I was one of those “gifted” kids in elementary school. Yes, one of them. Some of my earliest grade school memories are of sitting in a small room with a woman who always had a special series of tasks for me to complete. I could have seen it as a fun “recess” from class once or twice a week, but instead, I recall experiencing crashing waves of nervousness whenever I was called out of my normal classroom for these sessions. I think part of my anxiety stemmed from the fact that I didn’t know exactly who this woman was. I knew she wasn’t a teacher, but I always saw her walking the halls. I later discovered that she was our school psychologist. Just as I was starting to feel more comfortable with her, I was officially placed into an academic enrichment class (Academic Enrichment Program- AEP) with another woman I didn’t know. She introduced herself as Mrs. Fineour because, as she said, we were always “going to have a fine hour” during the time we met in her classroom each week. I specifically remember doing creative activities such as cross-stitching, as well as learning the names of the planets by way of an acronym (that I definitely still use today…with the exception of Pluto): My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas.

When I left my elementary school and graduated to our Intermediate school for grades 4-6, I continued to participate in AEP and regularly left class with about 10 other students to meet with our giftedness instructor. The curriculum built on skills we were learning in our other classes and really focused on developing skills for invention. We did small research assignments on exotic animals of our choice, worked in teams to develop new computer games, and even dissected some small invertebrates. At some point, though, it became extremely awkward to excuse myself from my classmates. Why did I deserve this more intimate educational experience? Was I really that much smarter than
them? It seemed like most of my friends did just as well as I did in school…Moreover, I often felt uncomfortable in the gifted class itself. I knew that certain students in the class were especially good at math and science, and, even though I enjoyed both of these subjects, I started to question my abilities in those areas. I was caught between feeling guilty about being labeled as academically superior to my other classmates and friends and feeling inferior next to my gifted peers. Indeed, many of the students in this gifted program ended up graduating at the top of our class. After an enlightening discussion in my Developmental Psychology class, however, I do not believe that this outcome came without a significant cost.

I do not intend to argue against the existence of well-established centers for giftedness, such as the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins, which offers summer residential programs, distance education, and family academic programs. Such centers have staff members who are well-trained in identifying and nourishing giftedness, and they favor a multi-perspective approach to intelligence assessment (Flieess, 2010). For example, The Davidson Academy, a public day school for profoundly gifted learners in Nevada, whose mission is to offer students advanced educational opportunities designed to specifically serve their needs, interests and goals, admits students on the basis of more than just high IQ scores. Though applicants should score 99.9% or above on intelligence tests, administrators seek students who also: “exhibit superior intellectual development and academic achievement, demonstrate motivation, social and emotional maturity, and overall readiness for an accelerated educational environment” (Davidson Institute, 2010). Instead, I intend to question the presence of gifted programs within the public school system—programs whose admission criteria relies on early testing, specifically before
age 6. I suggest that these school districts focus their attention on creating an academically enriching environment for the class as a whole rather than for a select group of students.

I’ve already used the terms “gifted” and “giftedness” close to ten times and still you might be wondering exactly what those terms mean. This is precisely one of the “preliminary” issues underlying the structure of such programs. While Robert Hoge (1989) of Carleton University concedes that it’s not necessarily problematic that there are variable definitions of giftedness, he does call into question whether the many definitions across school districts explicitly define the term. In other words, schools need to better identify the specific behaviors and aptitudes that students must display in order to be admitted into the program. By clearly defining what it means to be gifted, all of those involved in the program (teachers, parents, and the students themselves) can concretely defend their use of the term (Hoge, p. 11). Even if schools provide a less abstract definition, the problem of discontinuity between sources of selection remains. If some students are selected based on teacher nominations, while some are recommended according to IQ scores, and still others are admitted based on a committee of experts’ evaluations (p. 11), it seems that schools are just obscuring the definition they worked so hard to solidify.

Perhaps part of the reason it’s difficult to define giftedness is because of the historical legacy of researchers’ struggle to articulate what it means to be intelligent. Some approaches describe intelligence as a single entity, called “g;” accordingly, all human beings contain a certain amount of “g” (Jensen, 1998; Spearman, 1927). Others bifurcate the concept into fluid and crystallized intelligence, where fluid intelligence
characterizes the ability to reason and to understand relational concepts, and crystallized intelligence refers to factual knowledge. More complex views posit that intelligence is multi-faceted, encompassing an array of mental abilities (Thurstone, 1938). John Carroll’s (1993, 2005) three-stratum theory of intelligence synthesizes these perspectives and proposes a hierarchical picture of intelligence that includes “g,” general abilities, and various specific processes, with these latter processes at the bottom. The fact that this small sampling of theories dates back to the 1920s reflects the magnitude of the challenge that it is for psychologists and other researchers to decide what constitutes human intelligence.

