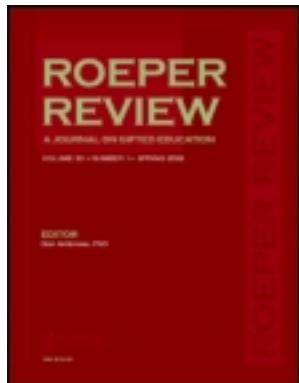


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Excellence at the Cost of Social Justice? Negotiating and Balancing Priorities in Gifted Education

David Yun Dai

Gifted education is often faulted as compromising the principle of equity and perpetuating social inequalities. This article focuses on making gifted education socially defensible and educationally productive. To accomplish this goal, key values and priorities guiding policy and practice, such as excellence, selectivity, diversity, equity and social equality, and efficiency or educational productivity, must be endorsed. To understand how these issues have been dealt with, several cases and examples that have a bearing on how to negotiate and balance these values and priorities without resorting to radical, dogmatic positions are discussed. Finally, several recommendations for practice that will help resolve the tension between excellence, selectivity, and efficiency on the one hand and diversity, equity, and social equality on the other are made.

Keywords: differentiation, education, educational excellence, equality, giftedness, gifted programs, identification of the gifted, underrepresentation

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR EXCELLENCE: PROBLEMATIZING THE EXCELLENCE–EQUITY ISSUE

America is built on hope and opportunity for everyone, with the belief that “everyone would be free to perform at the level of his or her ability, motivation, and qualities of character and be rewarded accordingly” (Gardner, 1984, p. 22). Central to this argument are the priorities of excellence (outstanding achievement) and equity (fairness in opportunity and equal rights for excellence). Very few would reject these principles outright. However, when we consider how they can be used to guide education in general and gifted education in particular, the issue gets more complex than what meets the eye.

Consider excellence first. In education, *excellence* is typically defined as a level of performance in areas of valuable human endeavor that meets high standards. These standards may involve general personal qualities as well as domain-specific criteria. Yet, significant variations exist, and subjectivity is inevitably involved in setting up these standards. Who defines excellence? In other words, by whose standards is excellence determined? What kind of excellence should be rewarded and how many kinds of domain excellence should

be considered educationally valuable? Because excellence is earned, not possessed, some individuals by their dispositions and propensities tend to seek excellence to the best of their ability, whereas others might have the necessary abilities but lack sufficient motivation or qualities of character to pursue excellence. Does it make sense to make excellence obligatory?

Next consider the issue of equity and equality. We can all accept the premise that human beings are born equal politically (i.e., with equal rights), but are they created equal biologically? To the extent to which we believe in fundamental individual differences in human potential, some degree of selectivity becomes inevitable for the sake of productivity and efficiency; that is, some will be granted more opportunity given the demonstrated potential or real accomplishments. Conversely, if variations in abilities, motivations, and qualities of character central for a particular line of development are highly malleable and educationally negligible, selective programs or schools would be problematic.

Let us suppose that individual differences are substantial and enduring and therefore selectivity is warranted. How can we determine who has the potential for excellence, however defined? Is the potential measureable in some types of aptitude tests that are remotely associated with the current tasks at hand or only manifested in authentic performance and achievement? Is this a potentially versatile one that can be flexibly channeled to do a variety of things well, or is it restricted to a particular set of tasks or domains? Inequity

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Address correspondence to David Yun Dai, Educational Psychology and Methodology, University at Albany, State University of New York, ED233 SUNY–Albany, Albany, NY 12222. E-mail: ydai@albany.edu

will occur if the practice of identification and selection violates our understanding of the role of domain-general and domain-specific abilities and achievement motivations for a particular domain and unfairly denies some people access to excellence.

