

## Separate and Unequal: The Underrepresentation of African American Students in Gifted and Talented Programs

By Adrienne Hopkins and Kendra Garrett

*Although 60 years have passed since “Brown vs. Board of Education” (1954) legally ended segregation in school settings, schools are now more segregated than ever before, including their gifted programs.<sup>1</sup>*  
Dr. Donna Ford

The history of inclusive and equitable education in the United States can be characterized as a turbulent struggle at best. And for African Americans, this struggle was, and continues to be, filled with stories of trials, tribulations, and triumphs. For over one hundred years, African Americans continuously fought losing battles for equal opportunities in education; “[as] early as 1849, in the case of *Roberts v. the City of Boston*, they filed suit against an educational system that mandated racial segregation.”<sup>2</sup> Though the Massachusetts Supreme Court ultimately ruled in this case that “separate schools did not violate the rights of black children,”<sup>3</sup> this unsuccessful fight for equal educational opportunity gave way to later triumphs. One such triumph was based upon the civil rights tenets argued in the case, which, coupled with the unyielding fight of African American parents for equality in schooling, played a central role in the “1855 [decision of] the Massachusetts legislature [to pass] the country’s first law prohibiting school segregation.”<sup>4</sup>

More than one hundred years later, those same 1849 arguments would become prominent in the seminal 1954 civil rights triumph of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. In the *Brown* case, the nation’s Supreme Court unanimously declared state laws that upheld public school segregation solely on the basis of race to be unconstitutional. This decision struck down the “separate but equal” doctrine by interpreting it to be a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.<sup>5</sup> Since that time, many strides have been made regarding access to quality educational opportunities that are inclusive; however, *Brown v. Board* did not alleviate all struggles for the nation’s African American children. In today’s schools, instead of the dubious “separate but equal” doctrine looming in the midst, there continues to be separate and unequal education, which is evidenced by statistics that document the over- and underrepresentation of minority students in special programs.<sup>6</sup> In short, the struggle for inclusive and equitable education for all continues.



In accordance with the current volume of the *Black History Bulletin* devoted to *Young, Gifted, and Black* students and their academic achievement, we will briefly examine this struggle and its implications for the underrepresentation of Black youth in gifted and talented programs.

### Separate and Unequal Post–*Brown v. Board*

In the Past: In 1968, Lloyd Dunn, a leader in special education, took issue with the civil rights implications related to the placement of large numbers of students of color and/or “socio-culturally deprived” students in special [education] day classes. He believed that these children had long been seen as problems by general educators, and thus misidentified and referred to special programs for the educable mentally retarded. To this cause, Dunn wrote in *Exceptional Children* that special education was, to a great extent, simply a relocation of students who were disadvantaged from one segregated setting to another.<sup>7</sup> As well, he suggested a reexamination of the special day placements in schools to be sure they were not becoming the *new segregation* of their time and indicated that an educational reformation of these self-contained classes was imminent and necessary. More importantly, Dunn’s warning about special programs possibly becoming segregated spaces for children of color seems to transcend time and space and should prompt us, even today, to continually reexamine the state of special programs in our schools. During this reexamination, we should ask ourselves the following questions: *Are special programs our modern-day segregation? Are students who learn differently relegated to programs for students who have disabilities? Are these students and other students of color left out of programs that recognize their gifts and talents? What will happen to our best and brightest?*

In the Present: Today’s special programs include those that provide special services for students throughout a continuum of exceptionalities, including gifted and talented students. They are designed to meet the needs of students

at differing points along the learning continuum. Yet, it is those very programs that also show vestiges of separation, segregation, and inequality resembling the conditions prior to the *Brown v. Board* decision.<sup>8</sup> For example, it is well documented that students of color who have identified disabilities are overrepresented in special education programs,<sup>9</sup> while those who are identified as intellectually exceptional are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs.<sup>10</sup> Though programs for students with disabilities and programs for students who possess gifts and talents may seem to be at opposite ends of the special program spectrum, they are similar in that they can both, to some extent, be considered present-day examples of segregated settings.

