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Authors: Ford, Donna Y.
Harmon, Deborah A.

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EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE: PROVIDING ACCESS TO GIFTED EDUCATION FOR CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

Lacking both incentive and opportunity, the probabilities are very great that, however superior one's gifts may be, he will rarely live a life of high achievement. Follow-up studies of highly gifted young Negroes...reveal a shocking waste of talent--a waste that adds an incalculable amount to the price of prejudice in this country. (Educational Policies Commission, 1950, p. 33)

As the aforementioned quote suggests, a mind is not only a terrible thing to waste, a mind[1] is a terrible thing to erase. That is to say, we are wasting and erasing gifts and talents when we do not recognize the strengths of students.

The primary premise of this article is that the under-representation of diverse students in gifted education centers on the debate between excellence and equity, which is grounded in a "deficit perspective" about culturally diverse populations. This thinking effectively hinders educators from recognizing the gifts and talents of students who are different from the dominant culture.

[Hindrances to Progress](#)

Recognizing the loss of talent among diverse students who are not being identified as gifted, Congress (1988) passed legislation (i.e., Javits Act) to promote the interests of gifted students; its major goal is to support efforts to identify and serve minority[2] and low SES students. This legislation requires that about half of the funded projects serve low socioeconomic status (SES) students. Moreover, the National Association for Gifted Children (1997) published a position statement urging educators to use more than one test to make educational and placement decisions about gifted students and to seek equity in their identification and assessment instruments, policies, and procedures. Despite these initiatives, little has changed in the demographics of gifted education (or the practices and instruments used to identify gifted students). In a 1996 article, Ford examined reports that focused on the

demographics of gifted education nationally. The trends revealed that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students have always been under-represented in gifted education and, in some years, their under-representation increased rather than decreased.

Why do culturally diverse students persist in being underrepresented in gifted education? While a majority of publications point to testing and assessment issues, our experiences suggest that the primary barrier is the pervasive deficit orientation that prevails in society and our schools. After examining this orientation, we discuss symptoms of this orientation, such as the low referral rates of diverse students for gifted education services and the heavy reliance (sometimes exclusive reliance) on tests that inadequately capture the strengths and cultural orientations of diverse students.

Deficit Ideologies: Limiting Access and Opportunity

Perceptions about differences among students manifest themselves in various ways, and they exert a powerful influence in educational settings. A common saying among African Americans is "The less we know about each other, the more we make up." For instance, if a teacher does not understand how some cultural groups value cooperation or communalism over competition, that teacher may perceive the diverse child as being "too social." Communalism is a commitment to social relationships and social learning (e.g., working in groups, helping others). It is a "we, us, our" philosophical orientation (see Boykin, 1994; Shade, Oberg, & Kelly, 1997). Likewise, if teachers do not understand that some cultures come from an oral tradition, they may neither recognize nor appreciate the strengths of students who prefer speaking more than writing and reading. They may not recognize that students who speak nonstandard English can still have strong verbal skills. Thus, teachers may not refer culturally and linguistically diverse students for gifted education services if they equate giftedness with verbal, reading, and/or writing proficiency.

Essentially, ideas about cultural diversity influence definitions, policies, and practices. Too often, differences are equated with deficits. Most recently, the publication of *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) has revived the deficit orientation. Among other grievous errors (e.g., equating IQ with actual intelligence, viewing intelligence as static and almost totally inherited, misinterpreting correlation as causation, etc.), the authors overinterpreted and misinterpreted results of studies on the intelligence of African American children. They ultimately drew the fatal conclusion that African Americans are intellectually and culturally inferior to other cultural and ethnic groups. To state the obvious, this premise is harmful and unsound.

Menchaca (1997) traced the evolution of deficit thinking and demonstrated how it influenced segregation in schools (e.g., *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) and resistance to desegregation during the Civil Rights era and today. To what extent have educators resisted desegregation and used tracking and ability grouping to resegregate students racially (see Ford & Webb, 1995)? Below, we discuss how deficit orientations influence a myriad of gifted education practices and, thereby, limit diverse students' access to gifted education.

Testing and Assessment Issues

Extensive reliance on tests. Test scores play a dominant role in identification and placement decisions. More than 90% of school districts use intelligence or achievement test scores for decision making (Colangelo & Davis, 1997; Davis & Rimm, 1997). This near-exclusive reliance on test scores for placement decisions keeps the demographics of gifted programs primarily White and middle class. Traditional tests have been less effective with diverse and economically disadvantaged students, which raises the question, "Why do we continue to use these tests so exclusively and extensively?" There are at least three explanations offered for the ineffectiveness of standardized tests: (1) the fault rests with the test (e.g., test bias); (2) the fault rests with the educational environment (e.g., poor instruction and lack of access to high-quality education contributes to poor test scores); or (3) the fault rests with (or within) the student (e.g., he or she is cognitively inferior or "culturally deprived").

