



**THE NATIONAL  
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*University of Connecticut  
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**Issues and Practices in the  
Identification and Education of  
Gifted Students From  
Under-represented Groups**



James H. Borland  
Teachers College, Columbia University  
New York, New York



May 2004  
RM04186



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The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) is funded under the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, Institute of Education Sciences, United States Department of Education.

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The work reported herein was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award Number R206R000001, as administered by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the position or policies of the Institute of Education Sciences or the U.S. Department of Education.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this monograph, I discuss the current and historic under-representation of economically disadvantaged students, students of color, students from ethnic minorities, and students with limited English proficiency in programs for gifted students. I examine the likely causes of the under-representation of these students, drawing on research and theory from psychological, sociological, anthropological, and critical theoretical perspectives. I then present some ideas and practices that show promise for redressing this chronic imbalance. These include both changes in practices that fall within the range of typical gifted program activities (e.g., identification practices) and changes in policy and practice that may enable us to educate more potentially and manifestly gifted students through reconceptualizing the theory and practice of gifted education.





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# **Issues and Practices in the Identification and Education of Gifted Students From Under-represented Groups**

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## **Introduction**

It has for some time been a commonplace observation that certain children have been and continue to be chronically, if unintentionally, under-represented in programs for gifted students. For example, the under-representation of girls in such programs has been a concern for some time, especially in the field of mathematics (see, for example, Callahan, 1991; Gavin & Reis, 2003; Junge & Dretzke, 1995; Stanley & Benbow, 1983; Stocking & Goldstein, 1992; Swiatek, Lupkowski-Shoplik, & O'Donoghue, 2000; Terwilliger & Titus, 1995), and this is undeniably an important issue and a problem far from solved. However, in the United States, the most pervasive instances of under-representation have been associated with economic disadvantage and racial and ethnic minority status. This is the situation that I will address in this monograph.

## **Historical Background**

### **The Origins of the Field**

From the very beginning of the field, individuals labeled as gifted, either for educational or research purposes, have, to an overwhelming degree, been of European descent and have deviated significantly upward from population-wide socio-economic norms. For example, in *Hereditary Genius* (1869), Sir Francis Galton concluded that eminence in "mental work" is 400 times as likely to be found among children of upper-class parents than among the children of laborers. Galton, who is frequently, and accurately, cited as the intellectual forebear of the field of gifted education, had no doubt that "natural ability," what we today would call *giftedness*, was hereditarily distributed disproportionately in a manner that favored White upper-class individuals.

In the prefatory chapter to the 1892 second edition of his seminal work, Galton, echoing the racial attitudes that predominated among educated Victorians, wrote, "the natural ability of which this book mainly treats, is such as a modern European possesses in much greater average share than men of the lower races" (p. x). With respect to class differences and natural ability, Galton left no doubt as to his beliefs. Discussing "the bulk of general society" (1869, p. 35), Galton wrote, "everyone knows how difficult it is to drive abstract conceptions, even of the simplest kind, into the brains of most people—how feeble and hesitating is their mental grasp—how easily their brains are mazed—how incapable they are of precision and soundness of knowledge" (p. 21). One is not

surprised, therefore, to read Galton's pronouncement that "it is in the most unqualified manner that I object to pretensions of natural equality" (p. 14).

My point is not to impugn Galton's egalitarian or populist credentials; there is nothing to impugn and he no doubt would bridle at the suggestion that there were. It is difficult to think of him wearing the mantle of elitism with anything other than pride. Rather, I am suggesting that the scholarly foundation upon which the field of gifted education has been built, and with which contemporary scholars and practitioners must contend, rests upon assumptions about race and class that have influenced research and theory from the time of Galton to the present, even as these assumptions have become buried under layers of subsequent theory, research, and good intentions and as attitudes and beliefs have become, from our current perspective, less benighted.

I suggest that it is useful to us in the present to understand our collective past. Just as a childhood experience, long repressed, can, according to psychoanalysts, exert a profound influence on adult life, assumptions about giftedness, race, and class held by the founders of the field, I contend, continue to influence us today, despite our repugnance when openly confronted by them. And just as psychotherapists believe that awareness of repressed experiences and conflicts can have a salutary effect on analysts—the essence of Freud's "talking cure"—so too might an awareness of our field's origins in times when even educated people held views that, by today's standards, were undeniably racist and class-biased be beneficial for today's professionals who are struggling with the legacy of views such as Galton's.

In this light, it is useful to examine the work of Lewis M. Terman, generally regarded as the *fons et origo* of gifted education in the United States. Terman's massive longitudinal study of over 1,000 high-IQ students, reported in his *Genetic Studies of Genius* (1925-1959), has obvious historical value as the first large-scale empirical study of "gifted"<sup>1</sup> children and considerable continuing influence over how we think about such children. Because of the pivotal role of Terman's research in our field's history, it is important to understand the nature of the sample on which this work was based and from which the findings were derived.

In the first volume of his magisterial *Genetic Studies*, entitled *Mental and Physical Traits of a Thousand Gifted Children* (1925), Terman described the children who, over their life spans, would be the subject of his and his successors' research. That the sample was far from representative either socio-economically or racially and ethnically is quite clear. For example, whereas 4 to 5% of the adult general population at that time was, according to the scale Terman used, classified as being engaged in "professional" occupations, 50% of the fathers of his high-IQ subjects were so-classified. This is a remarkable statistical deviation from the norm, one that has been insufficiently remarked upon by writers in this field in discussing Terman's findings.

Racially and ethnically, the sample was also atypical of the general school-age population. Terman reported in Volume 1 (1925) that children of Asian, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Mexican descent were statistically under-represented, and the

nearly total absence of African-American children was so much in line with expectations that it was not deemed worthy of mention. Clearly, the "Termites" were, as a group, Whiter and considerably more affluent than their lower-IQ school-age peers.

Nonetheless, Terman's research has, more than any other body of work, constituted the bulk of what we "know" about "gifted" children, although its influence has, to some extent, been obscured by being incorporated into secondary and tertiary sources that have passed along his findings as the common knowledge of the field. It is interesting to look at some of the knowledge contributed by Terman's *Genetic* studies and to consider the role that socioeconomic status (SES) in particular could have played and the degree to which that has become confounded with giftedness.

Among Terman's findings, widely repeated, is that, contrary to the stereotype, gifted children are not sickly, physically frail, neurotic, or socially inept; rather, Terman tells us, they are healthy, robust, emotionally well-adjusted, and socially adept. One must ask, however, whether these characteristics are attributable to giftedness or to growing up in upper-middle-class White families in pre-New Deal America when, owing to a lack of social services, economic advantage carried even more of a benefit with respect to physical health and even survival than it does today and when, again to a greater extent than today, membership in the White middle- and upper-middle-class mainstream conferred certain advantages that bore directly on one's emotional and social development?