### Gifted and Talented Defined?

Many characterizations of “gifted and talented” students have been adopted based upon the United States Department of Education’s 1993 definition. The Department of Education uses a broad and overarching definition of the term *giftedness* and characterizes gifted children as:

*children and youth with outstanding talent who perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment.*<sup>11</sup>

The federal definition goes on to explain that, in order to be considered gifted, these children should “*exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic field[s],*” and should “*require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools.*” Additionally, the federal definition recognizes that “*outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor.*”<sup>12</sup>

Following suit, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) defines a gifted person as “a person who shows, or has the potential for showing, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression,”<sup>13</sup> while the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) provides the following definition of the term *gifted and talented* when used to describe children:

*[Gifted and talented] means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.*<sup>14</sup>

These are all fairly straightforward definitions. However, most notably, upon examination of these definitions, it becomes quite clear that the federal definition includes a reference to a reconceptualization of the historically laden perception of the attributes possessed by a child who has gifts and talents—it specifically states that the assignment of gifted and talented labels should be extended to students who are culturally and economically diverse. This is a major milestone and should provide guidance in developing criteria for student identification for gifted programs. On the other hand, though many states have begun to adopt similar definitions of the term *gifted and talented*, those who are entrusted with the task of student identification have not been quite as fortunate. States have assigned varied criteria based upon their interpretation of the gifted and talented definition being utilized, with no clear, static consensus. This lack of consensus on specific identification criteria denotes a somewhat uncertain and unstable foundation for gifted and talented programs across the country, and can be problematic for the identification of students of color who are gifted and talented. Therefore, deciding on standard identification criteria that specify consideration of a broader and diverse pool of students is paramount in improving the representation of students of color in these special programs.

### Who Is Gifted and Talented?

There are several barriers to appropriately identifying students of color who are gifted and talented, all of which contribute to their underrepresentation in gifted programs. First, there are no federal guidelines and, in most states, there are no state guidelines for identifying gifted students. Instead, Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests or other standardized tests have traditionally been used to determine which students are identified as gifted and talented. The results of these IQ tests are used to decide placement and services based on each student’s presumed educational needs.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, giftedness is perceived to be interconnected with “traditional school skills and characteristics measured by traditional intelligence and achievement tests—advanced vocabulary, highly developed verbal skills in written and oral expression in Standard English, and early and advanced reading skills.”<sup>16</sup> Next, when students are not provided opportunities to be challenged, they often become unmotivated and bored and may become a behavior problem, which detracts from the perception that gifted children do not exhibit behavioral challenges for teachers. And finally, one of the biggest barriers to the identification of students of color as gifted and talented is teacher perception. It is well documented that teacher bias and low expectations for decision-making in regard to the identification of gifted students may cause teachers to overlook students altogether. As well, many

researchers and authors state that there is a belief among some teachers that students from certain ethnic groups or economically disadvantaged families do not have the cognitive ability or skills necessary to be considered gifted. One underlying reason behind these diminished beliefs in the potential of ethnic minority and low-income students is the strong acceptance in the educator population of a very narrow and internally determined conception of intelligence and giftedness.

**Solutions to Underrepresentation**

It is well documented that the same teacher perceptions and beliefs that lead to the overrepresentation of students of color in programs for students with disabilities plague the appropriate identification of students who are gifted and lead to their underrepresentation in gifted programs. Therefore, strategies and programs need to be in place to provide support to students of color who are gifted and their parents and their teachers. But first, in order to improve the representation of children of color in gifted programs, all involved have to change their approaches, expectations, and mindsets.<sup>17</sup>

One way to accomplish this, and eliminate barriers to the identification of students of color who are gifted, is to provide students, teachers, and parents with opportunities to gain knowledge about the history of gifted education programs and the impact of the underrepresentation of students of color in these programs. Another is to provide insight into culturally responsive strategies for recruiting, retaining, and teaching students of color who are gifted. As a start, in the next section, teacher resources are provided. *Brown v. Board* was only the beginning of creating a just and equitable educational system, and so are these resources.

**Culturally Responsive Gifted and Talented Education Resources**

1. Lydia T. Anguiano, "Underrepresentation of Minority Students in Gifted and Talented Education," *Multicultural Education*, Fall 2003.
2. A. Y. Baldwin, "Identification Concerns and Promises for Gifted Students of Diverse Populations," *Theory Into Practice* 44 (2005): 105-114.
3. S. Donovan and C. Cross, eds., *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002).
4. B. M. Davis, *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You: Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006).
5. H. Elhoweris, K. Mutua, N. Alsheikh, and P. Holloway, "The Effects of the Child's Ethnicity on Teachers' Referral and Recommendations Decisions in the Gifted/Talented Programs," *Remedial and Special Education* 26 (2005): 25-31.

