

## The Best of the Best: Academic Validation and Self-Worth in *My Brilliant Friend*

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Centered in childhood and adolescence, *My Brilliant Friend* (2012) by Elena Ferrante follows two friends, Elena and Lila, as they navigate the complexities of growing up in a poor, violent, post-World War II neighborhood in Naples, Italy. Lila, the fierce, headstrong, and sometimes mean girl, juxtaposes the quiet, people-pleaser narrator, Elena. Yet the two girls have one thing in common: educational achievement. Both girls battle to be the best in their elementary school class and receive high praise for their scholastic advancements. Yet, as elementary school ends and middle school begins, it is Elena who continues on while Lila drops out to work at her father's shoe shop. Elena continues to have her successes applauded by friends, family, and teachers, but her feelings toward herself become reliant on this praise. Elena's relationship with education ultimately becomes a drug, as she constantly searches for validation based on her academic achievements. Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* examines the duality of one's relationship with academically contingent self-worth, a connection that ultimately sours with age as Elena faces pressures that lead to a cheapened value in herself, her achievements, and academics as a whole.

Validation itself is something that has been closely theorized within the realm of psychology, with articles such as "Revisiting Validation Theory: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Extensions" by Laura Rendón Linares and Susana Muñoz applying this theory to college students.

Validation theory references:

intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment. (Rendón Linares and Muñoz 12)

While validation theory has specifically been applied to college students, its general definition and principles can also be applied to the experiences within *My Brilliant Friend*. This theory has a fixed focus on non-traditional students, such as adult learners, as well as first-generation scholars and low-income students such as Elena, whose underprivileged position is reflected through instances where she says "[t]here was no money to send me to private lessons during the summer" (Ferrante 104). Validation can take several different routes, whether it be verbal praise from professors, support from

family, or more. Academic validation itself takes the same principles as validation theory and is used to instill confidence within students, growing their desire and ability to learn.

This concept of validation is introduced to Elena early in academia. At the end of elementary school, Elena is urged to continue her education by her teacher, Maestra Oliviero, who “summoned in turn [her] parents” to say “that [they] absolutely had to take not only the test for the elementary school diploma but also the one for admission to middle school” (Ferrante 63). Maestra Oliviero serves as a primary agent for Elena’s validation. She goes beyond the classroom to personally visit Elena’s home to ensure that Elena’s parents know that she must continue her education. She affirms Elena’s intellect and demonstrates that Elena can flourish if she continues. Thus, Maestra Oliviero validates Elena, instilling confidence and value in Elena and her capabilities, and ensures that her academic basis is expanded by continuing with school.

Backed by Maestra Oliviero, Elena continues with her education as more and more of her peers drop out, ultimately finding that positive feedback parallels positive feelings of worthiness. After passing her exams with high scores, Elena comments,

I was the best in school: better than Alfonso, who has an average of eight, and much better than Gino. For days and days I enjoyed that absolute superiority. I was much praised by my father, who began to boast to everyone about his older daughter who had gotten nine in Italian and nine, no less, in Latin. (Ferrante 119)

Elena’s academic achievements, and the validation she receives because of them, are inherently linked with her self-worth. She receives validation from her father, who informs everyone that his daughter is acing difficult subjects. Additionally, her knowledge of the scores of other students in class and the subsequent comparison that comes with this serves as additional validation. This validation ultimately contributes to a positive feeling of supremacy within Elena, where Elena rides the high of feeling as though she is the best and the smartest. When she is doing well in school and receiving recognition because of it, validation causes content emotions within Elena. Elena inevitably leans on validation as a crutch. While Lila is talking about making shoes with Rino, Elena talks about how she is going to go to high school, “as if to chase away the feelings of revulsion these thoughts inspired, as if to emphasize my value and my indispensability” (Ferrante 132) and to prove that she is “special” (Ferrante 133). The one commonality that bonded Elena and Lila was education and achievement. Now, though, Lila has entered the workforce and is finding other routes to success with her shoe creations. Elena, in turn, feels the need to pose this impression of success on Lila as well. Elena and Lila used to compete in the classroom, vying for the top spot and

the praise of the teacher. Now, even though Lila is not in school, Elena feels the need to evoke this same feeling of competitiveness between them and hopes that Lila will validate Elena as the best. Mentioning her promotion to high school has a purpose beyond simply seeking validation. Elena is simultaneously ensuring that Lila sees that Elena is exceptional and vital in their friendship based on her achievements in school. By drawing on her successes at school, Elena ultimately links validation and value.

