

How some of America's most gifted kids wind up in prison

Twice exceptional and low income is a recipe for disaster.

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Our table at La Casa Del Mofongo, a Dominican restaurant in Washington Heights, New York, buzzed with excitement as we reunited with our former students, whom neither of us had seen in a year, since we transitioned to other jobs. While the other graduating seniors fretted about college loans, Lamont regaled us with plans for attending a selective liberal-arts college in New York State, which had offered him a full scholarship. Glancing at an empty seat at our table, we inquired about creative, sensitive and idiosyncratic Manny. Lamont averted his eyes and regretfully informed us, “Manny dropped out.” (Names are pseudonyms.)

Lamont and Manny were students in our ninth grade English inclusion class, comprised of typically developing students and students with disabilities. There was nothing typical about Lamont

or Manny since both were gifted and talented. However, Lamont was gifted in many areas, while Manny was asynchronous and, we believe, twice-exceptional (gifted but possessing a disability). Unfortunately, due to a lack of services for low-income twice-exceptional students, the outcomes for Lamont and Manny were drastically different.

There is much indignation over the school to prison pipeline that funnels children into the criminal justice system, especially regarding the large number of special education students within this population. As many as 70% of those arrested possess some kind of disability. Lamentably overlooked, though, is the other at-risk population, gifted and talented students. In fact, the gifted may comprise as much as 20% of prisoners, according to Marylou Kelly Streznewski's *Gifted Grown Ups: The Mixed Blessings of Extraordinary Potential*.

Where is the outrage about the pipeline to prison for gifted students?

Gifted students need specialized instruction to reach their full potential. However, due to a lack of funding, only 56% of high achievers from low-income families remain successful by fifth grade, [according to the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation](#). Furthermore, high ability students from low-income backgrounds, as compared to their more advantaged peers, are twice as likely to drop out of school. Dropping out triples the likelihood of incarceration later in life.

(The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation is among the various funders of *The Hechinger Report*.)

What a tragic waste of potential for them and for us, who would benefit from their contributions.

In the pursuit of “equity,” bureaucrats ignore gifted children whom they perceive as elitist. Perhaps because the root word “gift” means something freely given, giftedness connotes privilege. Nothing is further from the truth.

Potential doesn't equal performance.

Many gifted students are impoverished, underperform due to distraction and boredom, or possess disabilities that most well-intentioned teachers are not trained to handle. The belief that gifted students can fend for themselves is misguided and inequitable.

With initiatives like [No Child Left Behind](#), which focuses on raising the achievement of low-ability students, the gifted and talented—the other outlier population—are left behind. Meanwhile, the [Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program](#), the only federal program for gifted students, received only \$5 million in 2014, a pittance compared with the \$11.5 billion allocated to special education.

Socio-economically disadvantaged students are the most adversely affected by this lack of funding, since the poorest neighborhoods, like District 7 in the South Bronx, with predominantly Hispanic and black students, lack a single gifted program. Furthermore, [only three states require their general education teachers to have training in gifted education](#).

Though Lamont's work was noteworthy, Manny's was transcendent. We'll never forget his stories, poems and drawings. Lamont and Manny were prototypes of the successful gifted student and the at-risk gifted student, respectively. They were the highest performers in our often disruptive class. But, while Lamont was able to focus, Manny was distractible. He embraced every opportunity to work independently. Furthermore, with his emotional sensitivity, common in creatively gifted children, Manny was easily irritated.

Additionally, Lamont had a stable home life, while Manny didn't. Although both were raised by single mothers on public assistance, Lamont's mom was loving and dedicated, while Manny's was abusive. Social services had removed him previously, but he was back with her

at that juncture.

Manny thrived in our class because at-risk gifted students benefit from individual creative projects and mentorship from adults. Admittedly, we knew nothing about gifted education best practices at the time, but made prudent choices regarding strategies. Still, we often bemoaned the lack of an honors class, which would have provided less distraction and more motivation.

Already frustrated by his struggle in algebra, Manny was trying to grasp the intricacies of a formula when someone chucked a spitball at him, inciting Manny to shove the boy into a wall. As a result, he was suspended from school for a few days.

Unlike Lamont who excelled in every subject, Manny's performance was uneven. Highly gifted in writing and the arts, he struggled profoundly in math. Furthermore, his social and emotional development were out of sync with his intellectual development, as evidenced by his loss of temper. His heightened emotionalism was compounded by his family troubles.

In retrospect, we realize that Manny was probably twice-exceptional, intellectually gifted with a disability, in his case emotional due to his traumatic home life. While there is no concrete data about twice-exceptionality, professionals say it exists in many people. In order to qualify for special education services, a student must be referred for a psychological evaluation. As he did well in our class, we never referred him for testing. Unfortunately, we did not understand the complexity of giftedness at the time.

One day, after Manny was no longer our student, we noticed one of our colleagues frantically assembling an application for an intervention program for Manny, who had joined a gang.

Manny joined the gang for acceptance, family and protection. Family issues aside, had he been in a gifted program where other students

were similarly artistic and emotional, he would not have needed the support of a gang.

Manny attended the intervention, but a year later dropped out of school. While Lamont thrives in college, where he is now a junior, our attempts to contact Manny have been unsuccessful; his phone number has been disconnected, his social media deleted, and even his mother doesn't know where he is.

For every success story like Lamont's, there are many more tragic outcomes like Manny's.

We can help at-risk gifted kids if we by doing the following stop playing politics at the expense of children. We must allocate more federal and state funding for gifted education. We must also create more scholarship opportunities for gifted kids to attend private schools train teachers and counselors in gifted education and identify gifted students earlier.

We also need to research best practices for high-ability, low-income youngsters, create honors classes, advanced placement classes and specialized high schools in low-income areas. Creating mentorships in which adults are assigned to at-risk students so that they don't fall by the wayside is also important.

Although gifted children are exceptional students like special education students, they are not protected by a federal law like [The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#). Because funding is inconsistent, it is socio-economically disadvantaged gifted students who are hurt by the lack of protection. As the other marginalized population, they should be afforded resources equal to those of special education students, especially since many gifted students are twice-exceptional.

Gifted education's \$5 million, as compared to special education's \$11.5 billion, is anything but egalitarian.

You can follow Florina and Sabrina on Twitter at @nycauthentic. This piece was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news website focused on inequality and innovation in education.