One could examine a number of Terman's findings concerning the physical, emotional, vocational, and social development of his subjects and propose that social class, not giftedness, is the primary causal factor (i.e., these subjects were stronger, more successful, happier, etc. because of comfortable families of origin, not high IQ). Why is this important? It is important because of Terman's lasting influence on our thinking about the children who are the focus of our field. If the foundation of our knowledge rests on a study of high-SES mostly White children with high IQs, this knowledge will be translated into practice. For example, authors of teacher checklists will reproduce these findings as "characteristics of gifted children," and children chosen for gifted programs will, to a greater degree than might otherwise be the case, resemble Terman's sample racially, ethnically, and socio-economically. In other words, I am suggesting that, nearly a half century after his death, Terman's sample is being replicated in a number of gifted programs across the country.

### **The Post-Sputnik Years**

The work of Terman and such contemporaries as Leta Stetter Hollingworth (e.g., 1942; Klein, 2002), as well as the publication of two *National Society for the Study of Education (N.S.S.E.) Yearbooks* (T. S. Henry, 1920; Whipple, 1924), not only established an empirical and theoretical basis for the field, one in which race and class played both powerful and invisible roles, but also resulted in the implementation of programs for gifted students in a number of school districts across the United States. However, by the mid-point of the twentieth century, gifted education was out of favor. It was not until the

launching of Sputnik I by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957, that, with the nation nervously looking to the schools to do more to encourage the development of "the best and the brightest," gifted education came to the forefront of the national consciousness. Once again, during this second wave of interest in gifted education, issues of race and class played major roles in that they were powerful factors in determining who was gifted and who was not. Despite a great deal of discussion about expanding the concept of giftedness in the fifty-seventh *N.S.S.E. Yearbook* (N. B. Henry, 1958; see especially the chapter by Witty) and in the highly influential but flawed work of Getzels and Jackson (1958), giftedness was mainly operationalized through aptitude tests. In the schools in the post-Sputnik era, as in Terman's *Genetic Studies of Genius*, "giftedness" usually equaled a high IQ.

An exception to the norm of treating giftedness in a decontextualized manner without reference to how it can be shaped by issues of race and class and to how certain groups can be advantaged and disadvantaged by how it is conceived is found in the work of the noted African-American educational researcher, Horace Mann Bond. In 1960, Bond studied the relationship between socio-economic status and the awarding of National Merit Scholarships. His findings revealed a pronounced skewing of awards toward higher SES students, prompting him to ask whether we have "developed a class system that is almost as fixed and immutable as that long established in Western European social hierarchies" (p. 117).

In the same anthology on gifted education in which Bond's paper appeared, Martin D. Jenkins, another prominent African-American educator, felt compelled to point out that mean differences in the IQs of Caucasians and African-Americans did not imply that no "superior cases" would be found among the latter group, nor did it mean that African-Americans were lacking in "the ability to participate in the culture at the highest level" (1960, p. 111; see Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993, for more about the work of Bond, Jenkins, and other "forgotten pioneers" in the study of gifted African-American children).

Despite this work, and the coinciding of the post-Sputnik wave of gifted education programs with a crucial period in the struggle for civil rights by African-Americans, little cognizance was taken of issues of race and class in this period. It fell to a later generation of scholars to acknowledge that a problem exists and, belatedly, to begin to work on that problem.

### **Contemporary Indicators of the Under-representation of Economically Disadvantaged and Children of Color in Gifted Programs**

The history of the field of gifted education in the United States can, perhaps simplistically but nonetheless usefully, be divided into three periods characterized by a widespread acceptance of the need of "gifted" children for an appropriately differentiated education and a proliferation of gifted programs. The first such period was launched by the work of Terman, Hollingworth, and others in the post World War I era, and the second was the short-lived post-Sputnik efflorescence of gifted programs, both of which

are briefly discussed above. We are still in the third period, one that began, or at least coincided, with the publication by the U.S. Office of Education's *Education of the Gifted and Talented*, the so-called "Marland Report" (1972).

For the past three decades or so, gifted education has been a more-or-less-accepted part of the educational landscape, never approaching the near-extinction that it faced in the early 1950s or the mid-to-late 1960s. During this time, numerous writers have called attention to the fact that poor children and children of color have been under-represented in programs for gifted students (see, among many others, Baker & Friedman-Nimz, n.d.; Borland & Wright, 1994; Borland, Schnur, & Wright, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harris & Ford, 1999; Passow, 1989; Richert, 1987; VanTassel-Baska, Patton, & Prillaman, 1989).

Serious effort has finally been devoted to the problem, especially since the passage of the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, which resulted in, among other things, the funding of numerous local projects designed to develop ways of identifying and educating traditionally under-represented gifted students. Another product of that legislation was a government publication, *National Excellence: The Case for Developing America's Talent* (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Contained in this report was a definition of giftedness, replacing the much-quoted definition in the Marland Report (1972), that contained the statement, "Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor" (p. 26). The mention of "all cultural groups" and "all economic strata" in this definition, along with the funding of local projects focused on equity issues signaled a new level of determination in the field of gifted education to attack and make progress with respect to the problem of the under-representation of low-SES children and children of color in programs for gifted students.

Nonetheless, current data suggest that the under-representation of economically disadvantaged and minority students in gifted programs continues. For example, the ongoing National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS '88) conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (e.g., 1991) revealed that eighth grade students whose families' socio-economic status placed them in the top quartile of the population were about five times more likely to be in programs for gifted students than were students from families in the bottom quartile. Moreover, almost half of the eighth grade students identified as gifted and placed in gifted programs were from families in the top SES quartile, whereas about 9% were from the bottom quartile.

Baker and Friedman-Nimz (n.d.) conducted sophisticated statistical analyses of the NELS '88 data and found that part of the problem related to availability of services. They report that students from the third SES quartile were 18% more likely to attend school with gifted programs and students in the highest quartile were 28% more likely to attend schools with gifted programs than were students in the first, or lowest, quartile. This suggests that, in part, the problem of under-representation of poorer children in gifted programs is part of a larger national problem of inequities in the provision of

public educational resources, which results in inadequate services being provided to schools serving low-SES children.

Ford and Harris (1999) used data from 1978 through 1992 to compute indices of under-representation and over-representation of certain groups by comparing their representation in the general population with their representation in gifted programs. Their data show that Latinos were under-represented by 24% in 1978 (accounting for 6.8% of the school population but only 5.15% of students in gifted programs) and by 42% in 1992. American Indians were under-represented by 62% in 1978 and by 50% in 1992, and the indices for African Americans were 33% and 41%, respectively.