Elena's feelings about herself based on education ultimately become a two-way street, as she experiences negative feelings about herself whenever validation from others is not present. When the initial praise from receiving a ten on her paper fades, Elena questions what her "small reputation for being clever" (Ferrante 188) proves and hopes for more validation to "prove [her] autonomous virtuosity" but receives only an eight on the next essay (Ferrante 189). Samuel Fairlamb introduces a critical clarification to explain this behavior in "We Need to Talk About Self-Esteem: The Effect of Contingent Self-Worth on Student Achievement and Well-Being." Fairlamb explains that a chief component of validation theory emphasizes that validation must be consistent in order to uphold positive feelings, a negative constituent that Elena reflects. Elena initially is thrilled at the positive reception she receives. However, once this fades, Elena seeks new routes to substantiate her worth; namely, new academic validation. While she does get a good score on her next essay, she does not obtain as high of a score as she got previously, leading Elena to question her formerly praised cleverness. Thus, academic validation, a construct that has normally been viewed as a positive route for motivational learning, begins to have the opposite effect on Elena.

Fairlamb discusses potential reasons for this shift, leaning on previous studies to demonstrate that academically contingent self-worth can have negative effects, specifically pertaining issues with personality and mental health "because that individual's motivation is based on introjected (i.e., need to do well) rather than intrinsic (i.e., interest) reasons" (46). When trying to discern one's own worthiness, people stake a certain level of importance in external factors, such as academics, to determine their merit. Attaching self-worth to a specific domain can cause an individual to become more motivated, but the origins of this motivation are often blurred. Introjected motivation as a primary incentive leads to what Fairlamb calls a "fragile motivational boost," given the fact that motivation fades whenever success is threatened or nonexistent (46).

This idea of introjected motivation is reflected through Elena when pressures are placed on her to maintain the opportunity to even go to school. On the first day of elementary school, Elena's father says to her, "Lenuccia, do well with the teacher and we'll let you go to school. But if you're not

good, if you're not the best, Papa needs help and you will go to work" (Ferrante 45). It is this conversation that places the kernel of being the best in Elena's head. If she does not succeed and is not at the very top of the class, she will not be able to go to school anymore. This inevitable ultimatum is characteristic of the working-class neighborhood Elena resides in. Many of her peers end up dropping out to go to work, and many of the women in her neighborhood end up being housewives. Elena's primary motivation for succeeding is therefore rooted in fear, and whenever the people who surround her do not validate her as the best, Elena becomes scared of the possibility of work. Thus, a lack of academic validation correlates with working instead of going to school. The threat of work as opposed to education hangs over Elena's head all throughout her educational journey, leading her motives for achievement to be rooted in an ultimatum rather than entertainment.

Elena's obligation to be the best is due to another aspect of fear: fear of becoming her mother. Elena admires Lila's "slender, agile" and "always moving" legs, convincing Elena to think, "if I kept up with her, at her pace, my mother's limp, which had entered my brain and wouldn't come out, would stop threatening me" (Ferrante 46). Elena's mother is immobilized, in a physical and metaphorical sense. Her prominent limp is her most obvious constraint but illiteracy is another. Elena's mother is a housewife, as outlined in the character index, and is not educated, reflecting a pathway many women within the neighborhood take. Her limp and substandard schooling places a severe limit on what she can do and binds her to the neighborhood for the rest of her life. This scares Elena, as she latches herself on to Lila because she looked "to her progress to learn how to escape [her] mother" (Ferrante 322). While some look up to their mothers as role models, Elena is scared of following the example her mother has set. When she looks at Lila, she sees strength, intelligence, and freedom from the neighborhood, the opposite of her mother, with education as the ultimate tie for this all. Elena believes that in order to avoid her mother's limp, escape the neighborhood, and become more than a housewife, Elena must remain competitive, stay in school, and follow Lila's golden path as opposed to her mother's bleak example.