Finally, let us suppose that there are substantial group differences along the lines of gender, race, and socioeconomic status regarding differential opportunities available for pursuing excellence and that these differences are partly attributable to social inequalities. For example, the gender disparity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) talents is problematic from a social equality point of view, though it is controversial as to whether it reflects unequal opportunities and differential gender role expectations for men and women or gender-based self-selection, which can have biological origins (see Dai, 2006; Spelke, 2005; Summers, 2005). Moreover, if there are substantial cultural differences in terms of what kinds of excellence should be especially encouraged and rewarded, then both selection criteria and curriculum goals reflect a value orientation. Indeed, some ethnic and cultural minority groups would be concerned about the marginalization of their cultures in regular education or gifted education (Ford & Grantham, 2011). Differential opportunities and social disparities for different groups are mainly an equity or social equality issue, and the marginalization of some cultures in defining and developing excellence reflects the priority of diversity, which is a deeper issue of equity. Let me summarize the excellence–equity conundrum by identifying more formally the following priorities and underlying assumptions:

Excellence

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1983) defines *excel* as “to be superior to; surpass in accomplishment or achievement” (p. 432). Several characteristics of excellence are distinguishable. First, excellence is an inherently norm-based and merit-based concept, implying a distinct comparative advantage or merit in a domain of human performance, though degrees and levels of excellence may vary (e.g., a national-level vs. an international-level player). Second, as superior achievement, excellence is not possessed but earned. Therefore, while sharing characteristics with the concept of *gifted* as being *superior* and *rare*, excellence is more of a performance concept, denoting superiority or outstanding quality by certain widely accepted performance standards, whereas the term *giftedness* is often conceptualized as an attribute of the person in question. Third, excellence, like the term *gifted*, is fundamentally value laden, indicative of superior achievement in domains valued by a culture and important for improving human conditions. Gifted burglars or computer hackers are perfectly conceivable, but few, if any, would cite their feats as instances of excellence and treat them as prototypes of the gifted.

In the educational context, excellence can be defined as superior achievement in academic, artistic, social, technical, and vocational domains, among others, by age-appropriate standards (Feldhusen, 1992). It can take the form of *skilled performance* (a chess champion, a piano virtuoso, etc.), *creative products* (a scientific theory, a novel, a new form of artistic expression, etc.), or *social leadership* in some worthy human endeavor (science, business, environmental protection, visionary governance, etc.). Excellence in educational context can be defined either in an orthodox manner based on mainstream curriculum standards or in a more liberal manner that permits a variety of cultural and personal ways of expression (Ford & Grantham, 2011). We might derive from this argument the principle of *diversity*, through which equity in strivings for excellence can be achieved.

Equity and Social Equality

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines *equity* as “justice according to natural law or right; *specif*: freedom from bias or favoritism”. The principle of equity mainly concerns (a) individual rights; (b) fairness in opportunity for self-development and pursuit of happiness, broadly defined; and (c) freedom from social discrimination. It stresses fairness in distribution of resources for educational and other purposes, without giving some individuals unwarranted advantages (barring inherent individual differences in capabilities and motivations). In comparison, concerns over social equality are more consequential in nature: for example, some groups enjoy distinct advantages over others in possessing more social capital and resources, resulting in or perpetuating group inequalities. Although equity and equality are often used interchangeably, it is theoretically possible to have an educational practice that is valid for its purpose, fair and equitable in terms of giving all individuals a fair chance, but falls short in taking into account the social disparities or still results in social inequalities (Nozick, 1974).¹