Why does this matter? The serious and destructive consequences of this state of affairs can be illustrated in the form of a syllogism that I believe is valid. Take the two following premises:

- Students typically derive at least some benefits from being placed in gifted programs, benefits that are realized in school and later in life.
- Gifted programs disproportionately serve White middle- and upper-middle-class students.

If these premises are true, and I believe they clearly are, the following conclusion is a logical necessity:

- Therefore, gifted programs are serving to widen the gap between society's have's and have-not's and between White and minority families by disproportionately serving the children of the former and neglecting the children of the latter.

The existence and the consequences of under-representation are not in doubt. What is less certain is why the problem exists, a question to which I will now turn.

### **Possible Causes of the Problem of Under-representation — Factors Outside the Field of Gifted Education**

It is useful to distinguish between those causes of under-representation over which we in the field of gifted education have an appreciable degree of control and those over which we do not. Among the latter, I will identify conditions in the larger society and, among the former, practices in the field of gifted education. This is a bit of a simplification if one views education, including gifted education, as an instrument for social change, but for purposes of discussion, I will maintain this dichotomy. Let me first examine factors outside the field of gifted education.



## **Social and Cultural Factors—Educational Disadvantage**

Poverty, racism, class bias—inequity in all of its ugly forms—are malignant and insidious forces that can damage people, and children are especially vulnerable. Thus, a child who is born into poverty and experiences the consequences of racism for the first 5 years of his or her life is at-risk, whatever his or her innate capacity for academic achievement, of entering kindergarten at a disadvantage educationally. In attempting to understand the underachievement and corresponding under-representation in gifted programs of children from certain groups, we sometimes lose sight of the simple and undeniable fact that such things as poverty hurt all but the most resilient children in ways that can deny them their basic rights in our schools and our society.

How this translates into academic underachievement and under-representation in gifted programs is a difficult question. Descriptive data are plentiful. For example, Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) list five "key indicators associated with the educationally disadvantaged . . . [that are] correlated with poor performance in school" (p. 16). These are, (a) being African-American or Latino, (b) living in poverty, (c) living in a single-parent family, (d) having a poorly educated mother, and (e) having limited English proficiency. Useful as this might be, these data are correlational rather than explanatory, so we have to turn elsewhere for possible insights into how what Natriello et al. refer to as "educational disadvantage" comes about.

### **A Cultural-Ecological Perspective—The Work of Ogbu and Fordham**

John Ogbu (e.g., 1978, 1985, 1992) and Signithia Fordham (e.g., 1988, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) have provided a useful, although not undisputed (see, e.g., Chapell & Overton, 2002; Lundy, 2003), theoretical framework for investigating the causes and mechanisms of educational disadvantage among children of color. I will summarize some of their ideas that, I believe, bear on the issue of the under-representation of minority children in programs for gifted students.

### **Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities**

Since economic and educational disadvantage is visited disproportionately upon racial and ethnic minorities, understanding the nature and effects of minority status is essential to addressing its educational consequences, including under-representation in gifted programs. To this end, Ogbu makes a distinction between *voluntary minorities*, who come to this country by choice to seek economic opportunity or greater political freedom, and *involuntary minorities*, such as African-Americans, who were originally brought to this country against their will, denied assimilation into the mainstream, and relegated largely to menial occupations. (Ogbu also includes among involuntary minorities American Indians and most Latinos living in the U.S.)

## Primary and Secondary Cultural Differences

Although voluntary-minority children may initially experience school difficulties, they do not typically fail generation after generation, as many involuntary-minority children do. Ogbu attributes some of this discrepancy in school success to the ways the two groups differ from the cultural mainstream. According to Ogbu, all minorities, voluntary and involuntary, initially experience *primary cultural differences*—differences in language, religious practice, dress, child rearing—that existed before they came to the United States and that, for a period of time, serve to mark them as different from the acculturated mainstream. Primary cultural differences can cause educational difficulties, lack of fluency in English being a good example, but for voluntary minorities the problems rarely persist because they see primary cultural differences as barriers to overcome to adapt to and assimilate into the mainstream culture and achieve the goals that motivated their immigration in the first place. Maintaining these differences is contrary, not essential, to their identity and sense of self-worth. Thus, at least outside the home, they try to eliminate or minimize cultural attitudes, practices, and behaviors that constitute primary cultural differences, and they instill in their children the importance of assimilating into the mainstream, although perhaps within limitations relating to social relations, for purposes of upward mobility.

In addition to primary cultural differences, involuntary minorities also experience what Ogbu calls *secondary cultural differences*, which arise after their arrival in this country when "members of a given population beg[*i*]n to participate in an institution controlled by members of another population, such as the schools controlled by the dominant group" (Ogbu, 1992, p. 8). Secondary cultural differences arise in reaction to negative contacts with the dominant culture and serve as "coping mechanisms under 'oppressive conditions' " (Ogbu, 1992, p. 10). Whereas voluntary minorities see primary cultural differences as barriers to assimilation that must be overcome, involuntary minorities see secondary cultural differences as protectors of their very identity and "have no strong incentives to give up these differences as long as they believe they are still oppressed" (Ogbu, 1992, p. 10). Thus, secondary cultural differences can persist generation after generation.

## Cultural Inversion

One possible form secondary cultural differences can take is *cultural inversion*, "the tendency . . . to regard certain forms of behavior, events, symbols, and meanings as inappropriate . . . because these are characteristic of White Americans" (Ogbu, 1992, p. 8). In response to oppression and denial of opportunities to assimilate into the mainstream culture, involuntary minorities may develop a subgroup identity based on values, attitudes, and behaviors that are directly oppositional to those of the White culture. Once this occurs, socializing children involves teaching behaviors and values discrepant from those of the mainstream culture, and sanctions are often applied to those who appear to embrace values and behaviors perceived as being part of that culture, such as employing standard English or striving for academic achievement.

## Socialization and Caste

Ogbu (e.g., 1978, 1985) argues that involuntary minorities occupy the lowest stratum of a caste system that grants them little chance for upward mobility. Inferior positions in the caste system require little education, and the rigidity of the system is maintained by disproportionately meager rewards for involuntary minorities who do acquire an education.

This leads to Ogbu's analysis of the "failure-of-socialization" hypothesis. This hypothesis represents an attempt to explain the disproportionate educational failure rate among involuntary-minority children by asserting that their parents socialize them less effectively than middle-class parents socialize their children, with the result being that these children become indifferent to and unlikely to achieve academic success. Ogbu challenges this hypothesis, arguing that the real difference is in the *content* or *objective*, not in the *manner*, of socialization. Writing about African-American involuntary minorities, Ogbu states that, "black children's school behavior is not just a spillover of adult adjustive behavior; *it is a part of the training of black children for their survival in the American caste system*" (1985, p. 372). Further, he writes,

We should not expect blacks and whites to have the same socialization practices and experiences, because they are not being prepared for roles requiring the same kinds of competence. . . . When blacks differ from whites in . . . skills it is probably because their status positions require variant forms of the skills in question, not because parents have failed in their socialization duty. (p. 374)

In other words, the fact that many involuntary-minority children do not appear to be socialized for success in the educational system does not imply a failure by their parents to prepare them for their roles in society. According to Ogbu, just the opposite is the case. Considering their limited horizons and the rigidity of the caste system, these children are being socialized realistically for the future that awaits them. This, Ogbu argues, is *successful*, not failed socialization.