Competition with Lila mixes with introjected motivation to pressure Elena to succeed. When Elena moves on to high school without Lila, she comments, "I imposed on myself a discipline learned in middle school: I studied all afternoon until eleven and then from five in the morning until seven" and duly notes, "I was sacrificing the warm deep sleep of the morning to make a good impression on the daughter of the shoemaker rather than on the teachers in the school for rich people" (Ferrante 156). Another introjected motivation for doing well in school is outlined here: Lila. Academics is what initially pulls Elena and Lila together. They were constantly competing to be the best in the classes, and Elena searched for ways to impress Lila,

predominantly through academic achievement. Elena finds herself pushing through the stresses of school to impress Lila, giving up significant portions of her time outside of class to do schoolwork. However, Lila often is not dazzled by the fruits of Elena's labor. After passing her middle school exams with eights and nines, Lila questions "in her malicious tone, 'You didn't get a ten?'" (Ferrante 119), causing Elena to feel "disappointed" (Ferrante 120). In instances where Elena is vying for Lila's attention by mentioning academics and Lila is not impressed, Elena feels unworthy and as though her time and energy sacrificed for school is not enough.

Fairlamb duly points toward perfectionism as a motive for negative academically contingent self-worth, given the fact that this condition assumes high standards on the student. Perfectionism is "a multidimensional construct whereby one places excessively high standards of performance on oneself" (Fairlamb 50). Perfectionism is linked with self-worth due to the pressures placed on the student to succeed. When viewing this personality trait through an academic scope, students are prone to socially prescribed perfectionism, which is where the student places pressure on themselves to perform well based on the standards they believe others hold them to (Fairlamb). This aspect of the personality causes stress for the student because they view their scholastic aptitude with increased self-criticism. One can only feel good about themselves when they have met or exceeded the increasingly high standards they have placed on themselves and are often hyper-focused on their failures, among other fatalistic parts of their academic experience.

Elena places increasingly high restraints on herself in order to achieve a status of perfection yet often focuses on the reactions to the accomplishments instead of the accomplishments themselves. Elena faces various vocalizations of pressure, such as Maestra Oliviero saying that Elena "will bring us great satisfaction" (Ferrante 126). Elena later references how she "was reabsorbed by the work and, so that the teachers would not find me unprepared, I went back to studying until eleven and setting my alarm for five-thirty" (Ferrante 253). Elena has faced pressure to succeed since elementary school. This pressure has stuck with her throughout the rest of her education, and she now assumes perfection in herself. Elena strives to meet the demands of the teachers and puts in copious amounts of work so that they will not see her fail.

This notion of preparedness is just the tip of the standards Elena tries to uphold. When Elena "was promoted to the third year with all tens" she found that "no one was surprised or celebrated me. I saw that they were satisfied, yes, and I was pleased, but they gave the event no weight" (Ferrante 276). In this instance, Elena does achieve perfection by receiving the highest grades alongside her promotion. However, the shine of this event is slightly dulled as her family engages in quiet satisfaction. There is no

verbal validation. If Elena does not meet specific standards or if she does not receive verbal validation when meeting these standards, she fixates on the dismissive attitudes toward her education and reflects a dissatisfied viewpoint on herself. As more and more of Elena's peers drop out, patriarchal pressures similarly contribute to Elena's negative feelings toward herself and her worth based on academics. Luisa Tasca points toward the collective ideals of femininity in Italy at the time of Elena in "The 'Average Housewife' in Post-World War II Italy," noting "the conceptualization of domestic work as a feminine duty" in order to respond "to the desire for order and social peace, to the need for family tranquility after the lacerations and the disorientation of war" (96). The repercussions of the war intrinsically linked women with the role of housewife. Education is notably absent from this definition. Women were predominately confined to the home in this time period, expected to cook, clean, and care for children. This ideal has reached its way to Ferrante's book, as the men are defined and characterized by their occupations, while the women are simply listed as the wives of a man in the character index or, in the case of Elena's mom, a housewife. Thus, as the girls get older, there is an inherent pressure to become a wife.