Efficiency

The principle of efficiency means seeking the best ratio of investment and outcome. We can also interpret it as a principle of educational productivity. This principle demands that resources be used in the most productive manner. To the extent to which precocious and advanced students would benefit most from a more challenging and exciting learning environment than those provided in the regular classroom, some curricular adaptations or advanced placements are warranted. When we say that the adaptations and advanced placements are appropriate given these students' level of knowledge and capabilities, what we mean is that this is the most efficient and productive way to help students learn and grow. When the goal of education is to provide a pipeline of high-caliber talents, which presumably requires certain

aptitude, we evoke the principle of *selectivity* (i.e., selecting the best fit for a particular endeavor). We should note that the argument for singling out some students for special programs is more controversial than the argument for appropriate provisions or services that suit individual needs and meet the principle of efficiency and productivity on an individual basis. Selectivity and the extra resources devoted to the most promising for achieving excellence mean the exclusion of less capable students and tend to create a tension between the priority of excellence and the priority of equity and social equality. What exacerbates the matter is that cognitive advantages of those selected are often tangled with social advantages (see Borland, 2003; Ceci & Papierno, 2005).

THREE CASES FOR REFLECTION

In the following section, three cases are used to illustrate what is meant by the excellence–equity conundrum and how we might go about negotiating and balancing different priorities in a constructive, productive manner, rather than getting bogged down by ideological battles. The reason for using cases is that arguments and claims based on real-life situations are more complex and nuanced than what a priori principle-based arguments prescribe. Negotiating and balancing priorities entails some degree of wisdom or the art of addressing multiple goals and constraints in practical design and policy deliberation.

Case 1: U.S. Supreme Court Affirmative Action Cases in 2003

The U.S. Supreme Court Rulings on the University of Michigan' affirmative action cases in 2003 (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003) provide a real case of negotiating and balancing priorities of excellence and equity. The Court upheld University of Michigan Law School's admission policy, which considered race as a "plus" factor in admission decisions, because diversity of a student body is, according to the Court, a compelling state interest that presumably brings educational benefits of cross-racial understandings, breaking stereotypes, among others, and "better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce, for society, and for the legal profession" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). In a parallel case (the *Gratz v. Bollinger* case), however, the Court held the University of Michigan College of Literature, Sciences, and the Arts' (LSA) admission policy as unconstitutional, because it automatically assigned 20 points to any minority undergraduate applicant (one fifth of the points needed for admission) and thus violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution. The ruling points out that "the LSA's 20-point distribution has the effect of making 'the factor of race . . . decisive' for virtually every minimally qualified underrepresented minority applicant" (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 4). Both the Law

School and LSA of the University of Michigan are highly prestigious programs with limited and coveted admission slots. The Supreme Court ruling on the Law School case, drafted by Justice O'Connor, who cast a deciding vote to support the Law School policy, is revealing in her ambivalence toward a race-conscious admission policy, because the document ends with the following statement: "[R]ace-conscious admissions policies must be limited in time. . . . The Court expects that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). She apparently realized that the racially preferential policy in the name of diversity is a double-edged sword and can potentially discriminate nonminority applicants and thus threaten the very notion of equal rights protected by the Constitution. In the LSA case wherein racial preferential treatment was more distinct in the admission policy, infringement upon the principles of both excellence (and, for that matter, selectivity) and equity was quite blatant to opponents of this policy. Note that the rationale for affirmative action in university admission policy is twofold, to diversify the student body and to remedy the impact of racial discrimination in history, so that all racial and ethnic groups can have an equal footing in society over time. In a sense, what educators in gifted education are trying to do with underrepresented minority groups is similar to what affirmative action is intended to accomplish, balancing excellence with equity, social equality, and diversity. It is not easy to juggle these priorities, because every decision we make could affect individuals involved one way or another, sometimes in a profound way, for better or for worse.

Lessons Learned

Social inequalities are a historical baggage we carry. Allowing disadvantaged groups a fair chance for pursuing excellence is a worthy goal but should be tempered with a careful measure of equity (O'Connor's premonition about treating all groups equally) and excellence (selectivity and productivity). Diverse representation of social and ethnic groups in a talent pool can ensure not only social equality in the long run but also excellence in a variety of cultural manifestations. In this sense, diversity breeds excellence.

