Talented and Depicted

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Talented and Gifted: Time Will Tell

“How do you leave every day before math?” asked Steve. It was the end of second-grade recess and as we lined up two by two, he was my partner for the day.

“Project Go,” I shrugged.

“What’s that?” he asked with skepticism.

“I don’t know, we’re creating countries . . .” I began.

“It’s for smart kids, don’t you know anything?” asked Colin, shaking his head with a look of disdain.

“Yeah, how’d you get in there?” questioned Steve.

“I, uh, I don’t know . . .” I trailed off as the rest of the class moved forward.

It was the truth. I still don’t know how I ended up in the talented and gifted program, but as soon as I figured out it was for smart kids, I started to worry I didn’t belong. I wasn’t sure how I’d obtained such a label. Perhaps it was because of my constant motion and endless curiosity, but in the past they had only served as a means of trouble.

Like the first day of first grade when I decided to check out the mailboxes during silent reading, or the time in kindergarten when I poured chocolate milk over Tiffany Whatsername’s head. There were too many incidents to mention; suffice it to say I was a constant tremor in the classroom. I was always into something, that is, until I was completely over it, which was usually only a couple of seconds later. Within the confines of an otherwise quiet classroom, my behavior was problematic.

Throughout first grade Mrs. Carlson came face to face with my curiosity, the subsequent boredom, and resulting trouble. Somehow she was able to focus these traits into improved reading, spelling, and science skills. Perhaps she thought she spotted something deeper, perhaps she was trying to save the second-grade teachers from my impending doom. Either way, before the end of first grade I was recommended for, tested, and deemed talented and gifted.

On the first day of second grade Mrs. Brown told me I was to leave the classroom every day at 9:45 for Project Go, the talented and gifted program. My mind raced. Project Go? What’s that? Where do we go? Wait, when is 9:45?

Undoubtedly, I had been a million miles away on the days we learned to tell time, but in first grade someone had always told me when to go where. I imagined second grade would be pretty much the same, until I was told I’d need to pay attention and leave when necessary.

“No problem,” I thought. I’ll just wait for the others to get up and go.

So, 9:45 came and went, unbeknownst to me, and at 10:00 Mrs. Brown reminded me that I was to head down the hall, by myself. No other second graders would be “going.” I bumbled down the hallway, stopping for a drink, a look into the teacher’s lounge, and a covert mission to check out the first-grade recess equipment. By the time I entered the windowless closet that was Project Go, it was long past 9:45.

“When do we go?” I asked the third graders.

“We have music at 10:30,” one of them replied. Like I had any idea what that meant!

“No, I mean, when do we go. This is Project Go, right?”
As it would happen, Project Go didn’t actually meet my expectations; it came to mean that I would leave my peers to go to a windowless closet with third graders. There we were assigned various topics, given guidelines, and then provided time to work on these projects. Had I understood that being a part of this program was an honor, perhaps I would have appreciated it more, but it was a hassle to leave class. My peers wondered where I went and how I got into Project Go. I didn’t have a clue, but I had a sneaking suspicion that being a part of this program meant you were supposed to be smart and I wasn’t sure I was. I couldn’t even tell time!

A series of trial and error experiments followed. I discovered that 9:45 usually happened after journals and reading. As reading wrapped up, I would clear my desk and plod out the door. Unfortunately, reading didn’t always follow journals; sometimes it came first. “Where are you going, Katie?” Mrs. Brown would question, as I pushed my way out the door.

“Project Go,” I’d shrug casually.

“You don’t leave until 9:45. Please return to your seat, Katie.” At this point I would sigh, go back to my seat, and wait, knowing that if I didn’t show up, someone would come and get me.

As the year progressed, Mrs. Brown began to catch on and sometimes when I was off schedule she would ask, “What time is it, Katie?”

At this point I would squint at the clock and hesitantly say, “Nine forty-five?”

I began to think that Project Go was more of a hassle than it was really worth, especially because we were rarely going anywhere. That all changed with our final unit, Death and Dying. As the only second grader, with a group of thirds, this topic was a bit above my head. When the notion of suicide came up, I raised my hand, “What’s suicide?”

“You’re an idiot,” Jenny replied. “Suicide is when you kill yourself.”

“But, why would I want to kill myself?” I asked earnestly.

“Because you’re an idiot,” Jenny retorted.

The culmination of the Death and Dying unit was a field trip to Adam’s Funeral Home. Although I’d missed many of the key details of the unit, I had a sneaking suspicion there might be dead people there, and it did not sound like a fun place to go.

On the day of the field trip I decided I would “forget” what time we were supposed to leave, not a difficult task considering my track record with time. Unfortunately, the Project Go teacher met me at the door, grabbed my sack lunch, and whisked me away to the bus. Adam’s Funeral Home had one of those creepy, neon clocks in front of it. A kind reminder that time was on their side. As we walked past it, I wondered if it was 9:45. Regardless of the time, it didn’t go fast enough in second grade.