The first two viewpoints consider the influence of the environmental or external forces on test performance. Therefore, if the test is being questioned, alternative tests and assessment tools will be considered and adopted. Further, if the quality of the instruction and resources are poor, then educators recognize that test scores are likely to be low. Poor quality curriculum and instruction beget poor test scores.

Conversely, the last explanation rests in deficit thinking; it points to shortcomings within the students and, thus, it blames the victim. Educators who support this view abdicate any responsibility for minority students' lower test scores because of the belief that genetics exclusively or primarily determine intelligence and that intelligence is static--that genes are destiny. Such advocates are also likely to believe that the environment (e.g., families) in which culturally diverse students are reared is inferior to those of other groups. Both views are indicative of a deficit-oriented philosophy that hinders educators from seeing the potential of diverse students and prohibits them

from working effectively with such students.

IQ-based definitions and theories. Educators continue to define giftedness unidimensionally--as a function of high IQ scores. Thus, definitions and theories are based extensively on the results of intelligence tests. Essentially, giftedness is defined as an IQ of 130 or higher or a score that is two standard deviations above the mean on an intelligence test. IQ- or test-driven definitions often ignore the strengths of those who are culturally diverse, who are linguistically diverse, who live in poverty, or who are poor test takers. These students may very well be capable, but lack experiences deemed necessary for school success, as explained earlier.

Achievement-based definitions and theories. Along with high intelligence test scores, giftedness is often defined in terms of high achievement, as measured by achievement tests and grades. Gifted students are expected to demonstrate their ability in above-average school performance. Such definitions and theories, of course, ignore the reality that gifted students can and do underachieve. Gifted underachievers may be teachers' greatest "nightmare" because the students have the ability and potential to excel, but they do not. When we equate giftedness with achievement, we ignore an important reality: Gifted children may lack motivation, may have a conflict between the need for achievement and the need for affiliation, and may have personal problems that hinder their productivity and interest in school. Compounding these realities is another reality: Diverse students face social injustices (e.g., discrimination, stereotypes, negative peer pressures, etc.) that can contribute to underachievement.

Inadequate policies and practices. Procedural and policy issues also contribute to the under-representation of diverse students in gifted education. Specifically, teachers (including culturally diverse teachers) under-refer diverse students for gifted education services (Ford, 1996; Saccuzzo, Johnson, & Guertin, 1994). Ford (1996) found many Black students, for example, with high test scores who are under-represented in gifted education because teachers did not refer them for screening. Thus, when teacher referral is the first (or only) recruitment step, diverse students are likely to be under-represented in gifted education.

Equity versus Excellence Debate

The aforementioned barriers are empowered by debates over excellence versus equity, as if the two cannot coexist. This debate begs the question, "If we address issues of diversity (i.e., equity), will the quality of programs suffer (i.e., excellence)?" We are often asked by teachers and administrators, "If underachieving gifted students are identified and served, will this 'water down' the gifted education class?" We are convinced that beliefs-conscious or unconscious--about inferiority lie at the heart of this question.

Into the Future: Recommendations for Change

Schools must eliminate barriers to the participation of economically disadvantaged and minority students in services for students with outstanding talents ... and must develop strategies to serve students from underrepresented groups (USDE, 1993, p. 28).

To effectively recruit and retain diverse students in gifted education, educators must shed deficit thinking. As Einstein once said, "The world we have created is a product of our thinking. We cannot change things until we change our thinking." What follows are some suggestions for moving the field of gifted education into the next millennium in proactive, student-centered ways.

Adopt Contemporary Theories and Definitions

A number of theories of intelligence and giftedness exist, but two appear to capture the strengths, abilities, and promise of gifted diverse learners: Sternberg's (1985) Triarchic Theory of Intelligence and Gardner's (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences. These two comprehensive, flexible, and inclusive theories contend that giftedness is a social construct that manifests itself in many ways and means different things to different cultural groups. The theorists acknowledge the multifaceted, complex nature of intelligence and how current tests (which are too simplistic and static) fail to do justice to this construct. In addition, the USDE's (1993) most recent definition broadens notions of giftedness with its attention to potential and talent development. It recognizes that giftedness also exists among children living in ghettos, barrios, and hollows. Unfortunately, as with other definitions and theories, practical, valid, and reliable instruments have yet to be developed to assess these proactive and contemporary theories of intelligence. Our hope is that this will be rectified in the near future.