Despite these differences in perspective, most researchers agree that the intelligence quotient, or IQ, is a valuable tool for assessing and predicting students’ academic success. In fact, longitudinal studies that periodically measure the same children’s IQ as they get older indicate “impressive continuity from age 5 onward” (Seigler, p. 305). Therefore, it’s no surprise that IQ tests have a large role in the selection process for many gifted programs. More and more, though, it seems that programs are expanding their assessment tools to include more than just IQ tests. This is encouraging because, as professor of educational psychology Susan Johnsen (2010) claims, “gifts and talents are often exhibited within a specific area of expertise or interest. For example, a young child may know the botanical names of all of the plants in her backyard because of her interest in gardening but may not do well on a traditional achievement test.” Despite this movement to utilize more comprehensive selection tools, schools still need to use caution when drawing conclusions about giftedness based on these assessments.
Though IQ scores tend to be predictive of later academic achievement, the current push from some schools to administer tests earlier than kindergarten-age children raises concern about the tests’ validity and predictability. In her New York News & Features article, Jennifer Senior (2010) quotes Steve Nelson, head of the progressive Calhoun School, as he describes a conversation he often has with parents, asking them at what ages their children begin to walk. After receiving the normative responses of 9-13 months of age, he asks, “‘What would you think if you were walking down the street, and you saw a parent yanking a 1-year-old child up from the sidewalk, screaming, ‘Walk, damn it?’’” Senior reports that he claims the same “is true of a system that insists a child perform well on a test at 4 years of age. ‘Early good testers don’t make better students…any more than early walkers make better runners’” (Senior, 2010). Even more disturbing is the potential 2012-13 initiative for New York City schools to begin testing children as young as 3 years old for giftedness (Otterman, 2010). At 3-4 years of age, children are deeply committed to understanding the world. Enter: the onset of the why questions! In such an exploratory phase during which much learning takes place, can we confidently say that one child will ultimately achieve more academic success than another?

Even if schools refrain from administering IQ tests this early, testing at age 5 or 6 might not be much better in terms of predictability. The fact is that experience in the classroom has a large effect on academic development; therefore, testing children just as they’re entering kindergarten or after they’ve only had one year of schooling disregards the almost inevitable increase in intelligence that education brings. Fortunately—and this is especially good news for us college students—“attending school makes children
smarter” (Siegler, p. 312). Moreover, as writer David Shenk (2010) quotes University of Pittsburgh’s Robert McCall, “‘Education and mental achievement builds on itself. It’s cumulative.’” A study by Cahan and Cahan (1989) of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders’ IQ scores revealed that the number of years of schooling, rather than a slight difference in age, positively correlated with IQ score. In other words, the longer children were in school, the higher their IQ scores. Accordingly, as intelligence as measured by IQ improves over time, so may be the case with giftedness. Professor Johnsen (2010) describes the dynamic nature of giftedness and claims, “specific interventions need to be created for talents to emerge, which is particularly true for children from poverty who may not have had learning resources at home…” Once again, it appears that the range of abilities measured by achievement tests may exclude individuals gifted in “untested” areas, particularly those living at or below the poverty level.

In truth, socio-economic status (SES) may have one of the most profound influences on academic achievement. Consequently, public school programs that select for giftedness without taking the child’s SES into account are unjustly excluding these students from the selection pool. Research across countries has shown that “children from wealthier homes score higher on IQ and achievement tests than do children from poorer homes” (Case, Griffin, & Kelley, 1999; Keating & Hertzman, 1999, p.314). The explanation for this gap in performance lies in the fact that impoverished families often can provide neither sufficient intellectual stimulation in the home nor, at a more fundamental level, adequate nutrition, a component necessary for proper brain development (Siegler, pp. 313-14). One force responsible for widening this gap is the “gaming effect” (Renzulli, 2010), or parents’ efforts to prepare their child for
achievement tests. *New York Times* writer Sharon Otterman (2010) focuses on New York City schools’ mixed usage of the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (Olsat) and the Bracken School Readiness Assessment and explains that “Because the Bracken is a knowledge test, it is easy to prepare for, and increasing numbers of nursery schools and private companies offer tutoring” (Otterman, 2010). Of course, these presumably expensive resources are much more affordable for middle and upper class families, leaving children from lower-income families further disadvantaged as wealthier parents exploit strategies for test preparation.