After a year of faking it and a summer of relief, I was happy to discover that in third grade I was no longer talented and gifted. I didn’t have to go anywhere. Much like my transition into the program, my transition out was seamless and left me clueless. However, it was a welcome reprieve. It meant I wouldn’t have to explain to people how I got into such a program. What I didn’t know was that I’d also have to explain how I got out.

In third grade one of my friends discovered she too was talented and gifted, but only part-time. This meant she went down a few days a week, still an improvement over my out and out removal.

“I thought you were in Project Go,” she prompted on her first day.

“But then they found out you weren’t that smart?” jibed Colin.

“I don’t know, I guess,” I shrugged. The truth was I was happy to remain in class, to not have to prove my intelligence to others to justify my placement in the program. I got to stay in the classroom with windows and my friends. Not being in Project Go meant that I had more time to read, whatever I wanted! The year after I was talented and gifted was the year I actually learned how to tell time.

Slightly Special: The Resource Room

“Could you tell me about that paperweight on your desk? What about that time you rode your bike across the country? Do you have any good stories there?”

Not being one for numbers, I often interrupted math class in search of a story, or any diversion from the numbers, symbols, and endless confusion that was algebra. By the sixth week of ninth grade it was obvious my diversions weren’t
working, I was failing. My parents tried all they could to help me. Nightly flash cards, times tables, homework checks, loss of privileges, you name it, they tried it. I began to hate math even more than I thought possible.

I eked by with a pity pass of a D-first semester and despite the fact that I did spend a lot of time screwing around, it was obvious that I didn’t know a thing about math. Simple multiplication problems took minutes, complex equations could take hours. Something had to change. After parent, teacher, and counselor discussions took place, it was decided that I would start my journey down the special path. In layperson’s terms I was told that I probably wasn’t low enough to qualify for testing or special education but I could find help in the resource room.

It was going to be hard to explain to my friends about the resource room. I knew what this label meant and no way was I telling my friends that I was going to the resource room, that’s where the dumb, dumbs went. Everyone knew it, that’s why we called it “The Retard Room.” Based on my experiences with Project Go, I knew that this too would be something I’d have to explain. I anticipated the conversation with a few of my friends, “What are you, some kinda retard?” I didn’t think so, but if getting the help I needed meant that I was, then maybe. Like the label of gifted, special didn’t seem to be a good fit.

The next day I checked out with my study hall teacher. “I gotta go somewhere else,” I said quickly.

“Do you have a pass?” he asked.

“No, I mean, my schedule is changing,” my eyes pleaded. Couldn’t this be enough of an explanation?

“Oh, where are you going?”

I leaned in and whispered, “I gotta go to the resource room.” He looked up in surprise. Sure, I wasn’t the world’s greatest student, but the resource room? His eyes said it all. “Yeah, I know, I’m a math moron, so I have to go there.” I was hoping for a laugh, something to distract from the fact that I might be special.

Despite the label, I had to make the best of it and I had to pass algebra. I left study hall, walked down to another windowless closet, flung open the door, and announced my arrival. “I’m looking for the retard room!”

The two boys already there laughed. The teacher ignored my show and pulled out a chair. “Hey, have a seat, we’re working on math,” she said.

I remained slightly special for my remaining years of prerequisite math. Despite the negative label associated with the resource room, I looked forward to my time there. I learned how to cross-multiply and divide, use the Pythagorean theorem, and survive math. I came to an actual understanding of material rather than a simple sliding by. I made friends with the two boys who were also there. They helped me with math and taught me much of what I know today about how adolescent boys think and learn. I discovered that, despite what I thought about the resource room and the kids that went there, it was a place where I could be successful.

Now What?

The previous stories highlight two extremes in my own education. The first is the year I spent in the talented and gifted program in elementary. The second examines the high school years I spent in the resource room. When I entered the teaching profession I kept these stories quiet, afraid of what colleagues, parents, and students might think. I understood the label of talented and gifted was completely acceptable, perhaps even brag-worthy, but not in contrast with that of the resource room. I knew it was a secret worth keeping. Somehow I came to believe that someone who had struggled so much in learning should not be teaching, or at least not talk about it.

Because of these experiences I still struggle with what it means to teach those who come with the labels gifted or special, as sometimes I think they are so narrowly defined in consideration of a student’s abilities. Daily, I question what labels suggest to educators who must balance measurements of intelligence, understanding, intention, and effort in student performance. Although my experiences with labels gave me great perspective, I am hesitant to let them define my students.

There are some who are so overwhelmed by content that they interrupt class with comments
such as, “Tell me about that paperweight on your desk.” Others are so full of curiosity and spark that I struggle to determine if I am providing everything they need. I find myself evaluating their behavior based on basic, often inaccurate, assumptions. If they’re off task, perhaps they don’t understand. If they’re hyperactive, maybe they’re advanced. All while worrying how my interpretations of their behavior could become a label that surpasses any ability they could ever have.

Although I don’t believe my inclinations of being both “special” and “gifted” are all that abnormal, I know my placement in both programs is a rarity. Memories of these programs and the ways I navigated through them have altered my teacher mind. I know that Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) must be met, and advanced students should be inspired, but I believe that teachers shouldn’t rely on student labels to prompt our actions.