Adopt Culturally Sensitive Instruments

To date, the most promising instruments for assessing the strengths of culturally diverse students are nonverbal tests of intelligence such as the Naglieri Non-Verbal Abilities Test and Raven's Matrix Analogies Tests, which are considered less culturally loaded than traditional tests (Saccuzzo et al., 1994). Accordingly, these are likelier to capture the cognitive strengths of culturally diverse students. Saccuzzo et al., identified substantively more Black and Hispanic students using the Raven's than using a traditional test, and reported that "50% of the non-White children who had failed to qualify based on a WISC-R qualified with the Raven" (p. 10). They went on to state that "the Raven is a far better measure of pure potential than tests such as the WISC-R, whose scores depend heavily on acquired knowledge" (p. 10).

Educators should understand that nonverbal tests assess intelligence nonverbally. This is not to say that students are nonverbal (e.g., cannot talk); rather, the tests give students opportunities to demonstrate their intelligence without the confounding influence of language, vocabulary, and academic exposure. Gardner, Sternberg, and others contend that some gifted individuals do not have strong verbal or linguistic skills, as may be the case with musically gifted students, creatively gifted students, spatially gifted students, and those having a great deal of practical or social intelligence. Thus, we must find ways to assess the strengths, the gifts, of these capable students. At this time, nonverbal tests hold much promise for identifying such students--one test and one type of test cannot possibly measure the many types of intelligences that exist.

Identify and Serve Underachievers and Low Socioeconomic-Status Students

Underachievement is learned. Children are not born underachieving. Yet, when one equates giftedness with high achievement, gifted underachievers will be under-referred for gifted education. Considering the reality that a disproportionate percentage of diverse students live in poverty, they are likely to be underachievers--not due to lack of intelligence, but due to lack of opportunity (see Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997). Thus, educators must be mindful of why students underachieve and recognize that poverty is predominant among these reasons. Few articles have focused on gifted students who live in poverty. Therefore, it is essential that we adopt definitions and programs that center on potential and talent development so that we can change the demographics of gifted education and open doors that have historically been closed. Further, more research is needed that focuses on the characteristics and needs of gifted students who live in poverty--a disproportionate percentage of whom are culturally diverse students.

Provide Multicultural Preparation for Educators

With forecasts projecting a growing minority student population, teachers will have to bear a greater responsibility for demonstrating multicultural competence (Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1999, 2000; Ford, Howard, Harris, & Tyson, 2000). Multicultural education preparation among all school personnel may increase the recruitment and retention of diverse students in gifted education. To become more culturally competent, educators must, at minimum: (1) engage in critical self-examination that explores their attitudes and perceptions concerning cultural diversity and the influence of these attitudes and perceptions on diverse students' achievement and educational opportunities; (2) acquire and use accurate information about culturally diverse groups (e.g., histories, cultural styles, norms, values, traditions, customs) to inform teaching and learning; (3) learn how to infuse multicultural perspectives and materials into curriculum and instruction so as to maximize the academic, cognitive, social-emotional, and cultural development of all students; and (4) build partnerships with diverse families, communities, and organizations. In teacher education programs and staff development initiatives, we must prepare future and current teachers to work with culturally diverse students. Theories, models, and strategies proposed by Banks (1999), Ford and Harris (1999), Shade et al. (1998), and others should be shared with school personnel so they can create multicultural learning environments--classrooms and schools that are culturally responsive.

Provide a Multicultural Education for Gifted Students

Many scholars emphasize the need for all students to have a multicultural education (e.g., Banks, 1999; Ford, 1998; Ford et al., 1998; Ford & Harris, 2000). What resources accurately and effectively teach about slavery? What materials and resources offer multiple perspectives on the Trail of Tears? How can we ensure that all subject areas (including math and science) have a multicultural focus?

Students have the right to see themselves reflected (and affirmed) in the curriculum. Minimally, this means that teachers must expose students to high-quality multicultural books and materials, create lesson plans that focus on multicultural themes and concepts, and expose students to culturally diverse role models (e.g., using biographies and having speakers visit classrooms; see Ford & Harris, 1999, for additional strategies, resources, and curricula).