Case 2: The New York City Admission Policy for Gifted Elementary Schools (2012)

In a recent entrance exam (using the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, or OLSAT) for gifted elementary schools, more than half of the children tested in two districts (encompassing the wealthy section of Manhattan) were found to be "gifted" (with a cutoff set up at the 90th percentile), whereas only six children made the cut in an economically disadvantaged district, according to *New York Times* (Phillips, 2012). Did these exams sort children by actual giftedness or by economic and social advantages?

There are several factors to be reckoned with. Is the development and maturity of children as young as 4 years old stabilized enough to permit such an assessment? For that matter, is there a reliable and valid test for the purpose of placement? Is the test measuring an inherent, enduring quality we call giftedness or simply a form of precocity that may or may not last? To complicate the matter further, do children who took the test have similar backgrounds and experiences with respect to preparedness for this kind of test? To the extent that levels of preparation are distinctly different, we can assume that some children from rich communities have a distinct, often unfair, advantage over those from poor homes or communities. This advantage may come from enriched daily experiences, but it may also be due to targeted coaching and preparation for the test, which was apparently the case with several parents interviewed by ABC Nightline (2012); these parents spent thousands of dollars for coaching and tutoring to get their 4-year-olds into the coveted gifted schools. In general, deliberate coaching to a test and subsequent overlearning tend to distort the originally intended purposes of testing (predictive validity) and psychological meaning (construct validity) of the resulting scores.

Validity concerns in this case naturally lead to questions about excellence (productivity) and equity, such as whether the identification/selection practice gives the wealthy an unfair advantage and perpetuates existing social disparities in educational resources. Knowing that test scores can fluctuate quite dramatically in early elementary years (Lohman & Korb, 2006), the relatively permanent placement at such an early age seems problematic. The issue is less about false positives (those who are admitted but later would prove inadequate) and more about false negatives (those who are not admitted but would be adequate if admitted). Using the same norms regardless of what school districts children live in jeopardizes a fair chance for the economically disadvantaged (Lohman, 2005), raising equity and social equality concerns, because wealthier parents will gain more admission slots for their children than less wealthy parents, not because their children are more gifted but because they have more resources to make their children qualify. Here cognitive advantages are likely derived from social advantages, rather than biological ones. In short, the identification/selection practice induces an unfair competition for high-quality education.

Lessons Learned

Educators need to follow scientifically credible theories of child development and honor evidence-based practices to make sure that they are developmentally responsive (to children's changing capabilities, interests, and needs) and socially responsible in terms of honoring public values such as excellence, equity, efficiency, choice, and diversity (Dai, 2010). Selection/placement policy should be based on how specific educational needs of the selected can be

met by targeted educational provisions, rather than alleged giftedness based on arbitrary cutoffs on a test. For that matter, using local norms is more equitable.

Case 3: Detracking for High-Student Achievement

In the 1990s, 10 secondary schools, located in different parts of the United States, with racially and socioeconomically mixed student populations, were engaged in a reform effort to restructure the social and pedagogical organization of learning to bring all students to high-academic standards (Oaks & Wells, 1998). Detracking was their main strategy, which eliminated all between-class grouping in favor of heterogeneous classes for the sake of promoting high standards for all in education, rather than reserving them for only a very small proportion of students designated as gifted. Some high schools eliminated remedial tracks, leaving only one regular and one advanced track. Others made their electives equally rigorous but offered an honors option. The way these schools accommodated diverse achievement was not by ability grouping but by offering diverse opportunities for low-achieving students to catch up or demonstrate their unique abilities otherwise unrecognized in formal academic assessment, based on the multidimensional conception of intelligence and giftedness. Sometimes high-achieving and low-achieving students were deliberately mixed together to allow them to gain insights from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Contents of the curriculum were enriched and diversified to reflect the multicultural values and perspectives. Pedagogically, inquiry-based and project-based learning are featured prominently in classrooms, permitting active engagement and high achievement of some students perceived as low achievers in traditional classrooms.

