

Too Bad to be Gifted: Gifts Denied for Black Males with Emotional and Behavioral Needs

The authors examine how high-achieving Black students identified with emotional disorder receive inadequate academic instruction

Special education has experienced great scrutiny and debate regarding the over-representation of Black students, particularly Black males, in special education (SPED). Such over-representation is most prevalent in areas where evaluations are subjective, test driven, and highly stigmatized. A relatively small percentage of those receiving SPED services (e.g., compared to learning disabilities) have emotional/behavioral disorders. However, this small percentage is disproportionately comprised of Black males. Too many are false positives – misidentified, mislabeled, and miseducated as they are receiving services that do not address the scope of their learning needs.

The story of gifted Black males is also problematic. Of all students, Blacks are the most underrepresented in gifted education, with over a 50% discrepancy (Ford, 2013; 2011). Teacher biases and stereotypes have

been found to contribute to under-referrals and the subsequent lack of access to gifted and talented education classes (GATE). This article focuses on the reality that most students identified with an emotional disorder (ED) are Black males (U.S Department of Education, 2015) and most are not receiving GATE opportunities. We examine how these specific twice exceptional students are receiving inadequate academic instruction and are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to find steady employment, and very likely to have a criminal record (Wagner & Newman, 2012). Improving the identification and education of Black males identified as ‘at-risk’ is a national priority.

Many identification and service models exist but not all are culturally responsive. However, shifting from a deficit orientation to a strength-based orientation

has presented challenges. A list of culturally blind deficits and not strengths comprise the profile used to identify and educate children with ED. Strength-based assessments, identification processes, and service models can only be consistently effective if attitudes and views change and the profile includes culturally informed characteristics of strengths, including gifted potential.

Taking this under consideration, the authors present literature and cases of Blacks identified with an ED who demonstrated a variety of strengths, talents or gifts. We are not negating the existence of severe deficits, but rather establishing these students' capabilities of demonstrating strengths that need appropriate recognition and service. Black students identified with ED are not "too bad" to also be identified as gifted.

Donovan: Not Too Bad to Be Gifted

Donovan is a Black male whose educational career began less than three years ago in preschool. He attends a school in an affluent White community where parents are substantial stakeholders in identifying school culture, school climate, and school norms. Donovan comes from a middle class family; he lives with his biological father and has weekly visitations with his mother. His teachers all shared that Donovan is a bright child whose performance is well above his

same-age peers based on school administered assessments and overall work production when he completes his work. He is also described as being highly articulate. Donovan comes to school neatly dressed and his hair is always groomed.

Donovan is not a typical first grader. Although he is able to perform above grade level, his teachers report that his severe behavioral outbursts impede his academic progress and that of others. Teachers report that they have tried everything to manage his behaviors. Unfortunately, the perpetual outbursts lead to concerns of harm to himself and others. His behaviors are so 'bad' that the only consideration for such a child is for parents to consider medication or evaluation for special education.

Donovan's regular display of wild and unruly outbursts while sprawled on the floor shouting "no" illustrates a need for specialized supports not typically supported in a general education setting. His behaviors are described as more extreme than other children his age (e.g., destroying classrooms, pouring water on electrical sockets, and leaving school property without permission). Individuals familiar with the characteristics of ED would perceive Donovan's consistent exhibition of demonstrative behaviors as the classic special education case. However, he is a little different than most students with

characteristics of ED. Donovan shows traits of being an academically gifted Black male. He is bright, has a large vocabulary, and is above grade level in most areas when compared to other first graders.

Currently, Donovan is undergoing an evaluation for special education services as a student with an emotional disturbance. Additionally, he was hospitalized due to his out of control behaviors and clinically diagnosed as having mental health issues. Although his current measures of intellectual and academic functioning indicate that he is a student with great academic potential (i.e., scores primarily within superior limits), current teachers' reporting on behavior rating scales reflect severe challenges atypical of same age and grade peers.

According to C. M. Owens, Ford, Lisbon, and M. T. Owens (2016), who utilize a cultural framework, Donovan's orality, verve, affect, and ability to perform well above his peers academically could classify him as gifted and could be related to his perceived 'extreme' social and emotional problems. What can be done to support both his social and emotional challenges and advanced academic abilities? Now is the time for urgency if we are to prevent this young Black male from becoming another educational statistic (Alexander, 2010).