This pressure begins to disturb Elena's satisfaction with her life's path during adolescence when others around her begin to equate success with relationships. When Lila begins to talk to Pasquale, Elena comments on how she "was terrified of failing in school" but is suddenly overcome with "a single true thought: to find a boyfriend, immediately" because she feels "more strongly the anguish of not being in time" (Ferrante 157). As more of the girls start dating, Elena wrestles with whether to prioritize love over school. Her motivations for pursuing love are rooted in modeling herself after those around her instead of genuine interest. Elena feels the need to continue following Lila's life path to achieve success by embarking on a new journey to find a boyfriend. While Elena's previous validation within school has been enough for her, this feeling has changed as a greater emphasis has been placed on marriage as opposed to school.

Elena's family eventually views Elena's education as "pointless, a waste of time" because Lila "had acquired a wealthy husband, economic security for her family, a house of her own" (Ferrante 315). While Elena has previously focused on education as a route to success by escaping the poverty of the neighborhood, marriage is now seen as the prime avenue for this. Elena adopts viewpoints of shame and embarrassment linked with staying in school instead of getting married from those around her, like her family. While she is still striving for success in school, education takes a back seat to love due to the changing attitudes toward success.

The question of whether academic validation is truly enough is posed throughout the rest of the novel. As Lila gets ready to be married at sixteen,

Elena comments on “the meaninglessness of school” and how she feels as though she is “a shadow,” but she is soon consoled by two committee professors who “praised [her] Italian paper to the skies” (Ferrante 276). Elena assumes a delicate balancing act when placing worth toward school. The very attitudes surrounding what has defined success have changed. Whenever Elena is around Lila, it is no longer enough for Elena to succeed in school – she must succeed outside of it and secure a husband. She is no longer validated for her academic achievements. Lila, instead, receives validation for her subsequent marriage. However, the second Elena receives academic validation again, it makes her feel better and solidifies her path in life, even though it looks significantly different than Lila’s.

By the end of the novel, societal demand leads Elena to no longer place value toward her education or worth. In the final scene of the novel, Elena says, “I doubted that I could make it. Studying was useless: I could get the highest possible marks on my work, but that was only school: instead, those who worked at the journal had sniffed my report, my and Lila’s report and hadn’t printed it” (Ferrante 330). The paper Elena refers to is one Nino said would get published in his journal. Elena learned at the wedding that it would not be getting published anymore, contributing to a de-validation of Elena’s accomplishments. For her entire life, she has viewed school as her future source of wealth and validation as a verbal reflection of that. Yet, as more and more of her peers are finding other routes to success and validation through marriage, Elena’s educational accomplishments, and lack thereof, seem to have no value anymore. Elena’s unhealthy relationship with academic validation festers, as compliments related to academics seem to have no worth in her adolescent life. The pressure to conform to society’s ideals and get married grips Elena and squeezes, causing her to believe that academics and validation are no longer enough.

*My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante explores how Elena’s self-respect is rooted in academic validation, showing how various external motivations and patriarchal pressures contribute to a twist on a normally positive route to stimulation. While validation begins as a way for Elena to build confidence in her intellect and potential, it morphs into her associating these traits with validation itself. Thus, when validation is not present, Elena’s worth depreciates and she finds herself constantly searching for validation from her teachers, her friends, and her family. This fixation cripples her, trapping her within a wheel of self-doubt and fear. Reasons for this shift are embedded in Elena’s motivations for going to school, inclinations that are based in an ultimatum from her father, fear of turning into her mother, and comparison to Lila as opposed to genuine interest, as well as perfectionism causing Elena to fixate on what she deems as failures. In the end,

patriarchal pressure to get married becomes a defining route to validation in Elena's life, leading her to devalue school and her accomplishments and place a significant emphasis on marriage. Elena's internal struggles with her own value serves as a critical reminder that it is important to find validation from within instead of relying on the praise of others through one specific validation genre.

### Works Cited

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