Yet another group of children that achievement tests used in gifted programs in the U.S. often exclude are those who belong to an ethnic minority. School administrator Stephanie McIntosh (2010) comments on the unfortunate reality that through commonly used screening techniques, “gifted children with limited English proficiency are misclassified as ‘slow learners.’” She offers the encouraging news that some schools are taking steps to account for cultural differences in their assessments. For example, Pittsburgh public schools select for gifted minorities using not only tests but also a host of community and educational resources. Additionally, the school system coordinates training sessions for kindergarten teachers to help them to adjust their traditional expectations of gifted students to encompass children born outside of mainstream American culture. What makes this program even more inclusive is that it recognizes the importance of parental influence on intellectual development, for it provides parents of identified gifted children with instruction for how to help them develop their potential at home (McIntosh, 2010).
Beyond concerns about IQ test predictability and the exclusion of economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority children, the social harms associated with labeling a certain group of students as gifted must also be considered when assessing the overall benefits of gifted programs in public schools. Author of *New York City’s Best Public Elementary Schools* Clara Hemphill (2010) writes that “Labeling a very young child as ‘gifted’ and segregating him from his peers…is unnecessary.” I asked F&M senior and personal friend Samantha Graff to reflect on Hemphill’s point late one night in Martin Science Library, and she responded, considering her own experience in a gifted program: “While it was good to be in an environment with students who were all at a similar level, there was an awareness among the other students of who the ‘advanced’ kids were.” Pulling students out of their regular classes can have socially isolating effects and might even confer a label on children that they ultimately decide is undesirable.

Finally, the question becomes whether this label has potentially negative long-term effects. If, as research suggests, the giftedness bestows impractical expectations of perfectionism upon the labeled individual (Buescher, et al., 1991), what does this mean for how the person will evaluate him/herself not only during his or her early school years but also throughout the rest of his or her life? Carole and Charles Holahan (1999) offer insight into this question through their research on participants in the Terman Study of the Gifted, a longitudinal study that ran from 1922-1996 and reported mid-life and “last stage of life” appraisals of participants who initially scored 135 or higher on an IQ test (Terman et al., 1925). Participants in Holahan and Holahan’s (1999) study ranged in age from 75 to 84 and were asked: “On the whole, how well do you think you have lived up to your intellectual abilities? Don’t limit your answer to economic or vocational success
Responses fell on a 5-point scale ranging from “Fully” to “Consider my life largely a failure.” Additionally, the participants self-reported mood on a 9-point scale from “cheerful” to “depressed,” as well as anxiousness on a similar scale with “calmness” at 9 and “anxiety” at 1. They also rated their happiness on a 3-point scale from “very happy” to “not too happy” (p. 166). These ratings combined were meant to provide a picture of the individuals’ psychological well-being. Results of the study revealed that the earlier individuals learned that they were gifted (i.e. before age 14), the more likely they were to report that they’ve not reached their intellectual potential. Additionally, those individuals who learned of their giftedness early on also reported lower psychological well-being than individuals who had learned of their advanced abilities after age 14. Mid-life appraisal and well-being were significantly related, for the more individuals felt they’d lived up to their intellectual abilities, the higher their ratings of psychological well-being (pp. 167-8). Overall, these findings suggest that labeling children as gifted early in life may result in their marking intellectual ability as the dominant measure of life success. Furthermore, the researchers propose “that unrealistic expectations related to being labeled as gifted can foster enduring self-devaluations and negative emotional consequences” (p. 170).

I do not propose that the aforementioned negative aspects and consequences imply that we should eliminate enrichment programs. Certainly, children benefit from being challenged intellectually, as evidenced by the developmental phenomenon of social scaffolding. The idea is that “more competent people (teachers in this case) provide a temporary framework that supports children’s thinking at a higher level than children could manage on their own” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Thus, presenting children
with somewhat difficult material and tasks helps to develop their cognitive abilities, as long as instructors are available as a resource. With this in mind, I suggest that public school districts focus their attention on enriching the environment of the classroom rather than on creating separate spaces for progressive academic enhancement. Director of the gifted and talented program in San Diego school districts Dave Hermanson describes the school programs’ mission to improve the quality of overall education: “‘Our goal through the gifted program is to help students with high potential, as well as all students, achieve at the highest level possible’” (McIntosh, p.2). The program trains teachers to better identify giftedness, but, more importantly, it pushes instructors to devise more diverse, unconventional methods for “enhancing thinking processes” (p. 2). Our first priority should be to care for the class as a whole, ensuring that all students are exposed to enrichment resources that account for the cultural and SES diversity that exists, particularly in inner-city schools. By shifting the focus in this way, we move away from issues of predictability associated with early testing. Moreover, schools would provide more opportunities for giftedness to develop without explicitly catering to those children who display the “traditional” characteristics of gifted individuals.

Did I really benefit from being excused from class each week so that I could engage with resources unavailable to other students in my class? Was it worth the risk of inferiorizing my peers? One of my roommates this year admitted that he was rejected admission into his elementary school’s gifted program because his grades were not high enough, even though he’d performed well on achievement tests. He’s now published in a scientific journal along with several other F&M chemistry students and is plodding his way through medical school applications. Did the fact that he did not receive the label of
gifted student as a child prevent him from achieving an impressive level of academic success? It seems that it did not. Granted, he presumably did not face the socio-economic hardships that other students bear in some public school districts; however, the fact is that he’s doing more than well for himself without having obtained the coveted identity of being a gifted child.

References