The impact on students' school attitudes and behavior is predictable. Nearly all children find certain aspects of schooling to be meaningless and boring. However, White children and children from voluntary-minority groups are socialized to endure the school routine because their parents know that real benefits can accrue to them if they do so. Ogbu believes that for involuntary-minority children, however, there is likely to be little or no reward for brooking the tedium of the classroom, a fact not lost on parents, who realistically instruct their children in the development of other, more adaptive, skills.

## The Burden of Acting White

This creates a dilemma for potentially gifted involuntary-minority students, which Fordham (1988, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) refers to as the "burden of acting White."

Learning school curriculum and learning to follow the standard academic practices of the school are often equated by the minorities with . . . "acting white" while simultaneously giving up acting like a minority person. School learning is therefore consciously or unconsciously perceived *as a subtractive process*: a minority person who learns successfully in school or who follows the standard practices of the school is perceived as becoming acculturated into the white American frame of reference at the expense of the minorities' cultural frame of reference and collective welfare. (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, pp. 182-183)

The quandary faced by gifted students from involuntary-minority groups can be a painful one: either adopt attitudes and behaviors that, although facilitative of school success, serve to alienate one from friends and culture, or maintain loyalty to friends and culture by sacrificing one's prospects for academic and vocational success. This is no small matter. Those who attempt to cross cultural boundaries may experience what Fordham and Ogbu (1986), borrowing from DeVos (1967), call "affective dissonance," the feeling that "they are . . . betraying their group and its cause" (p. 182; see also Fordham, 1988, 1991; Mickelson, 1990).

Research by Ford (1992, 1993, 1996) suggests that this is a significant problem for some bright involuntary-minority students. In her sample of 148 African-American fifth and sixth graders identified as gifted, above-average, or average in academic ability, 97 "reported exerting low levels of effort in school" (1992, p. 134). This included 38 of the 48 gifted students, despite the fact that this group endorsed what Ford calls the "American achievement ideology."

### **Assimilation Without Accommodation**

For involuntary-minority children both to succeed academically and to deal with the burden of acting White, they need more than what Ogbu (1992) calls "primary strategies," such as positive academic attitudes, hard work, and perseverance that are essential for all academically successful students. Involuntary minority students must also adopt "secondary strategies," which "shield them from the peer pressures and other detracting forces of the community" (p. 11).

Some secondary strategies, such as emulation of Whites or "cultural passing," exact a significant psychological toll. Others, such as "encapsulation in peer group logic and activities . . . [refusing] to do the White man's thing or . . . [to] consider schooling important" (p. 11), come at the cost of wasted academic talent. More successful, with a smaller although not negligible price, is "accommodation without assimilation," adhering to school norms in school but cultural norms at home and in the community. These secondary strategies, with respect to the goal of enabling involuntary-minority students to succeed academically, achieve various degrees of success at varying costs. Yet, under the conditions that obtain in this country today, Ogbu believes they are necessary for involuntary-minority students to achieve.

Ogbu's work suggests that there is a powerful array of forces, often misunderstood, that work to lower the academic achievement of involuntary-minority children. Fordham and Ogbu (1986), referring to African-American children, summarize these as follows:

The low school performance of black children stems from the following factors: first, white people provide them with inferior schooling and treat them differently in school; second, by imposing a job ceiling, white people fail to reward them adequately for their educational accomplishments in adult life; and third, black Americans develop coping devices which further limit their striving for academic success. (p. 179)

Clearly, the under-representation of economically disadvantaged children, especially those from racial and ethnic minority groups, in programs for gifted students is a problem that, in Ford's words, is "complex and perplexing . . . requiring movement away from traditional theories and paradigms, including those which hold that underachievement results only from a lack of motivation to achieve" (1992, p. 134). Moreover, it is part of a larger problem, the failure of our educational system to educate economically disadvantaged and minority students that is the product of persistent structural inequities in our society.

### **Structural Inequities in American Education**

The theories of Ogbu and Fordham are useful in understanding some of the possible psycho-social factors that may operate in the diminished academic success of some children of color and economically disadvantaged children and that thus may contribute to the under-identification of these children in gifted programs. However, their ideas do not address structural inequities in the provision of educational resources that constitute an additional plausible factor.

I mentioned above the analysis of the NELS '88 data by Baker and Friedman-Nimz (n.d.) that revealed that "across states, higher socioeconomic status students who attend larger schools are more likely to have access to gifted and talented programming" (p. 2). In other words, poorer children (and thus children of color since race and SES are strongly related in this country) are not only less likely to be identified for gifted programs, they are less likely even to have a program in their schools for which they might be identified.

This is a quantitative finding supporting the work of writers such as Kotlowitz (e.g., 1992) and Kozol (e.g., 1986, 1991, 2002), who have shown, through their more intensive qualitative focus on individuals and particular settings, the sometimes brutal effects of what Kozol, in the title of his 1991 book, called "savage inequalities." For example, in that work, Kozol pointed out that in New York City, the majority of whose student population of 1.1 million children is African-American and Latino, the average per-pupil expenditures in 1987 were \$5,500. In the nearby, wealthy, largely White suburbs of Manhasset and Great Neck, per-pupil funding exceeded \$11,000.

In a 2002 article in *The Nation*, Kozol pointed out that median salary for New York City school teachers was \$36,000 less than the median salary in Scarsdale, New York, \$30,000 less than the median salary in White Plains, New York, and \$19,000 less than the median salary for Westchester County, in which Scarsdale and White Plains are located, as a whole. To make matters worse, these inequities are being exacerbated by budget cuts trickling down from Washington to Albany to New York City, which wealthier suburbs, although often hard-pressed, are better able to weather.

