

## How Coaching Special Olympics Changed the Trajectory of My Life

*Robinson's narrative provides recommendations for identifying gifted students in special education.*

There goes man that stands of high moral in his hands;

One that educations those in his way, while others toss those lost away;

Four years of despair, he still appeared while other educators disappeared;

Through four years of pain came a change assisted by a man who resembles a character from the hall of fame;

No matter my struggle this man was an enormous source of power;

Confidence was obvious through his eyes it rubs off after a matter of time;

I do not stay "THANKS" to every man, only those that reached out a hand;

Now it is my turn to continue the blessing, that Mr. Carpenter gave me through my life lessons; I end this poem with true emotions and only two words complete my story – Thank you. (Shawn A. Robinson)

This poem reminded me of how I was able to navigate and survive as a student in special education (SE). Survival is exactly the word to describe my experiences as a student who felt hopeless, voiceless, and academically disengaged. Thus, experiencing academic failure day after day, month after month, and year after year influenced my identity, engagement and expectations (Robinson, 2013). Furthermore, it was not until high school that I learned about my hidden talent – leadership abilities – as a student in special education, which both altered my thinking and influenced my self-motivation (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this short narrative is to discuss: (1) an overview of the characteristics of a gifted student with a learning disability (LD) and emotional/behavior disorder (EBD), (2) my high school experience, and (3) recommendations for identifying a gifted student in special education.

### **Characteristics of a Gifted Student with a Learning Disability and Behavior Disorder: A Brief Overview**

According to Ruban and Reis (2005) there are characteristics that hinder the identification of gifted students with both LD and EBD, which may include, but are not limited to: their frustration with the inability to master certain academic skills, learned helplessness and disruptive classroom behavior. Students can appear “immature” since they may use their anger to express feelings to deal with situations they perceive as difficult, and take risks in non-school areas without considering the consequences. On the other hand, there are strengths that these students display, which may include: high levels of creativity and productivity, wide variety of interests, ability to see interrelationships among ideas and concepts, task commitment, and desire for knowledge, desire to explore and discover (Coleman, Harradine, & King, 2005; Ford, 2014, 2013).

Still, there are challenges associated with recognizing the gifts and talents of students with LD and EBD, which may also impede the appropriate services needed to foster their achievement (Baldwin, Omdal, & Pereles, 2015). Furthermore, since gifted students are so distinct, not all will demonstrate characteristics, and their giftedness may go unrecognized as teachers

focus only on their disruptive behaviors (McKenzie, 2010; Silverman, 2009). Moreover, students with both LD and EBD are often leaders among the more nontraditional students as they may display resilient behavior, and their characteristics may interfere with their ability to be seen as leaders. Therefore, teachers must be familiar with the characteristics that students with LD and EBD exhibit to ensure they are provided the appropriate academic services needed to be successful (VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler, 2009). What follows is a narrative of how coaching Special Olympics changed the trajectory of my life.

#### **Personal Vignette:**

##### **My High School Experience**

In September of 1993, I walked through the doors of a New Trier High School. I was not a stellar student and had endured years of anger that influenced my behavior and how I saw myself (Robinson, 2015a). The temperature on this specific day was 80 degrees, and students were excited about seeing each other after months of summer vacation. Some students, like me, were roaming the hallways looking lost, and undoubtedly the upperclassmen could figure out who the freshmen were. I did not feel entirely lost because my peer group in middle

school included the same guys I found myself getting into trouble with in high school. Almost immediately, my freshman year was off to a rough start. I was still searching for self-confidence and struggled academically, so I fought with peers in order to try to ease the pain.

Reflecting back yields the realization that I was crying for help with no one listening to a 6'3" Black male in special education who seemed to be tough, and managed to get into trouble in and out of school. In fact, trying to pinpoint exact memories from this year is difficult, but one that I remember captured the essence of my behavior. The school bell had rung, and this day I had picked a fight with the starting running back for the varsity football team. After school, I walked out the front doors talking tough guy language: "Hey you mother bleep--you hear me," and other inappropriate language. While walking towards him, I grabbed my belt and put a lock on it, wrapped it around my hand, and walked up to him like the proverbial big bad wolf. Soon, I felt the hard concrete and realized I was on the ground getting punched. I got up and ran away as fast as possible. In spite of this and other similar incidents, I did not learn my lessons, and found myself as a regular in the Dean's office. My behavior during my freshman year was moving on a downhill

slope faster than an Olympic bobsled team due to an inability to read and lack of identity as a scholar (Whiting, 2014). Despite feeling hopeless, I was promoted to the next grade level and during my sophomore year received an opportunity that changed my life forever. As a student in special education I was consumed with inner anger and low self-esteem.

