

Multicultural Issues

Recruiting and Retaining Black and Hispanic Students in Gifted Education: Equality Versus Equity Schools

Donna Y. Ford, PhD¹

Keywords: diversity, gifted education, equality, equity, retention, recruiting

As a young scholar, I was a major supporter of the mantra “excellence and equality” as a philosophical means of closing achievement gaps and for increasing access to gifted education for students who are under-represented (Ford & Harmon, 2001). Excellence, of course, pertains to rigor and challenge where students are pushed and supported to think and perform at higher levels, to question and investigate, and to pose and solve/resolve meaningful problems.

Educators know that curricular and instructional rigor, grounded in high and positive expectations, can work wonders in raising and improving achievement, test performance, student engagement, behaviors, and overall school outcomes. Research on teacher expectation–student achievement (TESA) supports the aforementioned assertions regarding the power of expectations grounded in excellence, as does tacit intelligence—common sense—and real world experiences in classrooms (Barton & Coley, 2009; Ford, 2010; Valencia, 2010).

Over 50 years of studies, theories, paradigms, and debates have focused on how equality, namely, equal educational opportunity to learn, can close achievement gaps and open doors to rigorous programs and classes (e.g., gifted education, Advanced Placement) for Black students and, more recently, Hispanic students. Equality is the cornerstone of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). Equality denotes

and connotes sameness. All students are entitled to high quality teachers. All students are entitled to have access to technology. All students are entitled to . . . the same supports and resources. Problematic is that equality fails to consider students’ context and, thus, their needs as is prevalent in the seminal ecological work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and in this visual (see <https://radicalsolarship.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/equity-vs-equality.jpg>). What are the lived experiences of students? What are their supports? What do students, in this case gifted students and gifted Black and Hispanic students, bring to their school or learning experiences? What do gifted students bring to

schooling and learning environments that differ from their classmates and that, accordingly, require different strategies and supports . . . supports that are not equal but, rather, are different? What do gifted students who are racially, culturally, and linguistically different from their classmates bring to learning environments that require more than an *equal* opportunity to learn? Borrowing from math, equal means the same.

Two School Districts: Equality Versus Equity Focus

Both Equality District and Equity District reflect the national representation of students in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, & Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011): 25% are Hispanic, 19% are Black, 5% are Asian, 1% are American Indians, and the remainder (49%) is White. Note, however, that gifted education demographics look quite different in these districts. Although under-representation exists in both, one is inequitable based on

“THE DEGREE OF SEVERITY THAT IS ACCEPTED, TOLERATED, OR REJECTED DEPENDS ON WHETHER ONE ADOPTS AN EQUALITY OR EQUITY PHILOSOPHY AND ASSOCIATED PRACTICES.”

CRITERIA	Equality District	Equity District
Screening	N/A	Universal
Teacher Referral	Yes; grade 3	No
Family/Caregiver Referral	Yes; grade 3	No
Intelligence Tests	Traditional (IQ of 130+ on verbal <i>and</i> math subscales)	Traditional (for screening, an IQ of 110 on <i>one</i> of the three subscales; for identification, IQ of 120+) Non-Traditional (Non-Verbal; IQ of 110 for screening or 120+ for identification)
Achievement Test	97 th percentile	Based on building norms
Norms	National	Local and School Building
Income Considerations	No	Yes
Gifted Programming	Grade 4	Grade 1
Equity Goals	No	Yes

Figure 1. Gifted education in Equality District and Equity District.

guidelines proposed by Ford (2013, 2014; Ford & Russo, 2015). As discussed next, a significant distinction in these districts is their philosophy and practices regarding gifted education and students—an equality versus equity philosophy, respectively, sets them apart and closes or opens doors to gifted education for culturally different students.

Equality District

In this district, which promotes sameness regardless of different opportunities and needs, Black and Hispanic students are gravely under-represented in gifted education. While Hispanic students are 25% of their schools, they are 16% of gifted classes—almost 40% discrepancy. Even more under-represented are Black students. Despite being 19% of the school district, they are only 10% of gifted education. The discrepancy is almost 50% discrepancy. The discrepancies are large and may point to discrimination in recruitment and retention policies, procedures, and instruments (Ford, 2013).