Kozol (2002) argues that such discrepancies in per-pupil funding as cited above reflect demographic shifts and suggest a willingness to under-fund schools serving poor children and children of color. He points out that until the late 1960s, when White children still attended the New York City public schools in large numbers, per-pupil spending in the City fairly closely mirrored that in surrounding suburban counties. "Three decades later," he writes, "with the white population having plunged to a surviving remnant of 14.5%, New York City's spending has collapsed to levels far below . . . suburban counties" (p. 22). Kozol quotes Noreen O'Connell, Director of the Educational Priorities Panel, as follows:

If you close your eyes to the changing racial composition of the schools, . . . you're missing the assumptions that underlie these [funding] decisions. . . . The assumption is that these are parents who can be discounted. These are children who just don't count—children we don't value. (p. 23)

It is likely that none of this is very surprising to readers of this monograph. We have become largely inured to such funding patterns, accepting as inevitable the fact that communities with higher tax bases, i.e., with more affluent families, will be able to raise more monies for their schools through property taxes, just as we accept a suburban child is more likely to live in a six-bedroom home with a four-car garage and a swimming pool than is a child living in the inner city. But I would suggest that this is something that we should not accept so willingly.

In a capitalist system such as ours, whatever one thinks of it, not everyone is entitled to a swimming pool and an estate on a multi-acre lot. But does this same hold true for a decent public education? If every child in this country is entitled to a free public education, what moral justification can there be for one child to receive a substandard education—a decrepit building, an inexperienced and probably transient teacher, fewer textbooks than students in each class, meager supplies often purchased out-of-pocket by the teacher, no music or art programs—and another an enriched one simply because the children were born in different communities?

It is important to understand that the inequities Kozol has documented, as well as the heart-breaking story of the brothers Lafayette and Pharoah, living in Chicago's Henry Horner housing project, told by Kotlowitz in *There Are No Children Here*, are the result of a series of conscious decisions, not the result of inexorable natural forces. As a society, we have made a collective decision to provide a significantly richer public education to children from more affluent suburban families and an often shockingly

inadequate one to poorer urban children, children who are much more likely to be children of color. Moreover, those children to whom we have deigned to give the crumbs of our public educational system are also those who depend on it the most, those whose parents cannot afford supplementary classes, private tutoring, academically oriented camps, and so forth.

The implications for gifted education are obvious. Giftedness, however it is defined, is more likely to emerge in schools in which the prevailing assumption is that children have talents, not deficits, in schools in which the teachers have the professional skills to recognize and nurture these talents, in schools in which there are adequate materials to allow children to learn, and in schools in which the curriculum has not been picked clean of such "frills" as music and art, areas of human experience that enrich the mind and the spirit. And these are more likely to be schools attended by White middle- and upper-middle-class children.

## Summary

Thus, I submit that there is a host of factors—those socio-ecological factors identified by Ogbu and Fordham, those structural inequities in contemporary American society deriving from political forces identified and documented by Kozol and Kotlowitz, as well as others, no doubt—over which we, as a field, have no control except as individuals committed to social change. That is to say, changes in our practice as a field will not alter the perception of the need for cultural inversion among involuntary minorities should Ogbu's theory be correct, nor will anything we do with respect to the way we operate gifted programs change what should be seen as a shocking pattern of under-funding of schools that attempt to serve the poorest and most vulnerable of our children.

This, however, does not exculpate us, as a field, with respect to the inequities that obtain in gifted programs across the country. True, gifted education, and the educational system at large, is a creation of and subserves the larger society, which has yet to shed its burden of racism and class bias. But, I believe, there are practices within the field of gifted education that contribute to the chronic under-representation of poor children and children of color in our gifted programs, practices that *are* within our power to change if we are serious about making progress toward a more equitable future. It is to these that I will now turn.

## **Possible Causes of the Problem of Under-representation—Factors Within the Field of Gifted Education**

### **Conceptions of Giftedness**

#### **Giftedness as a Social Construction**

Giftedness is not a thing. It has no physical reality, no weight, no mass. It is a social construct, not a fact of nature. It is something that was invented, not discovered. As I argue elsewhere, to state that giftedness is socially constructed is to state that it "gains its meaning, even its existence, from peoples' interactions, especially their discourse. Concepts and constructs that are socially constructed thus acquire their properties, and their influence, through the give-and-take of social interaction, not through the slow accretion of empirical facts about a pre-existing entity" (Borland, 1997, p. 7; see also Borland, 1996, 2003).

This is an important consideration for our field (that is, of course, if my contention that giftedness is socially constructed is valid and not completely misguided). This is because of two properties of social constructs. First, the fact that an entity is socially constructed does not render it meaningless. It simply shifts the criteria for judging it from the scientific-empirical (does it really exist?) to the pragmatic or utilitarian and moral (what are the consequences of its creation in the education of children?). Thus, by arguing that giftedness is socially constructed, I am not arguing that it does not matter.

Second, if giftedness is socially constructed and not a natural phenomenon discovered as a result of disinterested scientific inquiry, it is subject to critical analysis, comprehension as to the nature of and reasons for its creation, and, ultimately and ideally, a greater degree of conscious control by those concerned with the outcomes of education. This requires, as Susan Gallagher states, that we "recognize how our taken-for-granted way of thinking from within the discipline's meaning-making system impacts the educational process in perhaps unintended ways" (1999, p. 69).

#### **Problematizing Giftedness**

In her chapter, "An Exchange of Gazes," in Kinchloe, Steinberg, and Villaverde's provocative collection, *Rethinking Intelligence* (1999), Gallagher discusses the importance of problematizing educational psychology. By "problematizing," she means "the process of grasping an assumption, that is, a taken-for-granted way of thinking, and turning it into a question" (p. 74). This requires an understanding that "educational psychologists . . . have constructed the categories and the technologies they apply" (p. 80). These categories and technologies are the product of our discourse—our writing and talking—especially our professional discourse. As Gallagher reminds us, discourses are "an artifact of culture . . . [and] develop from specific social and political locations and are as much the product of social negotiations as they are scientific processes" (p. 74).



Applied to giftedness, this locates the construct within a specific context and implies that its creation was tied to historical forces (e.g., the advent of mental testing, the need to "Americanize" thousands of immigrants through the public schools) and that its creation served, and continues to serve, socio-political ends. Giftedness is not part of a "neutral" body of knowledge that has as its goal facilitating more effective teaching and learning" but rather is "connected to the ways modern societies manage and regulate their citizens" (Gallagher, p. 70).

As a construct, giftedness is inevitably tied to notions of excellence and potential. In multicultural societies, conceptions of excellence and giftedness are likely to be shaped by the values of the dominant culture or subculture. In fact, some writers, such as Tannenbaum (1983, 1986) in his "psycho-social conception of giftedness," argue that the environment, the social context, is not just a shaper but an actual component of giftedness itself. Thus, in the U.S., intellectual and academic giftedness, as it has traditionally been understood and operationalized, has largely been White middle- and upper-middle-class giftedness because the discourse out of which the construct has been created has been dominated by White middle- and upper-middle-class professionals.