The seemingly paradoxical characteristics Donovan demonstrates rests on the limitations of the combined ED and gifted learner classification categories. We will explore the weaknesses of both labels and review the research on students who are twice exceptional. Then we propose implications to improve the identification and service supports for students like Donovan, Black male students who are twice exceptional ED.

Emotional/Behavioral Disability Characteristics

Based on the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHC), the characteristics most commonly associated with ED include:

a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance:

- A. An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors.
- B. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- C. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions.

- D. A general, pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- E. A tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or fears, associated with personal or school problems (Federal Register, 2006, p. 46756).

When enacted, authorities across education and mental health fields criticized the federal characterization of ED for its lack of explicit and measurable language (Wery & Cullinan, 2011; Oelrich, 2012). Terms and phrases such as *inability to learn*, *tendency to develop*, *satisfactory interpersonal relationships*, and *pervasive mood of unhappiness* are descriptors found to instigate a broad range of interpretations. Many claim the vagueness of the characteristics are closely related to a trend of misidentification cases and the high rate of false-positive identification of Black students (Artiles, Bal, Trent, & Thorius, 2012; Epstein, Cullinan, & Sabatino, 1977; Webb, 2004; Wery & Cullinan, 2013). Artiles (2002; 2010) added that the subjective language of the characteristics is colorblind and is a contributing factor to the inequities that mislabel Black students' experiences in and out of the classroom.

Although ridiculed for its lack of specificity, the 1975 characteristics of ED was generally adopted as the statute for classifying academically low-performing

students and who demonstrated adverse social, emotional and behavioral characteristics (Wery & Cullinan, 2011). Several decades later, the federal definition characteristics of ED remains markedly similar to the antiquated list of qualities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 describes ED as:

a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- A. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- B. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- C. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- D. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- E. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

F. Emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance under paragraph (c)(4)(i) of this section. (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004, Section 300.8 [c][4][i])

Despite flawed language in the characterization of ED, another controversial issue is the failure to address a broader range of academic ability among individuals with debilitating social and emotional problems. Currently, students with ED are distinguished as learners who, over a period of time, demonstrate the “inability to learn.” As a significant characteristic of ED, further description of the terminology suggests these learners are unwilling to learn, which is different from a student’s “inability” to learn (Oelrich, 2012). This phrase purports a narrowed view of ability that fails to consider culturally-rooted behaviors that may be misinterpreted as deficiencies for Black male students (Oelrich, 2012). It upholds two stereotyped myths: (1) students with moderate to severe social and emotional problems cannot be gifted and (2) gifted students do not exhibit significant social and emotional problems (Eklund et al., 2015; Gates, 2010).

Beginning in 1993, GATE, which is very racially segregated, offered a less narrow definition of giftedness in recent decades:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor (US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1993).

This definition, which has been adopted by many state and school districts has done little to increase access to gifted education for Black students. Black students comprise 16% of public schools in the nation but only 9% of those in gifted education. According to Ford (2013), this suggests that some 250,000 Black students have been denied access to GATE. The academic consequences are clear.

The potential of such students is compromised as they have limited access to Advanced Placement classes and more elite universities, for example.

High-achieving Black males identified with ED are at greater risk of being suspended from school, receiving subpar education, over-identification for special education, and more than likely to have a criminal record before they drop out of school (Artiles et al., 2010; Eklund et al., 2015; Oelrich, 2012; Wagner & Newman, 2012; Wills, 2015). More importantly, it infringes upon the right for academically advanced Black males with ED to receive a free and appropriate education. It limits the spectrum of services these students are entitled to receive to support the fullness of their learning profile and related needs. This counters unwarranted and unfounded assertions by Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Mattison, Maczuga, Li, and Cook (2015) that special education is benefitting Black students and that extra supports are useful. Intuitively, it makes sense that more support is useful, but that is when the supports are needed. For many Black males, special education is not needed. They are being miseducated. The extra support being denied and not even considered and evaluated for Donovan is access to gifted services and opportunities. The focus is not on what he

can do (academic work) but what he cannot do (manage emotions and behaviors).