Equality District relies on teacher referrals for screening of students in the second grade. Gifted programming begins in Grade 3 even though consultants have advised that screening and programming begin earlier. *If* students are referred, then testing begins. The administration, including gifted education coordinator, recognizes that teachers under-refer Black and Hispanic students. They also know that certain schools and teachers have rarely if ever referred these two groups. But they continue this practice of allowing teachers to be gatekeepers. They also accept referrals from parents/primary caregivers and have found that higher

income and more educated parents over-refer their children, while those with less social capital (Bourdieu, 1990), under-refer their children. They have complained that the form is confusing and cumbersome. Equality District has not reached out to inform and support such parents. Thus, the pipeline is primed for one group but leaky for another group.

There is no screening phase. Once referred by teachers or parents, identification begins. As indicated in Figure 1, the district uses a traditional test of intelligence containing three subscales: verbal, math, and non-verbal. White and Asian students are performing well, but fewer Hispanic and Black students perform at the designated cutoff score (i.e., IQ of 130 or higher on verbal *and* math subscales; non-verbal is not considered).

In addition to an intelligence test, Equality District includes achievement tests in their criteria, and has set the cutoff percentile at 97. Local norms are not adopted, and income or free and reduced lunch status is not considered.

Equity District

In this district, which considers differences in students and their contexts or background, Black and Hispanic students are under-represented in gifted education but not to the magnitude of Equality District. Hispanic students are 25% of their school enrollment and 22% of gifted classes. Black students are 19% of the school district, and 16% of gifted education enrollment. The discrepancies are less but equitable, as described shortly. As much as this district wants gifted education enrollment to mirror district enrollment, they are aware that racial quotas are illegal.

	Equality District	Equity District
Black Students	District = 19% Gifted = 10% Inequitable = Yes Equity goal is 15.2% for this group but they are only 10% of gifted education. Gifted enrollment must increase from 10% to at least 15.2%.	District = 19% Gifted = 16% Inequitable = No Equity goal is 15.2% for this group and they are 16% of gifted education. The equity goal has been met/ exceeded.
Hispanic Students	District = 25% Gifted = 16% Equity Goal = 20% Inequitable = Yes Equity goal is 20% for this group but they are only 16% of gifted education. Enrollment must increase from 16% to at least 20%	District = 25% Gifted = 22% Equity Goal = 20% Inequitable = No Equity goal is 20% for this group and they are 22% of gifted education. The equity goal has been met/exceeded.

Figure 2. Equality District and Equity District: District enrollment, gifted enrollment, and equity goal.

Note. The equitable goal for both districts would be 15.2% for gifted Black students because they are 19% of the districts, and 20% for gifted Hispanics students who are 25% of the district enrollment. These percentages will change based on enrollments in districts. For example, if Black students are 60% of a school district, using the equity formula ($60\% \times 30\% = 12\%$; $60\% - 12\% = 48\%$), then Black students should be at least 48% of gifted education in this particular district.

This district supports teacher input but not as referral agents. Equity District has read reports on referrals (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008) and hired a consultant to study teacher and parental referrals by students' race and income in their district. They understand that parents are indeed children's first teachers; caregivers have 6 years to raise their children before formal education. Educators in this district have studied the achievement gap and know that children spend those 6 years with different access to language, literacy, preschool, and educational experiences. They knew that under-referral by teachers is a problem in their district and that low income, and Black and Hispanic parents also under-refer compared with higher income and more educated White parents. The studies and findings for their own district advised that such referrals be dropped due to contributing to under-representation.

Therefore, instead of relying on referrals by teachers and parents, Equity District adopted universal screening in the first grade using both a traditional and non-traditional test (i.e., non-verbal). For screening, they have adopted the same traditional test used by Equality District, but for screening, they look at students who score an IQ of 110 or more on *one* of the three subscales. Schools can also replace this traditional instrument with a non-verbal measure, especially when students

are Limited English Proficient and/or low income. Instead of using racial quotas, Equity District has set equity goals that target *minimal* representation enrollments for under-represented students. The rationale and support for equity goals are described next.