As described in Figure 1, Banks (1999) has proposed that there are four approaches to infusing multicultural content into the curriculum: contributions approach, additive approach, transformation approach, and social action approach. Teachers must try to teach at the highest levels so that students have a substantive understanding and appreciation of diverse populations.

Develop Home-School Partnerships

In theory, school districts consider family involvement central to student achievement. In practice, few schools consistently and aggressively build partnerships with diverse families (Ford, 1996). During the first week of school and constantly thereafter, teachers and administrators must make sure that diverse families know that the school district offers gifted education services, understand referral and screening measures and procedures, and know how placement decisions are made. Just as important, diverse families must understand the purpose and benefits of gifted education. Efforts by schools must be aggressive and proactive; school personnel will need to go into diverse communities (e.g., visit homes), attend minority-sponsored events, and seek the support of minority churches and corporations in order to build home-school partnerships.

Equally important, efforts should focus on family education--holding workshops and meetings designed to educate diverse parents about how to meet the needs of, and advocate for, their gifted children. As I have noted elsewhere (Ford, 1996), diverse parents need strategies for helping their children cope with peer pressures and social injustices, for maintaining achievement, and for staying motivated and goal-oriented in the face of social injustices.

On-Going Evaluation

There are no easy or quick fixes to increase opportunities for diverse students to have access to gifted education services. Educators at all levels (e.g., teachers, administrators) and in all positions (e.g., counselors, psychologists) must constantly evaluate and re-evaluate their efforts to recruit and retain diverse students in gifted education. This examination must focus on instruments, definitions, policies and procedures, curriculum and instruction, and staff development. Armed with such information and data, schools can be proactive in opening doors that have been historically closed to diverse students.

The success schools achieve at diversifying or "desegregating" gifted education depends heavily on critical self-examination and on a willingness to move the equity versus excellence debate beyond deficit thinking. As Borland (1996) suggested, gifted education must begin to question and examine its fundamental premises and practices to see if they remain (or ever were) valid. Students in the gifted program should closely represent the community's demographics. The reasons for the disparities must be evaluated and decreased.

A Final Thought

"There is a wealth of talent and intelligence in this field [of gifted education], but I worry that we are using it to defend yesterday, not to imagine and build tomorrow." (Borland, 1996. p. 145). Clearly, controversy exists regarding why diverse students are under-represented in gifted education. The controversy focuses on whether the causes include deficiencies in the children and their families or discriminatory practices of schools and society that restrict the search for, and discovery of, minority talent. Giftedness is a social construct; therefore, inclusiveness is the philosophy of choice for increasing the power of those predictions. For the sake of children, we must err on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion.

The persistent and pervasive under-representation of diverse students in gifted education is likely to have devastating, long-lasting effects. We can attribute much of this difficulty to deficit thinking, which limits access and opportunity. Likewise, doing what is in the best interest of diverse students has been hampered by debates between equity and excellence. How many more diverse children must suffer while we debate this issue? What changes are we willing to make in the new millennium?

Author Notes

1. Motto of the United Negro College Fund.
2. The terms minority and culturally diverse are used interchangeably to refer to African American, Hispanic American, Native American, and Asian American students.

Noteworthy is that Asian American students are not under-represented in gifted education and they often have high test scores.

[Figure 1. Levels of Integration of Multicultural Content Into Curriculum](#)

Level 4: The Social Action Approach

Students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them. Students become empowered to make meaningful contributions to the resolution of social issues and problems.

Level 3: The Transformation Approach

The structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of different cultural groups. Students are provided multiple perspectives and viewpoints on issues, concepts, topics, and events. They are encouraged to be empathetic and consider events from more than one lens.

Level 2: The Additive Approach

Content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its structure. For example, teachers may add a book to the curriculum or add a diverse scientist to the list of famous scientists that students will study in a unit. Changes to the curriculum often occur during certain times (e.g., Black History Month), rather than throughout the year. Multiculturalism is not an integral part of the curriculum--it is an add-on. Consequently, students fail to understand how the predominant culture interacts with and is related to culturally diverse groups.

Level 1: The Contributions Approach

Teachers focus on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements when teaching about diverse cultures and topics. For example, students often study teepees in a unit on Native Americans; they often learn about Kwanzaa when studying about African Americans. Or students study foods and holidays. As a result, students acquire a superficial understanding of culturally diverse groups.

Note. Adapted from Introduction to Multicultural Education (2nd ed.; p. 25), by J. A. Banks, 1999, Boston: Allyn and Bacon. Copyright (C) 1999 by Allyn and Bacon.

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By Donna Y. Ford and Deborah A. Harmon

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