Literature on the characteristics of academically gifted and/or high-achieving students reveal that this population of learners are less likely to demonstrate and/or be identified with moderate to severe behavior problems (Bracken & Brown, 2006; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Richards, Encel, & Shute, 2003). This may be true for a specific population of identified gifted students; noticeably, the academically gifted student population is largely homogeneous (i.e., White and middle class), thus, limiting the generalized findings on gifted characteristics. Eklund, Tanner, Stoll and Anway (2015) identified increased rates of social and emotional characteristics among unidentified gifted students. In addition, varying social and emotional concerns often manifest differently for gifted Black males (Butler-Barnes, Williams, & Chavous, 2011; Ford, 2011; Ford & Whiting, 2011; Mueller & Haines, 2012; C. M. Owens et al., 2016).

Likewise, research on students identified with ED typecasts this population with below average intelligence (Oelrich, 2012; Webb, 2004). Most authorities contend that students who show significant social and emotional challenges are unable to perform at high cognitive levels, which may be the case for many students labeled ED.

However, highly intelligent individuals with significant social and emotional behavior problems are recognized by the National Education Association (2006) and authorities across the globe (Blaas, 2014; Gates, 2010; Ford, 2010; Missett, 2013; Wellish & Brown, 2013). The number of case studies validating the concomitant presence of advanced intelligence with characteristics of ED is growing.

Despite the paucity of research on the characteristics of highly intelligent individuals with moderate to severe social and emotional problems, there is a trend describing common social and emotional traits (Blass, 2014; Eklund et al., 2015; Missett, 2013; Wellish & Brown, 2013). A few of these traits are listed in Table 1. The following list of social and emotional traits are not all encompassing, particularly for subpopulations of students whose characteristics may manifest differently due to cultural and/or linguistic values.

Gifted Characteristics

Federal definitions of giftedness specifically list five types – intellectual, specific academic, creativity, visual and performing arts, and leadership, as noted earlier. Each type of giftedness comes with some general characteristics (Ford 2013). Given the vast majority of schools identify and serve mainly

two of the five types and given that underrepresentation of Black students is mainly in these two areas, this is our focus. The National Association for Gifted Children lists key characteristics of gifted individuals:

- Unusual alertness, even in infancy
- Puts thoughts together quickly
- Excellent memory
- Unusually large vocabulary and complex sentence structure for age
- Advanced comprehension of word nuances, metaphors and abstract ideas
- Enjoys solving problems, especially with numbers and puzzles
- Often self-taught reading and writing skills as preschooler
- Deep, intense feelings and reactions
- Highly sensitive
- Thinking is abstract, complex, logical, and insightful
- Idealism and sense of justice at early age
- Concern with social and political issues and injustices
- Longer attention span and intense concentration in one area
- Preoccupied with own thoughts—daydreamer
 - Learn basic skills quickly and with little practice
 - Asks probing questions

- Wide range of interests
- Highly developed curiosity
- Interest in experimenting and doing things differently
- Puts atypical ideas or things together
- Keen and/or unusual sense of humor
- Desire to organize through games or complex schemas
- Vivid imaginations; imaginary playmates when in preschool (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007)

This list is by no means comprehensive and much of what is known from this list and others is based on White middle class students. It is subjective in nature, colorblind, devoid of context while ignoring opportunities. For example, when considering the “desire to organize people/things through games or complex schema” how does this characteristic apply to gang leaders? Furthermore, when identifying students with an “unusually large vocabulary and complex sentence structure for age,” how does this apply to students who speak Black English? Poignantly, how would teachers and decision makers rate Black students on these characteristics if they are identified with an ED? How would they rate Donovan?

Essentially, the case can be made that students with special needs, in this case ED, have little to no chance of being perceived as

gifted and served accordingly. And the additional layer of race compounds issues and further closes doors to gifted education. Special education needs will trump gifted education needs (Ford, 2010), a reality ignored and discounted by Morgan et al. (2015).