Equity Goals: Overview, Formula, and Application

Under-representation exists in both school districts; however, Equality District's enrollment of Black and Hispanic students is more severe. When evaluating under-representation and seeking to address discrepancies to increase access, what goals do districts set? And why do they set such goals? What goals help to ensure that under-representation among gifted Black and Hispanic students is minimal?

Relying on the court case *McFadden v. Board of Educ. for Illinois School Dist. U-46* (2013), and also described in Ford (2013, 2014) and Ford and Russo (2015), schools must be deliberate in setting specific *minimal* goals to be equitable for their students. In *McFadden*, Hispanic students (40% of the district) were almost invisible in the district's mainstream gifted program (2%), which served mainly White students (who were

also 40% of district but some 98% of those in the mainstream gifted program).

In both Equality District and Equity District, the demographics of students are the same, but in gifted education, enrollments are different. Policies and procedures are different. Instruments and/or how they are used are different. Criteria are different for screening and/or identification. Unsurprisingly, the outcomes are different.

Relying on an equity allowance formula, the Equity District has set goals they wish to achieve to increase access without using quotas. In both districts, Black students comprise 19% of students and Hispanic students comprise 25%. What goals should both set for minimal gifted education enrollment? Applying the 20% allowance (Ford, 2013), Black students should be at least 15.2% of gifted students in both districts and Hispanic students should be at least 20%. The Equity Formula is as follows and applied in Figure 2:

$$\left[\text{Percentage of Black students in district } (P) \times 20\% = B \right];$$

$$\text{Equity Goal } (E) = P - B.$$

1. Calculate the percentage of Black students in the school district (Answer: 19%)
2. Calculate 20% of the total percentage of Black students in the school district (19%). (Answer: $19\% \times 20\% = 3.8\%$)
3. Subtract the result from No. 2 (3.8%) from their percentage in the district (No. 1; 19%). This will provide the *minimal* target representation for Black students in the gifted program. (The minimal Black percentage in gifted education should be 15.2%; $19\% - 3.8\% = 15.2\%$)
4. If the percentage in this case of Black students is less than 15.2%, under-representation is unreasonable and discrimination may be at work.

$$\left[\text{Percentage of Hispanic students in district } (P) \times 20\% = H \right];$$

$$\text{Equity Goal } (E) = P - H.$$

1. Calculate the percentage of Hispanic students in the school district (Answer: 25%).
2. Calculate 20% of the total percentage of Hispanic students in the school district (25%). (Answer: $25\% \times 20\% = 5\%$).
3. Subtract the result from No. 2 (5%) from their percentage in the district (No.1; 25%). This will provide the *minimal* target representation for Hispanic students in the gifted program. (The minimal Hispanic percentage in gifted education should be 20%; $25\% - 5\% = 20\%$).
4. If the percentage in this example for Hispanic is less than 20%, under-representation is unreasonable and discrimination may be operating.

Summary and Recommendations

How severe is under-representation among Black and Hispanic students in gifted education nationally and in school districts and buildings? The degree of severity that is accepted, tolerated, or rejected depends on whether one adopts an equality or equity philosophy and associated practices. Most, if not all scholarship, shares the same message or finding—Black and Hispanic students often lack access to gifted education. Nationally and in most of our 16,000 or so districts, these two groups, especially Black students, are under-represented in gifted education. Their school district enrollment does not match their gifted enrollment in the majority of states and districts (Ford & King, 2014).

The equity formula, which provides a 20% allowance, gives decision makers and policy makers a targeted formula to adopt and set minimal representation goals to address discrepancies. Once the goal is calculated, school personnel must examine barriers to recruitment and retention for gifted Black and Hispanic students to meet (and preferably exceed) those *minimal* goals. As listed in Figure 2, meeting equity goals requires interrogating policies and procedures, criteria, and instruments, along with supports given to culturally different students and their families/caregivers. Figure 2 juxtaposes the two districts on several factors regarding school district representation compared with gifted education representation. It also shares discrepancies (under-representations) and equity goals, and indicates which district has failed to meet and which district has met/exceeded this goal based on the formula presented.