Detracking is based on the belief that all students can learn and excel if given appropriate opportunity and scaffolding; therefore, elimination of the tracking system serves to equalize the opportunity to learn and thus makes education more equitable. Based on Oaks and Wells (1998), challenges and obstacles for implementing these changes mainly came from deeply held beliefs and ideologies about intelligence, racial difference, social stratification, and privilege. For example, parents of identified gifted students were upset, not because their children received poor quality education but because their children were not singled out and treated differently. In other words, they are more interested in the designation of their children as having exclusive rights to high-quality education, rather than what they actually receive in education.

Though detracking clearly eases the tension between haves and have-nots and helps equalize the opportunity to learn and excel while cultivating a wider range of student's strengths and interests, it does not directly address the question of how to accommodate individual differences in a way that will enhance the educational productivity for all, including the highly able and advanced. Research suggests that

strong educational interventions for all indeed can help all, but the most advanced tend to gain even more (i.e., the Matthew effect; see Ceci & Papierno, 2005). If this is true, equal opportunity, along with content diversity and pedagogical changes, are unlikely to level the playing field. To be sure, a multidimensional conception of intelligence and giftedness is used to support diverse forms of excellence. Yet no clear vision of how to cultivate diverse talents when they emerge in a heterogeneous setting exists.

Responses From Advocates for Gifted Education

In hindsight, we should not think that detracking is by nature an effort to dismantle gifted education. In fact, the field of gifted education has also moved in the direction of balancing excellence and equity. Consider the following quote in Renzulli (1998):

Our vision of schools for talent development grows out of the belief that everyone has an important role to play in the improvement of society and that everyone's role can be enhanced if we provide all students with the opportunities, resources, and encouragement to develop their talents as fully as possible. (p. 107)

In principle, this vision is consistent with what Oaks and Wells (1998) delineated. However, advocates of detracking, seeking to fix the equity–excellence conundrum, differ from advocates of gifted education in several ways: (a) implicitly rejecting selectivity, (b) no effort to differentiate, and (c) no differentiated standards and expectations for promoting high-level excellence. All three affect the criterion of efficiency and productivity.

Selectivity

Detracking as a solution to the problem of equity and excellence implicitly rejects selectivity as a viable option. The scenario presented by Oaks and Wells (1998) does not specify how challenging the curriculum they set up for the schools is, though a more advanced track is available to students. If a highly rigorous academic program is open to all without any checks and balances, can it ensure the rigor and quality of the program? As an anecdotal account, an International Baccalaureate program in a high school tried to relax its selection standards by allowing all of those willing to enter the program. However, the administrators recently found that quality control is a serious problem and are now trying to reinstate some of its admission standards. Selectivity is reinstated to ensure rigor. Without some degree of selectivity, excellence may suffer in the name of pursuing equity. Some options may not need selection, such as taking an advanced-placement class; however, participants have to measure up to the set standards to get credit.

Self-contained arrangements for advanced development may be still warranted, if the targeted goals of such programs

are excellence in specific areas of human activity and if what is offered matches the profiles and needs of students intended for such programs. Selectivity in such a case is meant to ensure efficiency and productivity given the limited resources (to avoid *nontherapeutic doses*, to use Gallagher's [2011] term). However, when the goal of education is self-exploration and development of an interest in social and professional practices, it is problematic to restrict access to such learning experiences.

Differentiation and Productivity

Although Oaks and Wells (1998) provided a highly optimistic synopsis of how to achieve both equity and excellence through detracking, along with curricular and pedagogical changes, the question remains as to whether it can deliver what it promises. It is conceivable, for example, that in a heterogeneous classroom the teacher devotes the most attention to those who need immediate attention and help, rather than those who have a hidden, but nonetheless urgent, need for faster pace, more depth and breadth, and more complexity and who, if left to their own devices, are likely to be bored and tuned out of the system.