Twice Exceptional Characteristics of Students with Emotional Disabilities

Twice exceptional students’ gifts are masked by their disability (Mayes, Hines, & Harris, 2014; Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014). Examples provided by Neilsen (2002) are “high level problem solving” masked by “processing deficits,” “advanced ideas and thoughts” masked by “inflexibility,” “superior vocabulary” masked by “uneven academic skills” (p. 95). Other characteristics can include, low self-esteem, inappropriate social skills, impulsivity, and highly distractible behavior.

When students are identified as twice exceptional, they are faced with many challenges and frustrations - from confusion regarding the incongruence of gifted ability and dis/ability to feeling of academic inadequacy in comparison to gifted peers; inappropriate social skills that may influence peer relationship development. These academic and social skills challenges create low self-concept and can lead to isolation that

prevents students from reaching their full potential in the gifted program. Thus, adequate attention to the social and emotional needs of twice exceptional students is as important as attending to their academic needs. There are a growing number of cases across multiple disciplines (psychology, mental health, education, etc.) that present studies of individuals identified as twice exceptional ED.

The comorbid condition gives recognition to a population of students with advanced learning abilities and potential who also struggle with social and emotional problems. Each of these cases present evidence of a broader learning capacity than what is characterized in the solitary classifications of students' abilities and may be better served under the category of twice exceptional. Special education and gifted education have operated on opposite ends of the spectrum of educational services.

This raises the question: Are gifted students void of having significant behavioral or emotional deficits or is it not possible for students with ED to be gifted? The mainstream literature would imply such a condition does not exist, let alone is present among Black students with ED. However, academic experience of those learners, such as Donovan, who are twice exceptional ED tell a different story. Their stories and

experiences reveal some of the common characteristics of learners who are twice exceptional. Like Donovan, these students often exhibited intolerable behaviors with traits of high intelligence.

Morrison (2000) gave a qualitative account of a White male gifted student with ED whose social and emotional needs went underserved. This student, Andrew, was initially identified gifted and received services in GATE. Andrew's story depicts a child who, over many years of traditional educational services in GATE, was isolated, had a poor self-concept, experienced extreme personal stressors, and achieved below his ability. After a few years of showing problem behaviors, he was identified with ED and placed in special education. Andrew loathed the lowered academic expectations and made a commitment to work hard to move from the self-contained special education class to the "normal" classes. This included improving his academic marks and seeking faith-based support. Although he continued struggling to develop personal relationships, Andrew was able to attend college and earn a degree in English.

In a more recent publication, the authors share the lived experiences of Franklyn, a Black male identified with ED who gifted abilities were overlooked (C. M Owens et al., 2016). Franklyn's social and

emotional needs were supported in self-contained special education classes. Although he exhibited culturally-rooted characteristics of giftedness, such as orality, verve, and expressive verbalism (Ford & Kea, 2009), his advanced intelligence went unchallenged. Unfortunately, his academic performance suffered when he was placed in self-contained special education classes with other students who had varying disabilities.

A first year special education teacher recognized his academic potential and modified his instruction to suit his high academic ability. As a result, Franklyn's social and emotional outbursts decreased. He was later placed in a GATE program while continuing to receiving special education services for his significant social and emotional problems. These accounts of twice exceptional students with ED illustrate a number of shared characteristics. Designated traits reflect the cultural manifestation of giftedness in Black students. Table 2 presents a summary of characteristics from the cases presented.

Implications

Culture blindness and deficit orientations of ED and giftedness adversely impact the identification and educational services of Black male twice exceptional students with ED. The flaws and limitations of both categories perpetuate a polarized view of

these students' needs and hinders adoption of effective services. This polemic perspective, fueled by deficit thinking and culturally dismissive research, as evident in the work of Morgan et al. (2015), undermines the federal mandate to provide an appropriate education for students with disabilities.

For Black male students who are twice exceptional with ED, their unique characteristics place them at greater risks of academic failure that are overlooked when considering the student for specialized services. Due to the elevated rates of personal adversities such as having an unemployed parent, economic hardships, and marital dissolution, Black boys are at greater risk to develop mental health problems, social and emotional problems, and behavioral problems (Artiles et al., 2012; Ertel, Richards, & Koenen, 2011).