The point is that giftedness as a concept, as a label in the schools, and ultimately as a descriptor of certain adults is likely to reflect the values and strengths of the dominant culture and to slight those of other cultures, especially those of involuntary minorities who employ such secondary cultural differences as cultural inversion as a means to define and protect their identities. Thus, I would argue that giftedness, as it has been constructed in American schools within American society has embedded in it the basis for the under-representation of certain groups outside the White middle-class and upper-middle-class mainstream.

### **Social Reproduction Theory**

One need not view this as reflecting malign intent, although some do. According to social or cultural reproduction theory (see, for example, Apple, 1982; Katz, 1975; Spring, 1989), society's inequities, among them racism and wide disparities in wealth, work to the benefit of a wealthy and powerful elite. Society is structured to maintain the dominance of those in power and to perpetuate the subordinate status of those in the underclass, and social institutions, such as the educational system, are designed to perpetuate inequities that benefit the elite by reproducing, in the educational system, the hierarchical stratification found in the larger society.

One way the schools serve to maintain the status quo and the current power structure, according to social reproduction theory, is by denying an adequate education to the poor and the nonwhite and by extending special privileges to the more affluent. Gifted education is seen by some as an instrument of social reproduction and one of the means whereby schools perpetuate racism and economic injustice. Sapon-Shevin (1994) writes, "Whether or not the intention of gifted programs is to reproduce existing economic and racial hierarchies or to produce cultural capital held by an elite group of students, these are in fact the consequences of such a system" (p. 192).

Margolin, in his book *Goodness Personified: The Emergence of Gifted Children* (1994), and especially in his *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* article, "A Pedagogy of Privilege" (1996), asserts that gifted education is a "pedagogy of privilege," an inversion of Freire's (e.g., 2000) "pedagogy of the oppressed." In Freire's notion of the pedagogy of the oppressed, an educational system in the service of the power structure inculcates in poor and marginalized children the message that their role in school, and later in life, is to be passive and to accept a subordinate role in the scheme of things. Margolin argues that the pedagogy of privilege, on the other hand, exists to teach gifted children, who as a group are disproportionately White and upper-middle-class, that *their* role is to be active, to be leaders, to be privileged.

Although I do not believe that gifted education is the result of a conscious intention to perpetuate inequities in society, there remains the nagging question of whether the very concept of giftedness necessarily leads to or reinforces racial and economic inequities, whether it might be impossible to conceptualize and operationalize the distinctions at the heart of the concept independent of such factors as race, ethnicity, and SES. I will return to this issue below.

At the very least, we need to be conscious of the fact that conceptions of giftedness are created, not discovered, and that their application has powerful practical consequences. If we conceive of giftedness in the manner that Terman did, and if our definitions of the target population in our gifted programs mirror that conception, we need to be aware of the fact that we are operating in a manner that will inevitably advantage certain children and disadvantage others and that the line, or lines, of demarcation between the advantaged and the disadvantaged will be in large part determined by racial, ethnic, and socio-economic differences.

### **Identification Practices**

That White middle-class children are identified as gifted in proportions that exceed their proportion in the general school population is a fact of educational life in the U.S. In part, this is a consequence of the ways we have traditionally identified students as gifted, which are themselves rooted in the values of the White middle class. For example, IQ tests have traditionally played a major role in identifying gifted students. Although no one in the field of gifted education of whom we are aware advocates using these tests as Terman (1925) and Hollingworth (1942) used them, such tests and other measures that correlate substantially with IQ are still widely used in the schools to identify gifted students.

Standardized tests can play an important role in the equitable identification of gifted students (see, for example, Borland, 1986; Pendarvis & Howley, 1996). However, because standardized tests reflect the values and interests of the largely White professionals who created them, unless we also use nontraditional methods for identification (Borland & Wright, 1994), inequities will be inevitable. Furthermore, our traditional conception of identification as a method whereby we separate the gifted students from the rest of the student population has, despite some challenges (e.g.,

Renzulli, Reis, & Smith, 1981), continued to dominate our thinking. As long as this is the case, we may be faced with the problem I address in this monograph.

### **Curriculum**

Multicultural curriculum is, unfortunately, one of a number of commonsensical educational initiatives that has become controversial as a result of its being politicized. Although it has many definitions, the one by Banks and Banks (1993, as cited in Ford & Harris, 1999) is one of the most frequently used. Banks and Banks define multicultural education as

an educational reform movement designed to change the total educational environment so that students from diverse racial and ethnic groups, both gender groups, exceptional students, and students from each social-class group will experience equal educational opportunities in schools, colleges and universities. (p. x)

As defined here, multicultural educational is quite unexceptionable, especially in light of the diverse nature of our nation's population and the inescapable fact that as a country we are indeed multicultural. Multicultural education does not mean the elimination of Shakespeare from the English curriculum, nor does it preclude the possibility of a common thread that unites us as interdependent citizens of a single country, diverse as it might be. Rather, it means, as Banks and Banks, explain, that equal educational opportunities should be available to all students irrespective of their race, their ethnicity, their sex, their exceptionality, and their socio-economic status (sexual orientation could have been added as well, since this is becoming more and more of an issue in education, especially secondary education). It is difficult to see how anyone could oppose these ends, although there is certainly room for debate over means.

As desirable as multicultural education is in the manner in which Ford and Harris treat it in their book *Multicultural Gifted Education* (1999), as they state in their preface, a focus on multicultural education has been "noticeably absent in gifted education" (p. xi). This is troubling when one thinks about Ogbu's (1992) notion of cultural inversion, Fordham's (1988, 1991) discussion of "the burden of acting white," and Ford's (1992) finding that a majority of the gifted African-American students in her sample reported expending little effort in their schoolwork.

Ford and Harris argue that "too often, students are presented a homogeneous curriculum, one that is most likely to meet the academic and affective needs of White students in upper-income brackets" (p. xii). To the extent that is this true of the curricula of gifted programs, it creates one more impediment to the incorporation of lower-income gifted students and gifted students of color in these programs. Just as the manner in which we conceive of giftedness and the way we identify gifted students can work to exclude such students, so, too, can curriculum that does not reflect the fact that ours is a multicultural society with a multicultural student population that deserves exposure to a world of ideas to which people from many different groups have contributed. As Ford

and Harris write, "just as we have argued for the desegregation of gifted education relative to increasing student diversity . . . , we ask for desegregation of the curriculum" (p. xii).

### **Some Thoughts About How to Address the Problem of Under-representation**

Without pretending to have the answer to the question of how to remedy the problem of under-representation, I will present some thoughts about the three aspects of the problem that I identified above as being endogenous to the field of gifted education.

To a considerable extent, I will draw on my experiences with Project Synergy, a Javits Grant project co-directed by Lisa Wright and me from 1991 through 1997. Through Project Synergy, we were able to work in schools in Central Harlem to develop nontraditional methods for identifying potentially gifted kindergarten and preschool students; to provide curriculum to enable the students to develop their abilities; to work with parents, guardians, teachers, and administrators to support the students' growth; and to place students in more appropriate educational settings.