Last week I contacted a parent to let him know of his child’s failing grade in seventh-grade English. “I know Adam is capable of the work,” I rambled. “I just think he needs some more time and focus.” To which his dad asked, “Do you think this is a learning disability or a matter of work ethic?” Questions like these leave me puzzled. I think it’s probably a little bit of both! I know that as a teacher I am supposed to be the expert, but I can’t teach without acknowledging the context of my own learning. Like Adam, I developed creative coping mechanisms to deal with my insecurities. These mechanisms often led to even less understanding, because I spent so much time developing them. As Adam’s understanding weakens, his artwork becomes more and more elaborate.

A few years ago a parent meeting sparked more questions in my teaching. The mother was on the verge of tears as she relayed stories of her daughter’s growing apathy toward junior high. “She doesn’t feel like the work is challenging or valuable. I don’t mean to be insulting, but I’m so worried about her.” Up to that point Sarah had been doing average work for a seventh grader despite the fact that she was being exposed to a rigorous “guaranteed and viable curriculum.” I recognized Sarah’s boredom in her half-hearted effort and bare minimum work. The issue wasn’t what she was capable of or whether she was achieving at a high level. The problem was that Sarah’s needs as a learner were not being met and it is likely that a label alone wouldn’t have changed that.

Both situations served as powerful reminders of what I already knew, that labels without responsive teaching are worthless and possibly restrictive. They may allow us to sort our students into neat little boxes, but the problem with people is they don’t fit into boxes. Sarah is more than just gifted; she’s a dancer, a reader; she’s shy and easily annoyed. Slapping the label gifted onto a girl like Sarah might mean that our expectations of mundane work are elevated and Sarah won’t stand for it. Allowing Adam to be defined by the word special would be akin to saying our only job is teaching. There’s just so much more! He’s an artist, a comedian, an observer, and an extremely sensitive kid. It seems as if labels have become an easy answer in a time when our jobs are getting more difficult by the day, but the problem with labels is that they can never encompass all that an individual is capable of.

This leads me to Tommy, a student in my supplemental, seventh-grade English class. A study skills class meant Tommy lost an elective to receive a second round of English instruction. I was about as thrilled with the experiment as my students, knowing they lost art, shop, or some other class they loved to be transferred to somewhere they hated. Although we weren’t placed in a windowless closet next to the custodian, kids knew they were there for a reason and it wasn’t positive. Tommy reminded me of it daily as he sauntered into the room, “tripped” on the trash can, and sneered at his classmates.

One day Tommy twirled in the black, pleather chair at the front of the room and wondered what words rhymed with dope. “What are you working on?” I sighed, recognizing his boredom and attempt at attention.

“A rap,” he quipped with a raised left eyebrow, as if this work with words was an act of defiance. Probably in some classes it was; Tommy was a gifted poet. He used his words to cut close.
“Why don’t you pull up the rhyming dictionary on the computer and find a rhyme?” I suggested. It was work with craft and revision, he was engaged, and it would mean he would accomplish something meaningful for the day.

As the rest of us read aloud, Tommy scribbled in his notebook and muttered rhymes at the front of the room. “Cope, hope, rope. You know, most people think I’m retarded,” he interrupted.

“Why would they think that?” I wondered aloud, recalling my own struggles with that word and the ways it had been misused to define ability.

“I get bad grades . . . I mess around . . . I’m in here!”

“And you’re going to let that define you?” I asked. The question settled into the silence between us and reminded me of the labels I had acquired throughout the educational system. Like Tommy, I struggled to see how the labels fit, but I knew from experience how students felt when defined by them. I realized that despite his talents, Tommy struggled to overcome the fact that most people didn’t see them. Indeed, when he came to my class I was warned that he was difficult and likely wouldn’t work to his full potential. What I wasn’t told was that Tommy had an acute sense of humor, a deep understanding of irony, and an endless thirst for knowledge. I wasn’t told that, in addition to having low test scores and poor behavior, Tommy was likely gifted.

Students enter our doors with a swarm of labels buzzing around them. The great thing about being a teacher is that in many ways we are revisionists, able to fix and change some of the problems we encountered as students. My work as a teacher has reaffirmed my belief that labels are rarely an accurate measure of students, and yet I found myself hesitant to share the labels I’d been assigned. In failing to share this information with others, I silently acknowledged that I accepted them. It was a silence I wouldn’t allow for my students but somehow tolerated for myself. My question to Tommy served as a question to myself. This story serves as my revision.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, “Nature never repeats herself, and the possibilities of one human soul will never be found in another.” My students serve as constant reminders that we are human, defiant of the descriptors we come with, more complex and diverse than any test could measure or label could capture. Legally I’m tied to an IEP. Morally I’m obliged to challenge those who are more advanced. Truthfully, I don’t feel any more qualified to assign a label than a test. So that means I must recognize the possibilities of everyone in my classroom, relishing the idea that the qualities they bring will never be found in another, labeled or not.

Work Cited


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