Leaders in the field of gifted education responded to Oaks and Wells (1998) by arguing that proper grouping, particularly within-class grouping, and many other arrangements such as curriculum compacting and acceleration, are still necessary to ensure that high-ability students are challenged and provided with opportunities commensurate with their capabilities (Reis et al., 1998). Flexible grouping also allows kindred spirits and like-minded peers to work together (e.g., enrichment clusters, advanced-placement classes) and to inspire each other (Reis et al., 1998; Rogers, 2007). An alternative to setting up gifted programs is to provide tiered services to meet differential needs from emerging the educational progressions, as is the case in the English model (Eyre, 2009). In addition, differentiation can be made with a diverse group of learners in heterogeneous settings when the ways in which distributed intelligence and giftedness will be used are well articulated (Smith, 2009).

Differentiated Standards and Expectations for High Achievement

What Oaks and Wells (1998) did not elaborate on is how to define *high achievement* for a diverse group of learners appropriately. It is probably unrealistic to expect a heterogeneous group of learners to learn in the same way and to be held accountable to the same high standards. Wile and Tierney (1960) identified two models of education: a client-based model (serving the needs of individual learners) versus a factory model (making mass production). Note that it was the social efficiency model of education (a factory model) that led to the tracking system. In historical hindsight, it is indeed not the most effective way to allow all individuals

to develop their own talents. A client-based model of education works better for that matter, because high-levels of achievement, unlike mastery of basic skills, require commitments from individuals who are prepared for the challenge. What is meant by differentiated standards and expectations for high achievement is an education that is responsive to differential trajectories and pathways that students demonstrate, rather than the same standards for all. Detracking alone cannot change the long-standing tradition of the factory model of education, characterized by the one-size-fits-all curriculum and the same standards for all, producing learners in a cookie-cutter fashion. As a corollary of differentiated standards and expectations based on a client-based model, the provision of a diverse range of optional educational opportunities is the only way to create a win-win situation for all, whereby students are allowed to pick and choose their own paths of development that capitalize on their distinct strengths and interests. Ultimately, the purpose of equalizing opportunity is not to achieve the same outcome for all but to allow individuals to cultivate their potential and find their niche.

Lessons Learned

For the sake of equitable excellence, seeking maximal participation and diversity in excellence is a worthy goal. The traditional tracking system, which uses a factory or social efficiency model, is not effective. However, detracking without proper measures (e.g., differentiated curriculum and instruction) to respond to the needs of advanced learners will shortchange their education and jeopardize excellence in the name of equity. Articulating differentiated standards and expectations is important for providing a wide range of educational opportunities that allow individuals to explore diverse paths and cultivate their own niches. The end result is differential development or increasing differentiation (Dai, 2010) that maximizes individuals' chances for success.

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Should we have a policy that addresses underrepresentation of some minority groups in gifted education? Should we have gifted programming that allows those who are capable and willing to excel at their own pace? These are two different questions. The former deals with the historical baggage we carry (some groups are socially advantaged and others disadvantaged), as well as the consequences of creating more disparities among the haves and have-nots. The latter question is a more general one about the defensibility of gifted services, which face charges of elitism from an egalitarian point of view. The three cases I discussed earlier touch on both issues, though the last one concerns a more general issue of defensibility of gifted programs and tracking practices.

The first question of underrepresentation of disadvantaged and minority groups is more than a problem of underidentification. Alternative practices of identification themselves would not solve the problem if the lack of opportunity to learn (Gee, 2003) before schooling or outside of the school is still prevalent. There is a limit as to how much gifted education can do to remedy the situation (Robinson, 2005). Given the importance of person-environment interaction in human development (Gottlieb, 1998), a lack of early stimulating, developmentally instigative environments and development-producing experiences can have a far-reaching impact on the emergence or onset of gifted and talented behaviors as well as the long-term developmental trajectory of a child. That means that a focus on identification of more underrepresented groups may fall into this trap. Rather, the long-term strategy should be something like the Head Start Program, which intervenes in early childhood.