6. D. Y. Ford, T. C. Grantham, and G. W. Whiting, "Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Gifted Education: Recruitment and Retention Issues," *Exceptional Children* 74 (2008): 289-306.
7. D. Y. Ford, "Ten Strategies for Increasing Diversity in Gifted Education," *Gifted Education Press Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2005): 2-4.
8. D. Ford, "Equity and Excellence: Culturally Diverse Students in Gifted Education," in *Handbook of Gifted Education*, eds. N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis, 3rd ed., 506-520 (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2003).
9. J. J. Gallagher, "Education of Gifted Students, a Civil Rights Issue?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1, 1995: 408-410.
10. K. A. King, E. B. Kozleski, and K. Lansdowne, "Where Are All the Students of Color in Gifted Education?" *Principal Magazine*, May/June 2009: 16-21.
11. H. R. Milner and D. Y. Ford, "Cultural Considerations in the Under-Representation of Culturally Diverse Elementary Students in Gifted Education," *Roeper Review* 29 (2007): 166-173.
12. K. N. Robins, R. B. Lindsey, D. B. Lindsey, and R. D. Terrell, *Culturally Proficient Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006).

**Notes**

1. Donna Ford, "A Challenge for Culturally Diverse Families of Gifted Children: Forced Choices between Achievement or Affiliation," *Prufrock Press*, [http://www.prufrock.com/client/client\\_pages/GCT\\_articles/Culturally\\_Diverse\\_Families\\_of\\_Gifted\\_Children.cfm](http://www.prufrock.com/client/client_pages/GCT_articles/Culturally_Diverse_Families_of_Gifted_Children.cfm) (accessed February 22, 2010).
2. *Separate Is Not Equal: Brown v. the Board of Education*. This website sponsored by the Smithsonian National Museum of American History features a special exhibition to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Brown v. Board*. It presents the stories of African Americans and other minority groups' struggles for their civil rights against segregated American educational systems across the country. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/Brown/history/2-battleground/pursuit-equality-1.html> (accessed December 15, 2009).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. "By declaring that the discriminatory nature of racial segregation ... 'violates the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees all citizens equal protection of the laws,' *Brown v. Board of Education* laid the foundation for shaping future national and international policies regarding human rights." <http://brownvboard.org/summary/> (accessed February 3, 2010).
6. Lydia T. Anguiano, "Underrepresentation of Minority Students in Gifted and Talented Education," *Multicultural Education*, Fall 2003.
7. L. Dunn, "Special Education for the Mildly Retarded—Is Much of It Justifiable?" *Exceptional Children* 35 (1968): 5-22.

8. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
9. Joel McNally, "Black Over-Representation in Special Education Not Confined to Segregation States," *Rethinking Schools Online*, [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/17\\_03/over173.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/17_03/over173.shtml) (accessed February 3, 2010).
10. Carolyn M. Callahan, "Identifying Gifted Students from Underrepresented Populations," *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2005.
11. National Society for the Gifted & Talented (NSGT), "Giftedness Defined—What Is Gifted & Talented?" U.S. Department of Education definition, 1993. <http://www.nsgt.org/articles/index.asp> (accessed February 4, 2010).
12. Ibid.
13. NAGC estimates that there are approximately 3 million academically gifted children in grades K-12 in the U.S.—approximately 6% of the student population. The number is generated based on an estimate that dates back to the 1972 *Marland Report to Congress*, which estimated that 5-7% of school children are "capable of high performance" and in need of "services or activities not normally provided by the school." National Association for Gifted Children, <http://www.nagc.org> (accessed January 18, 2010).
14. NCLB definition of gifted and talented (*Title IX, Part A, Section 9101(22)*) (Page 544).
15. Lydia T. Anguiano, "Underrepresentation of Minority Students in Gifted and Talented Education," *Multicultural Education*, Fall 2003.
16. J. J. Gallagher and S. A. Gallagher, *Teaching the Gifted Child*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994).
17. D. Y. Ford and D. A. Harmon, "Equity and Excellence: Providing Access to Gifted Education for Culturally Diverse Students," *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 12, no. 3 (2001): 141-144.