The effects of such adversities frequently co-occur with higher rates of suspension, underachievement, poor self-concept, experiencing a below standard education (Artiles et al., 2012; Ertel et al., 2011; Ford, 2010; Wills, 2015). These experiences have a significant impact on the student's value towards formal education, their ability to perform in school, and the snapshot assessment of the student's learning capacity during traditional identification of ED and GATE.

Educators must adopt different approaches to classifying, identifying, and serving the learning needs of this at-risk population. These methods must be culturally responsive with a strength-based approach toward students with ED. However, transitioning from decades of using deficit orientations (recently revived by Morgan et al., 2015) in favor of more strength-based orientations has presented challenges. Strength-based assessments, identification processes, and service models can only be effective if attitudes and views change, and when the profiles include characteristics of strengths, including gifted potential and cultural considerations. Unfortunately, a flawed definition of ED, limited characterization of giftedness in Black students, and stereotypes contribute to the subsequent lack of equitable access to gifted education classes (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). To begin a discourse on improvements that would better serve the needs of Black male students who are twice exceptional ED, the authors makes the following recommendations:

1. *Definition revision needed for ED.* The current definition's use of "inability to learn" is an antiquated view of the full spectrum of learning characteristics among individuals with ED and should be revised to

reflect more recent research (Oelrich, 2012; Wery & Cullinan, 2011). The National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition proposed definition is more inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of students who demonstrate an ED. (Council for Children with Behavior Disorders, 2000).

2. *Adopt Culturally Responsive Identification Processes and Procedures.* Identifying Black male students who are twice exceptional requires assessment methods that are culturally responsive and dynamic (Gay, 2010; 2002; Frasier, 1995). Rather than using a deficit perspective, identification should shift to focus on finding, acknowledging, and working with students' existing and potential strengths in the twice exceptional abilities among Black students.
3. *Culturally Responsive Training and Professional Development.* To reduce the likelihood of misidentifying culturally rooted giftedness in Black students, educators and other supportive professionals need training in culturally responsive assessment practices and in serving the variations in gifted ability manifestations among

at-risk populations (Center for Effective Collaboration, 1998; Ford, 2011; Gardner & Mayes, 2013; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008; Trotman-Scott, 2014).

4. *Equitable Assessment.* All instruments used to identify special needs, such as ED and giftedness, must be fair and reduced in bias against Black students (Naglieri & Ford, 2015). Educators must select tools with the goals of including rather than excluding them from GATE. Instruments known to increase their being identified as ED should be used with great caution, if not excluded altogether.
5. *Flexibility.* A non-traditional schedule of subjects and supports that would serve both the child's emotional disability and gifted ability would need to be implemented to accommodate the student's disability and gifted ability (Williams, 2015). Methods of support include, but are not limited to, counseling, mentoring, college and career readiness (Dole, 2000; Grantham, 2004; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005; Mayes & Hines, 2014; Morrison & Rizza, 2007; Whiting, 2009).

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Table 1. Sample Social and Emotional Characteristics of Individuals with High Intellectual Ability and Moderate to Severe Emotional Needs

Withdrawn, Social Isolation	Verbally Expressive	Aggressive
Sensitive to Social Issues	Disruptive	Poor Self-Esteem
Emotionally Sensitive	Highly Critical	Confrontational
Argumentative	Depressed	Anxiousness
Truant	Self-Injurious	Impulsive
Poor Academic Self-Concept	Strong Memory	Irritability
Underachievement	Failure-Avoidance Behavior	Reserved

Table 2. Characteristics of Students Who Are Twice Exceptional Gifted with Emotional Disabilities

Note: * Designates Cultural Styles Common among High Achieving African Americans (see Ford, 2011; Ford & Kea, 2009)

* High IQ but may be masked by poor test scores	Ingenuity/Creative	* Expressive verbally; Orality
Disruptive	Aggressive	Destructive
* Affective responsive	Underachievement	Poor self-concept
Problem solver	Highly critical	Confrontational
Argumentative, blunt and direct	Inconsistent academic performance	* Social Time Perspective (polychronic)
Self-Injurious	Truant	Analytical
Depressed	Anxious	* Harmonic or a sense of belonging
Poor impulse control	Polarized value system	Isolated
* Verivistic and movement oriented	Resourceful	* Sensitive and emotional
Leadership	* Charismatic	* Extroverted and social