The second question, of eliminating gifted programs but allowing students to excel in their domains of strength and move at their own pace, helps to balance the priorities of excellence and equity. But it raises new pragmatic concerns, such as adequate teacher training and incentives (or the lack thereof) for within-class differentiation for advanced students.

Regardless of the specific problems we are dealing with, some general recommendations seem warranted for facilitating decisions that balance various competing priorities. The following are some:

- Rewarding excellence, not "giftedness" (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Dai, 2010; Sternberg, 2000). Equity in education fundamentally concerns the opportunity to learn and to be intellectually challenged. Suppose that a person who is truly gifted, however defined, decides to enjoy a relaxing lifestyle and does not care about being excellent at anything. Should the education system provide extra services because of the alleged giftedness? Consider another person, who does not make the cut in an IQ-based definition of giftedness but is highly motivated academically or otherwise and shows authentic achievement above the level of his or her peers (Gottfried & Gottfried, 2004). Should this person be given opportunities to further develop his or her strengths and interests, even though he or she is not gifted according to an IQ cutoff? An equitable solution is to give this person an opportunity to try. Excellence beyond basic educational norms is a commitment and personal decision that cannot be forced upon anyone (consistent with a client-based model). An equitable gifted-education policy should consider motivation and commitment as an important factor of one's readiness for pursuit of excellence so that we do not easily reject highly interested and committed students on the grounds that they fall short of meeting some test score criteria and accept those eligible but lukewarm ones. Therefore, the state policy needs to be shaped in a way

that rewards excellence, which is earned, as opposed to giftedness.

- Changing identification practices. Identification should move from heavily relying on decontextualized tools such as IQ tests as the sole basis of assessing gifted and talented potential (often in a once-and-forever fashion) toward using more proximal, authentic assessment of one's functioning in situ (i.e., in more authentic rather than contrived performance situations). Review of the literature indicates that the field is moving increasingly toward recognizing the fluid and multifaceted qualities of high potential and its contextual, dynamic, and emergent nature (Dai, 2010; Dai & Renzulli, 2008). With the changing meaning of giftedness, educators should be more concerned about how an identification/assessment system operates to serve its purposes of proper educational placement and intervention that match the identified advancing needs of students, rather than how a particular test captures the elusive quality of giftedness; in other words, a specific test is used as an information-gathering device, along with other tools, in facilitating an assessment of the likelihood of success of a student for a particular educational challenge, rather than as a litmus test of giftedness. Practices following this new direction will alleviate equity concerns.
- Consider both demonstrated excellence (i.e., high achievement) and potential for excellence in the identification and selection process. This is particularly important when minority students are involved. The notion of potential for excellence and its corollary—using measures and criteria other than academic achievement—is preserved precisely because many students from underrepresented groups have yet to enjoy the opportunity to develop their academic skills that enable them to demonstrate their excellence. Using local norms ensures that we are comparing students with relatively similar backgrounds and experiences so that those in underrepresented groups have a better chance to be selected for various enrichment opportunities. As Ceci and Papierno (2005) pointed out,

Just as a nation does not want to rob itself of creating the best scientific, management, and engineering elite among its higher functioning group, it would likewise not want to lose out on many potential leaders, scientists, and so forth, whose talent may be [sic] not be realized because of external constraints. (p. 158)

- There are both continuities and discontinuities in curriculum concerning the learning progression and personal growth of gifted and talented students (Dai, 2010). There are standards for all, standards for many, and standards for only a few, depending on how advanced the content and process are, so that

individuals can choose to advance with a pace, breadth, and depth appropriate for them. For example, the 21st Century Skills Framework (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008) prescribes a set of curricular goals for all students, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (four Cs). However, how much depth and complexity one can reach depends on individual learners. Even though gifted education does not have a curriculum that is qualitatively different from regular education (Tomlinson, 1996), curricular discontinuities may occur for many advanced students but with completely different domains and trajectories. Both excellence and equity are served when the educational paths provided are diverse and approach the optimum for individuals. A client-based model of education is preferred to a factory-based model of education (Wile & Tierney, 1996).