#### **Conceptions of Giftedness**

We need to rethink giftedness as a concept and to do so radically, to go to the root of the concept and examine what it means, what it connotes and implies, and what value it actually brings to our field. At the very least, we need to examine our conceptions of giftedness to identify whether and how they might lead to the inequities I discuss above. Take as an example Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness (e.g., 1978, 1986), probably the most influential conception of giftedness in recent times. Renzulli challenged some well-entrenched, fundamental assumptions about giftedness, including the primacy of high levels of general ability, a legacy of Terman, Hollingworth, et al. This alone makes the definition a significant contribution to our literature. Yet, even this definition, in which giftedness is conceived of as an interaction among above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment, can contrary to its author's intention, be operationalized in a manner that reinforces social inequities.

Creativity and task commitment are necessarily assessed subjectively, that is, without the use of standardized tests, since valid standardized measures of these constructs do not exist. This is not necessarily a liability; in fact, my colleagues and I have strongly advocated the use of subjective measures in gifted education (see, for example, Borland & Wright, 1994; Wright & Borland, 1993). But problems can occur when any conception is applied in the practical sphere. For example, in many urban school systems, the teachers are predominantly White and middle-class and the students are not. It is not difficult to conceive of how conceptions of task commitment might be quite discrepant in the culture in which the majority of teachers live and the one in which the majority of students live. Teachers might, without any malign intent, conceive of this

construct in a manner that predisposes them to see it in children culturally like themselves and not to see it in students unlike themselves.

If this can happen with a conception of giftedness that breaks with a prevailing psychometric tradition favoring White middle-class students, few if any conceptions are immune to this problem. This seems to leave us with two options. The first is to attempt to develop conceptions of giftedness that are either culture-fair or equitably multicultural. This may prove to be as difficult as the attempt to develop culture-fair tests has been.

A second approach led me a few years back to "think the unthinkable: that there might be effective gifted education without gifted programs" (Borland, 1996, p. 144). Perhaps it is time to ask an even more radical question: Can there be effective gifted education without gifted children? (see Borland, 2003, for a more fully developed discussion of this possibility). By this, I mean to ask whether we can accomplish the goals that gave rise to the field of gifted education without identifying children as gifted or even having recourse to the construct of giftedness at all. This latter course of action would constitute nothing short of a revolution in the field of gifted education. It would, no doubt, be strongly resisted by many of our colleagues, but as a thought experiment it could be a productive exercise. I suggest that it is once again necessary to think the unthinkable.

If, as I argue above, giftedness is at root discursive, a social construction, then the appropriate question to ask about it is not whether a given definition of the construct is the "true" one, which would be a non sequitur. Instead, one must ask what the consequences of the application of a given definition, or better yet the totality of our conceptions of giftedness over the history of the field of gifted education, has been. In other words, the relevant criteria for judging any conception of giftedness—and, I believe, the construct of giftedness itself—are pragmatic, utilitarian, and moral ones, not the ontological and epistemological ones we apply to theories deriving from empirical science.

I argue in my chapter "The Death of Giftedness" (2003) that the construct of the gifted child, as applied in the public educational system of the U.S., not only lacks logical support but has not resulted in beneficial outcomes for students, those in gifted programs and those excluded from them, nor has it resulted in a system of gifted education that can be easily defended on moral grounds. I do not have the space to develop those arguments here, but I would suggest that worrying less about who is "truly gifted" and more about making curriculum and instruction truly differentiated for all students would do more to meet the goals of the gifted child movement than would a mandate for pull-out enrichment programs in every school in the nation. Moreover, it would, by eliminating the construct of the gifted child and the implicit construct of the "not gifted child," constructs that cannot be culture-free and that, I believe, must reflect the values and interests of those who are most privileged in our society, result at least in the mitigation of the problem with which this monograph deals.

## Identification Practices

Since I do not believe that the field of gifted education will readily give up the foundational concept of the gifted student, I would like to propose two possibilities for dealing with problems of inequity deriving from identification practices. The first of these is to work within the traditional conception of giftedness and the idea of programs that require the identification of gifted students. The goal here is to make the identification process more equitable and sensitive to diverse expressions of giftedness. Since I am most familiar with our own work in Project Synergy, I will use that as an example (see Borland, 1994; Borland & Wright, 1994; the latter has a more complete description of the identification process used in Project Synergy). However, the reader should also consult the work of Frasier and Passow (e.g., Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995; Frasier et al., 1995; Frasier & Passow, 1994), Ford and Harris (e.g., 1999), Richert (2003, Richert, Alvino, & McDonnell, 1982), among others.

In Project Synergy, we learned that certain features of an identification process can make it more effective for identifying economically disadvantaged students. They include:

- a post-positivistic approach to assessment (see Borland, 1990), including the use of observation and other forms of the "human instrument" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985);
- a focus on "best performance" (Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980) instead of averages of scores and ratings;
- curriculum-based assessment and other forms of "authentic assessment" instead of, or in conjunction with, standardized measures;
- portfolio assessment (Coleman, 1994; Wright & Borland, 1993);
- dynamic assessment, based on the work of Vygotsky (e.g., 1978) and Feuerstein (e.g., 1980), in which assessment is carried out in Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development";
- open-ended teacher referrals instead of checklists;
- a case-study approach to identification that relies on human judgment instead of a mechanical approach such as combining scores, which is characteristic of a matrix;
- conceiving of identification as a process, not an event; that is, making the identification process a long-term one, extending at least over a period of months.

I strongly believe that modifying identification procedures as we did in Project Synergy and has been done in other Javits Grant projects (e.g., Baldwin, 1996; Coleman, 1994; Feiring, Louis, Ukeje, & Lewis, 1997; O'Tuel, 1996) can improve our field's performance with respect to equity. However, there is a second possible direction for the field, and this is the course of action I suggested above: the possibility of gifted education without gifted students, or the concept of the "gifted student."

It is often said that, in an ideal educational world, special education, including gifted education, would not be necessary because curricula would be sufficiently

responsive to individual differences to make separating children into exceptionality categories unnecessary. Lisa Wright and I have worked with school districts interested in moving in this direction by helping them plan and implement programs that combine school-wide enrichment, flexible grouping across grade levels in major subjects, and, for a very few truly exceptional students, individual educational plans. The result is a form of gifted education that does not look like traditional gifted education and that requires little in the form of traditional identification, save for those few students who require individual plans (whose identification involves a process that begins with pre-kindergarten screening and continues for 2 or 3 years).