Making meaningful changes and progress requires professional development training that focuses on the dual goals of rigor and relevance, both of which are guided by high and positive expectations. Colorblind training in higher education and professional development will not put a dent in gifted education under-representation and will not meet equity goals. Educators must be prepared in gifted education *and* culturally responsive education to be equity minded and advocates for their Black and Hispanic students (Ford, 2011, 2013). This said, I offer 10 recommendations for equitable change regarding eliminating barriers to recruiting and retaining Black and Hispanic students in gifted education (for more recommendations, see Ford, Moore, & Trotman Scott, 2011).

1. Target equity goals to determine minimal representation of students, mainly those who are Black and Hispanic (under-represented students).
2. Adopt universal screening early and at several grade levels; screening, identification, and placement should be ongoing.
3. Adopt talent development models and opportunities.

4. Screen students based on one subscale (e.g., verbal or non-verbal) to cast a broad net.
5. Adopt non-verbal measures in screening and assessment, and do not disregard the non-verbal subscale of traditional tests.
6. Adopt local norms; adopt school building norms when districts have income and racial differences throughout buildings and parts of the district.
7. Examine the efficacy of referrals and nominations by teachers and families/caregivers for under-represented groups.
8. Be proactive and aggressive in outreach to parents/caregivers from under-represented groups so they can support and advocate for their children.
9. Be proactive and aggressive at training school personnel in gifted education *and* culturally responsive education.
10. Adopt an equity philosophy for recruiting and retaining culturally different gifted students.

Equity in education means the assignment of students to schools and programs without regard to their race. This includes providing students with unobstructed opportunities for participation in all educational programs (e.g., gifted education), regardless of their race. Decades of data and reports indicate that gifted education has tolerated under-representation, even when discrepancies are severe. Perhaps guided by notions of equality, this has been accepted. It is well past time to adopt, instead, views and practices grounded in equity; then more doors can open for gifted Black and Hispanic students.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Barton, P., & Coley, R. J. (2009). *Parsing the achievement gap II: Baselines for tracking progress*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Services.

- Bourdieu, P. (1990). Structures, habitus, practices. In P. Bourdieu (Ed.), *The logic of practice* (pp. 52-79). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Ford, D. Y. (2010). *Reversing underachievement among gifted Black students* (2nd ed.). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Ford, D. Y. (2011). *Multicultural gifted education* (2nd ed.). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Ford, D. Y. (2013). *Recruiting and retaining culturally different students in gifted education*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Ford, D. Y. (2014). School District U-46: A clarion call to school districts, state departments of education, and multicultural issues: Gifted education discrimination in *McFadden v. Board of Education for Illinois*. *Gifted Child Today*, 37, 188-193.
- Ford, D. Y., Grantham, T. C., & Whiting, G. W. (2008). Culturally and linguistically diverse students in gifted education: Recruitment and retention issues. *Exceptional Children*, 74, 289-308.
- Ford, D. Y., & Harmon, D. A. (2001). Equity and excellence: Providing access to gifted education for culturally diverse students. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 12, 141-147.
- Ford, D. Y., & King, R. A. (2014). No Blacks allowed: Segregated gifted education in the context of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. *Journal of Negro Education*, 83, 300-310.
- Ford, D. Y., Moore, J. L., III, & Trotman Scott, M. (2011). Key theories and frameworks for improving the recruitment and retention of African American students in gifted education. *Journal of Negro Education*, 80, 239-253.
- Ford, D. Y., & Russo, C. J. (2015). No child left behind . . . unless a student is gifted and of color: Reflections on the need to meet the educational needs of the gifted. *Journal of Law in Society*, 15, 213-239.
- McFadden v. Board of Educ. for Illinois School Dist. U-46, 984 F.Supp.2d 882 (2013).
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, & Civil Rights Data Collection. (2011). Available from <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>
- Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bio

Donna Y. Ford, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Special Education and Department of Teaching and Learning (secondary appt.) at the Peabody College of Education of Vanderbilt University.