To sum up my position, a gifted education is equitable and defensible if diverse opportunities and ways of achieving excellence are honored and facilitated, with a good balance between maximal participation and rigorous standards. Given the vast individual differences both in kinds and degrees (Ackerman, 2003; Carroll, 1993), the most equitable education system would be the one that encourages differential development whereby individuals can cultivate and identify their own niches, coupled with a value system that appreciates and rewards many and varied ways of excellence. It is misleading to argue that equal opportunities can create equal outcomes; what we strive for are equitable processes, in that all individuals are given a fair chance to try. For the matter of redressing the socioeconomic and racial disparities in gifted education, the remedies may lie in early interventions, though alternative identifications might address the issue of the rigidity of the methodology and narrowness of criteria to some degree.

In the larger scheme of things, Cutler (2006) observed what she called "Terman oscillations" (p. 5), whereby the zeitgeist sometimes favors spending money on a few (e.g., after Sputnik) and sometimes favors spending money on many (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act). Given the limited resources, the tension between priorities of equity and excellence is palpable. Silverman argued quite forcefully that "holding back the brightest students will not magically help the slower ones; bringing the top down does not bring the bottom up" (cited in Benbow & Stanley, 1996, p. 256). Borland's (2003) challenge to the traditional categorical approach (a legacy of the social efficiency model of education) to gifted education is also compelling:

Are these two groups—the gifted and the rest—the discrete, discontinuous, structured wholes this crude taxonomy implies? That is, is giftedness really its own thing, qualitatively different and apart from averageness or normality, making those who possess it markedly different, different in kind, from the rest of humanity? (p. 111)

Whether Cutler (2006) is right in her prediction that the Terman oscillation will soon turn toward directing resources at a few to help them achieve excellence (particularly in STEM areas), I suggest that we do not get trapped within a notion of zero-sum game between excellence and equity. Rather, we should provide equal opportunities and help level the playing field, then anticipate many trajectories and pathways to excellence and act accordingly. Do not foreclose opportunity because of rigid adherence to certain central doctrines of giftedness, but do not fear helping only a few promising ones, because they can be few and far between.

NOTE

1. The difference between equity and social equality can be roughly equated with the distinction that Nozick (1974) made between his own historical entitlement theory of justice and Rawls's (1971) theory of justice, particularly his postulation of the difference principle. Nozick's (1974) historical entitlement theory emphasizes the equitable (or inequitable) processes of acquisition and transfer of holdings, whereas Rawls's (1971) theory of justice, according to Nozick, is based on a nonhistorical, end-result principle, focusing on particular patterning of the distribution of holdings at a given moment (or current time-slice). The debate between Rawls and Nozick in the 1970s and its more current renditions have profound implications for our understanding of social justice in education, though a presentation that can do full justice to their theories is beyond the scope of this article.

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AUTHOR BIO



David Yun Dai is an associate professor of educational psychology and methodology at the University at Albany, State University of New York, and a Zijiang lecture professor of education and psychology at East China Normal University. He received his doctoral degree in psychology from Purdue University and worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.

Dr. Dai has published seven books and over 70 journal articles, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, and book and article reviews in general psychology, educational psychology, and gifted education. His published and upcoming books include, *The Nature and Nurture of Giftedness*; *Gifted Education in the United States* (in Chinese); and *Paradigms of Gifted Education: A Guide for Use-Inspired Research*. Dr. Dai was the recipient of the Early Scholar Award in 2006 conferred by the National Association for Gifted Children and a Fulbright Scholar to China during 2008–2009. He currently serves on the editorial boards of *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, and the *Roeper Review*. E-mail: yundai@albany.edu