From my perspective, there were some teachers who did not notice my potential because my leadership was hidden by anger and my reading disability (Gardner, III & Hsin, 2008). My leadership was buried at my core of shame and frustration, and all that they witnessed was the volcano erupting - my behavior. As a sophomore, I was in regular fights in and out of class, and constantly used inappropriate language and displayed immaturity. Despite knowing right from wrong, I refused to follow instructions because of an inability to read, and a realization that my mouth was my biggest weapon. Further, my impulsivity of walking straight out of class resulted in me being sent to the sophomore advisor chair/teacher - Mr. Carpenter. I had become so lost in the system, that I started building up feelings of learned-helplessness and became consumed with rage (Burden, 2005).

Mr. Carpenter was an SE teacher, varsity basketball coach, and well respected throughout the school district and community. Things started to take a slight turn in 1994 when Mr. Carpenter, Mr. Goldstein and other teachers took chances on me, similar to gambling at the craps table. The odds were not in my favor, but they were willing to make a big wager. While sitting in the chair outside the office, I observed students passing and friends were in and out of the other offices saying, “Shawn, what did you do now”? The door opened and a student walked out, followed by Mr. Carpenter, who said “Shawn please come in and take a seat.” I sat down, and without wasting any time, he admitted his frustration. He stated, “Shawn, I am unsure I can continue helping you anymore because you are not making it easy for me.” I stared at him and was unsure about how to respond (Robinson 2015b).

My behavior was so volatile and Mr. Carpenter admitted that none of his classroom and extracurricular interventions seemed to work with me, and then he said, “We need to find something that you can channel your inner anger into. I think it will be a good opportunity for you to serve as a peer mentor/coach for the adapted physical education class in the Educable Mentally Retarded program and Special Olympics (SO).” “Me, a peer mentor,” I thought to

myself, and my response was, “I am not working with those BLEEP.” In all honesty, the exact reasons I got involved or what specifically changed my mind escape my memory, but my life began to change the minute I started working with the students in the program, and the student athletes saw me as a leader. Competitions allowed me to witness student athletes shining, and taking chances without fear. They smiled, laughed and showed respect for each other, and I found that the student-athletes I coached considered me a friend and showed me a lot of love.

My experiences were a natural fit and allowed me to feel right at home and be loved by the students. I quickly became a valuable member in this community and learned many life lessons from the student athletes while participating as a peer mentor and coach. At that time, I did not know my strengths, but Mr. Carpenter’s decision to get me involved in SO as a peer mentor during my sophomore year transformed my life and helped me understand my leadership abilities. His gamble paid off. As someone who was always athletic, I connected immediately with the student athletes in the program. Despite not having learned to control my anger in most aspects of my life, I was able to do so when coaching SO. As a coach, besides learning the art of patience, I

had to not only “teach the skills and spirit that define a true athlete” and “help athletes with intellectual disabilities find their own strengths and abilities” (Special Olympics, 2016), but also give athletes the chance to reach their potential on and off the field similar to the way Mr. Carpenter treated me.

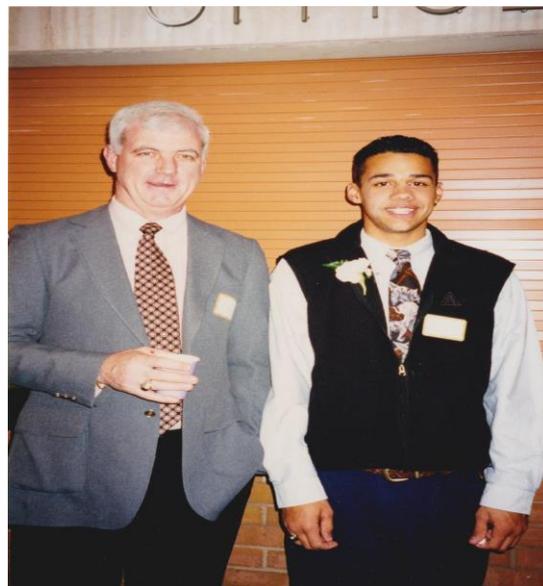
Mr. Carpenter modeled a version of leadership for me as well as provided me an opportunity to shine, which allowed me a chance to show my leadership ability, which boosted my self-confidence. He discovered that despite my learning disability, I also possessed hidden gifts that needed to be fostered (King, 2005). Further, I now realize that Mr. Carpenter had not limited my potential and achievement to academic programs, but believed I could perform at remarkably high levels when provided the right opportunities (Assouline, Nicpon, & Huber, 2006). Some of the greatest experiences in my life involved coaching and helping in the classes. During the day, I was a lost and angry adolescent. In the evening, however, this same person was coaching track and field every Thursday. A typical Thursday night consisted of athletes, coaches, parents, and volunteers meeting up at the gym and sharing laughs, smiles and hugs from 6-8 PM, followed by all of us going to a local burger shop for a later dinner. On one particular Thursday night, I was asked to lead

the group warm-ups, which was a surprise, but perhaps Mr. Goldstein noticed my leadership ability. It was a privilege to ask everyone to move into a full circle and to lead the warm-up exercises.