**Adrienne Hopkins** is from Austin, Texas. She holds a B.S. in Management Information Systems from the University of Texas at Arlington and a master's in Information Systems from the University of Phoenix. Currently, Adrienne teaches Business Education courses at Stony Point High School in Round Rock, Texas.

**email: [Adrienne.kte@gmail.com](mailto:Adrienne.kte@gmail.com)**



**Kendra Garrett** is a graduate of Round Rock High School (TX). She received a B.A. in History from Southwest Texas State University and a M.A. in History with a certification in Secondary Education from the University of North Texas. Kendra taught AP World History and European History for five years at Grand Prairie High School. During this time, she was honored to be named Teacher of the Year for the Grand Prairie ISD. Currently she teaches World Geography, World History, and U.S. History at Flower Mound High School in the Lewisville ISD (TX). Current

**email: [garrettk@lisd.net](mailto:garrettk@lisd.net)**

## Lesson Plan

### This Just In! BHET (Black History Education Television) Network

by Adrienne Hopkins and Kendra Garrett

#### Connections to High School

Current high school students live in a post–civil rights era, and many are not aware of the history of people of color in the United States. This lesson is designed to help students understand what civil rights activists were fighting for.

#### Goals of the Lesson Plan

Enhance students' understanding of the civil rights movement (from the platform of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech) and whether the goals of the movement have been fulfilled.

#### Objectives

1. Students will conduct research on the "Dream" of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as efforts that have been made since his death to make his dream a reality, including amendments to the Constitution and precedents set by court cases.
2. Students will compare and contrast the application of civil rights prior to the Civil Rights Act and now.
3. Students will be able to identify Dr. King's "Dream" as well as 8-10 efforts that have been made since MLK's death.
4. Students will work with a partner to research a particular piece of Dr. King's Dream and the effort made to change the behavior using the Internet and traditional methods.
5. Students will write their own 1- to 3-minute "I Have a Dream" speech.
6. Students will produce a 3- to 5-minute oral and visual presentation in a news report style/format.

#### National Council for Social Studies Standards

- Guide learners in practicing skills of historical analysis and interpretation, such as compare and contrast, differentiate between historical facts and interpretations, consider multiple perspectives, analyze cause and effect relationships, compare competing historical narratives, recognize the tentative nature of historical interpretations, and hypothesize the influence of the past
- Help learners to identify issues and problems in the past, recognize factors contributing to such problems, identify and analyze alternative courses of action, formulate a position or course of action, and evaluate the implementation of that decision
- Help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings

**Time Allotted: 7 Class Periods****Day 1: Introduce lesson and begin research.**

Warm-up: Students will get into groups of 3 or 4 and discuss what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream" was about and his vision for America. (15 Minutes)

Students will view and read MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech. Students will lead a discussion about the goals of the speech and the civil rights movement. Students will discuss how life was for people of color before and after the Civil Rights Act. Students will get in groups of 2 or 3 and research MLK's speech and the state of affairs prior to that time and currently. Students can use the Research Graphic organizer included in this lesson plan.

**Day 2–3: Research and writing time**

Students will use these days to research using the Internet and traditional research methods and write their speeches. Students can use the Research Graphic organizer.

**Day 4: Presentation of speeches**

Students will give their "I Have a Dream" speeches. Each speech will be recorded. Students will take notes and analyze the present-day issues addressed in the speeches given.

**Day 5–6: Students prepare news reports**

Using the notes from the speeches given, the class will be split into 3 or 4 groups. Utilizing audio and video software technology, each group will create and record a news report based on the research and the speeches given. Students will use bits and pieces of their speeches in their news reports.

**Day 7:**

Students share their news reports.

**Software/Technology Needs:**

- Corel VideoStudio
- Adobe Premiere Elements
- Free video editing software: Windows – Movie Maker, Mac – iMovie

**Teacher Resources:**

Content Knowledge: Compendium of Standards for K-12 by Kendall and Marzano.

The National Archives: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/>

MLK Online: <http://www.mlkonline.net/video-i-have-a-dream-speech.html>

**BHET Research – Graphic Organizer**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Period:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Guiding Question #1: What issues did the civil rights movement address?**

**Guiding Question #2: What other groups benefited from the civil rights movement victory?**

**Guiding Question #3: Are there civil rights issues still present in today’s society? If so, identify those issues and explain your choices.**

**Guiding Question #4: Are there groups that are fighting for civil rights today? Who are these groups and what civil rights are they to gain through their fight?**