In many ways, identification is at the crux of the problem of under-representation, for this is the process whereby more students from some groups and fewer children from other groups are designated as gifted. It seems to me that a major decision has to be made if we do not want to live with the inequities that have plagued the field since its inception. Either we have to make our practice equitable by modifying the way we do the things we have always done, or we have to give up these things while still hewing closely to our core values. In other words, we need to determine whether we can have gifted education, that is, its fundamental goals, not only without gifted programs as we have traditionally known them but without gifted children, labeled as such, as well.

If we give up the processes of conceiving of giftedness as a trait, or even state, possessed by some and not others and the process of sorting children into "gifted" and "not gifted" groups and instead attempt to achieve the goals inherent in the practice of gifted education through curriculum reform and more creative administrative arrangements such as flexible grouping, large-scale equity problems in education will not disappear. However, the problem of under-representation I am discussing here would become a moot point, for program placement, the activity that gives rise to under-representation, would no longer be a concern. Discrepancies in educational achievement would and should, of course, continue to be a concern. However, addressing these as issues of educational achievement instead of gifted or nongifted status strikes me as a slightly, but significantly, more tractable matter for educators.

### **Curriculum**

I will briefly address two issues related to curriculum for gifted students that are germane to the problem of under-representation. The first is the role multicultural education can play in gifted education, as I discuss above. Ford and Harris (1999) advance the idea that gifted education and multicultural education are complementary and point to some practical steps educators can take to effect this synthesis. To the extent that such educational streams as gifted education and multicultural education are seen as having a potential confluence, the goal of remedying the under-representation of lower-SES students and students of color in gifted programs will seem less remote.

The second approach derives from our work in Project Synergy. Working with kindergarten children in a severely under-resourced school in Central Harlem, we quickly became aware of two things. The first was that there were potentially gifted students in

this school, just as there are in any other. The second was that because of the nature of their schooling, these students were not ready academically for placement in gifted programs. Our approach was to implement what we called "transitional services," curriculum designed to help young students identified as potentially gifted develop their potential so that subsequent placement in gifted programs would be successful and appropriate. Such a curriculum need not be terribly elaborate. In Project Synergy, the emphasis was on traditional skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. We employed a diagnostic-prescriptive model, along with some interdisciplinary enrichment, work on thinking skills, and help developing academic "meta-skills," behaviors and attitudes that seem to be part of the tacit knowledge of successful students. Parent education was another important emphasis, and every attempt was made to maintain a multicultural perspective.

I think the concept of transitional services has potential in the field of gifted education for students who have not had the nurturance given to students from more economically favored circumstances. In cases where the only alternatives seem to be benign neglect or placement in a demanding sink-or-swim environment, the effort involved in developing transitional services curricula may be amply repaid. This does not mean that the gap between potentially high achieving poor and minority children and their high achieving age peers would necessarily be eliminated, for I am not advocating that the latter mark time while the former catch up. "Catching up" is not the goal; it is the development of potential that is too often frustrated by inequities in our society and our schools.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

In this monograph, I have tried to describe the extent of the problem of the under-representation of economically disadvantaged and minority children in gifted programs, to discuss some of the forces contributing to the problem, and to suggest some measures that might be palliative, if not curative. I hope that the problem can be addressed and substantial progress can be made. This should be a major priority for the field of gifted education, both as a matter of educational effectiveness and as a moral imperative. However, I think we also need to confront the troubling possibility that a complete resolution of the problem may not be possible.

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin, in an essay entitled "The Pursuit of the Ideal" (1990; see also, Gray, 1996), advances the notion of "value pluralism," which, I believe, has relevance here. This is the idea that we might not be able to attain a perfect state in which all goods, all desirable outcomes, are realizable. Some goods, Berlin argues, may be incompatible or incommensurable. That is, *A* may be a good, a desirable, even necessary thing; so, too, might *B*, which is equal in importance to *A*. But it may be impossible for both *A* and *B* to co-exist, for them both to be realized. The realization of *A* may render the realization of *B* impossible.

Berlin writes, "Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false" (p. 12). That is,



contrary to what many philosophers, at least since the time of Plato, have argued, there may be no perfect system, no ideal world in which the competing claims of various desirable but incompatible outcomes can be realized. As Berlin argues, "The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable—that is a truism—but conceptually incoherent" (1990, p. 13).

It is more than a little frightening to ask whether striving for a world in which the goals of both gifted education and perfect equity are pursued is, in Berlin's sense, a striving for that which is conceptually incoherent and, therefore, impossible. Might it be the case that, in any multicultural society in which there are discrepancies in socioeconomic status, the concept of giftedness and the practice of gifted education inevitably lead to the under-representation of certain groups of individuals and obviate the very possibility of equity?

This is a troubling thought. However, since I have been urging us to think the unthinkable, I feel obligated to suggest thinking what may be the most unthinkable thing of all within our field. This is the possibility that two essential, core values—pursuing the goals inherent in the practice of gifted education and striving for racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic equity—may be incompatible. We may be able to realize one or the other, but not both.

This is, in essence, the question Gardner (1961) confronted in his book *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* Gardner raised the issue and expressed optimism over the possibility of a resolution, but he did not show how it could be effected. His concluding line, "But who ever supposed it would be easy?" (p. 161) is certainly more optimistic than the response Berlin's idea of value pluralism suggests: "It is not only far from easy, it is impossible."

Perhaps Berlin was wrong, or, if he was not, this may not be one of those situations in which seemingly competing goods are truly incommensurable. And perhaps, until it can be convincingly demonstrated that excellence and equity are, in some ways relevant to the practice of gifted education, mutually antagonistic, we need to proceed as if they are reconcilable. That is, we should not give up on either good, we should strive both for excellence and for equity. But we need to ask the disturbing question of their incompatibility and, if all evidence suggests that, in this world at least, incompatible they are, we need to make some extremely difficult choices.



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### *Endnote*

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<sup>1</sup> I place the term *gifted* in quotation marks here not to express skepticism about the utility or conceptual coherence of the term, which I do later on, but to indicate that Terman was using the term gifted generically but conceiving of giftedness in a narrow and specific manner. One of the problems with which we contend in this field is that various meanings are attached to the word by different writers and that these differences are anything but subtle. Terman, for example, conceived of giftedness as the possession of a very high level of general intelligence, which, he believed, could validly be operationalized as a Stanford-Binet IQ of 140 or above. By contrast, Renzulli, a contemporary authority (e.g., 1986), conceives of giftedness as the interaction among above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment. Clearly, these two writers are using the same word to refer to different things, and they are only two among many, although two of the most influential. The words *gifted* and *giftedness* are what Stuart Hall (e.g., 1997), writing about race, calls a "floating signifier," a semiotic term "variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean" (Chandler, 2001, p. 33). Thus, I use quotation marks here, and in some other instances, to indicate that the term, used repeatedly in this monograph, has shifting meanings depending on who is using it and in what context and is the focus of more than a little disputation.

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