Jumping jacks, quad stretch, lunges and side steps were among the few exercises we did. After the warm-ups, we broke into groups where everyone rotated between the 50-yard dash, ball toss and assistant walker race. At these stations, I was able to use my athletic ability to inspire the students to push themselves. One of my vivid memories is of Danny who lined up and turned towards me, saying, “Robinson, you going down” and then pointing his finger at me with a smile. The starter at the finish line raised his hands and said “on your mark, set, go” – and dropped his hand. Danny took off, and I stood for a second and then caught up to him, screaming, “Come on, come on, let’s go.” At the finish line, he turned to hug me and said, “Thank you.” Then we walked back, and he said, “Robinson, I want you again.” We lined up and the starter dropped his hand and we were off. This time Danny broke his 50-yard dash time and set a record. The smile on his face was similar to Wayne Gretzky’s reaction when he had set a National Hockey League record in 1994. Throughout my time at S.O., I rotated to different stations where I cheered and encouraged the student-athletes to push

through regardless of the adversity. My role as a coach allowed me to be reliable and consistent with my responsibilities because of my love for what I was doing.

Throughout my high school experience, Mr. Carpenter and Mr. Goldstein provided opportunities for me to shine outside of my actual classes because they obviously saw something in me that I did not, due to my frustration with school activities and bouts of acting out in a negative fashion. Mr. Carpenter's referral was not based on formal assessment scores but on his personal knowledge of my strengths that were camouflaged (Lupart & Pyryt, 1996). He was able to see something that was not apparent to others or myself, and invested in my academic and social development, which is not typically the case for Black males in special education (Grantham, Ford, & Henfield, 2011; Kunjufu, 2011). In conclusion, as my high school career came to an end in 1996, I felt similar to Brett Favre who won the National Football League Most Valuable Player Award in 1996. Thus, I began to see myself as valuable and received the following accolades: Volunteer Service Award; Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH) student Helper; Certificate of Achievement - Special Olympics; Tri-Ship Scholarship; Youth Volunteer Service Award Village Board of Trustees and Citizen of the Year.



Mr. Carpenter and I (1995-1996)

Even twenty years later, I still have a relationship with Mr. Carpenter (see appendix B), Mr. Goldstein, former student athletes, have spoken at their Special Olympic banquets, and attended numerous practices, tournaments, outings, and summer games Special Olympics Illinois.



Mr. Carpenter and I at my Ph.D. Commencement

### **Recommendations for Identifying a Gifted Student in Special Education**

Educators must collaborate with parents, students and other educators by assisting them to understand the strengths and challenges that they may face through establishing effective identification and assessments that view their abilities from comprehensive approaches (Coleman, 2005; Leggett, Shea, & Wilson, 2010; Nielsen, 2002). Further, based on my lived experiences and a former student in SE, teachers should consider the following:

- Set limits and boundaries and hold students accountable; differentiate instruction to build success and confidence; and provide choice in assessment tools (project based vs. tests for example)
- Provide extra-curricular opportunities for students to shine;
- Collaboration between the gifted and special educators may lead to creative ideas that nurture the student's' full potential;
- Involve students in group processing and programs, or at least expose them as much as possible;
- Teach safe emotional language and use it consistently when addressing problem behaviors;

- Identify supports within schools and in the community; identify peers that can be role models, or help to foster the role of a role model;
- Identify ways to build self-esteem and concept, while strengthening self-identity;
- Find ways to EMPOWER Black males in SE!

For instance, teachers could design programs to create a sense of family among its members that may be beneficial for students identified as 'marginalized', as they may be able to help students develop "kinship ties" that can build identity (Yosso, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

My narrative addressed a critical period in my life when I was disengaged and angry, which resulted in me becoming less engaged with school and extra-curricula activities. I experienced enormous academic and social challenges, and exhibited many LD and EBD characteristics. My anger and outbursts left out of programming designed to nurture my talents. However, I had teachers who believed in my potential, took chances, never gave up on me, and realized that I had a natural gift hidden under layers of pain (Robinson, 2013). Further, chronicling my journey is a therapeutic process that allowed

me to share pivotal points throughout high school journey in hopes that my story can touch another student in similar situation. More importantly, for teachers to realize that all students have the potential to flourish if given the right opportunity. Thus, throughout the article, I provided a narrative that discussed: (1) a brief overview of the characteristics of a gifted student with a LD and EBD, (2) my high school experience, and (3) recommendations for identifying a gifted student in special education. Throughout high school I had teachers who were able to tap into my undeveloped leadership skills despite my academic struggles and verbal outbursts. The major characteristic trait of giftedness that I exhibited and excelled at was leadership, which was demonstrated by my work with Special Olympics. This experience allowed me to find my voice and passion, and become socially engaged within the school culture.

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