

# **Separate and Unequal: Giftedness in the United States 1900 – 2000**

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## Abstract

This project studies how parents, educators, and experts mobilized ideas about race and intelligence in the postwar era to separate students on the basis of “ability,” re-inscribing racial segregation in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Using previously unexplored archives, I argue that despite the breadth of the definition of giftedness—which emphasized exceptional ability in a variety of subjects including music, athletics, and leadership—giftedness ultimately came to be defined by differences in degrees of academic ability rather than kinds of ability. Experts chose to measure giftedness through an IQ exam. Giftedness appealed to a wide variety of actors because of the flexibility of the term; it could be used to promote the expansion of educational opportunities to disadvantaged groups including the working class, women, and minorities. But at the same time, giftedness could also be used to maintain the status quo by legitimizing the existing social order as natural and fair, based on the results of unbiased tests. The Cold War initially enabled the implementation of policies to group gifted students in separate classrooms and schools amidst concerns about whether “segregation” of ability was undemocratic. Instead, experts found that segregation was indeed fair and democratic because it promoted equality of opportunity as opposed to equality. Experts and educators argued this practice was more likely to promote academic achievement for gifted students over other alternatives. Thus, I make an interdisciplinary intervention in the literature on academic tracking in the social sciences and education policy by exploring how and why this practice became widespread.

# Separate and Unequal: Giftedness in the United States 1900 – 2000

Thanks to the generosity of the Rockefeller Archive Center, I have been able to conduct research that will enable me to revise my dissertation into a book manuscript. The project is tentatively titled, *Separate and Unequal: Giftedness in the United States, 1900 – 2000*. Three sets of research questions have guided my analysis. First, what was giftedness, why did it appeal to a wide variety of actors, and, ultimately, how did it impact education policy in the postwar era? Second, what was the relationship between achievement and giftedness, and how did a student's race or gender impact his or her ability to access these programs? And finally, was providing special opportunities and resources to gifted students fair, and to what extent did various actors raise concerns about the fairness of gifted and talented programs? In other words, if and how did separating students on the basis of ability challenge the very principle of integration and likewise efforts to achieve educational equity in the postwar era?

In the process of answering those questions, I show how at different moments throughout the postwar era, parents, educators, policymakers, experts, and students shaped and remade the meaning of giftedness in ways that would transform the landscape of public education in the United States, informing and reflecting ideas about democracy, equality, and opportunity. I trace these changes nationally. In 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), in part because it would allow the federal government to provide resources to gifted students, thus expanding the scope of the federal government. For the first time, education was no longer solely an issue of local control. Giftedness altered the allocation of educational resources in public schools. Superior "ability" became a justification for both grouping students together in schools and classrooms and providing those students with better curricular offerings and instruction, shaping and remaking the very meaning of equal educational opportunity in the wake of *Brown*. In the words of one author, gifted students would "bring answers to the toughest problems of today," including "[extending] how long we live, how peacefully we get along, how pleasant our jobs and homes

are, how healthfully our children are born and grow up.”<sup>1</sup> Giftedness promised to solve these problems (and others) without fundamentally challenging—or even attending to—their structural underpinnings. During the 1960s, a special task force appointed by President Johnson identified eighteen different federal agencies involved in “talent development” and emphasized the importance of identifying and educating the nation’s heretofore overlooked gifted women and minorities.<sup>2</sup> By the 1970s, these very groups demanded that gifted and talented programs actually reflect the diversity they claimed rhetorically to value and worked towards increasing access to those programs through integration and affirmative action.

Thus, in the project, I argue that despite the breadth of the definition of giftedness—which emphasized exceptional ability in a variety of subjects including art, music, athletics, and leadership, to name but a few—giftedness ultimately came to be defined by differences in degrees of academic ability rather than kinds of ability. Experts chose to measure giftedness through an IQ exam, selecting this option over other, more subjective measures of merit such as teacher recommendations, identification by parents, or the use of previous school records. Giftedness appealed to a wide variety of actors because of the flexibility of the term; it could either be a broad and expansive category accessible to almost any student, or it could be very narrowly tailored and therefore a designation limited to a select few. Similarly, giftedness could be used to promote the expansion of educational opportunities to disadvantaged groups including the working class, women, and minorities. But at the same time, giftedness could also be used to maintain the status quo by legitimizing the existing social order as natural and fair, based on the results of unbiased tests. The Cold War initially enabled the implementation of policies to group gifted students in separate classrooms and schools amidst concerns about whether “segregation” of ability was undemocratic. Instead, experts found that segregation was indeed fair and democratic because it promoted equality of opportunity as opposed to equality. Experts and educators argued this practice was more likely to promote superior academic achievement for gifted students over other alternatives such as accelerating gifted students or enriching their curriculum in a regular classroom. Segregation, they found, was the best way to ensure gifted students reached their

full potential and produced the best outcomes in terms of achievement.

Thus, the project makes an interdisciplinary intervention in the literature on academic tracking in the social sciences and education policy by exploring how and why this practice became widespread. Many excellent studies have quantitatively and qualitatively shown that racial minorities are more likely to be placed in remedial and low-ability groups while white students meritocratically “earn” acceptance into gifted and talented programs.<sup>3</sup> And while some gesture towards a larger historical context, they fail to provide a full account of why gifted and talented programs emerged and proliferated. My dissertation historicizes academic achievement and shows why this became such a driving force in the choices parents made about how to educate their children and where to send them to school. My archival sources allow for an in-depth analysis of how and why policies for educating gifted students developed on the national and local level and why parents came to accept, and even desire, a gifted child. Investigating the intricacies of this process opens up new possibilities for understanding the impact of gifted and talented programs on various forms of inequality (race, class, gender, and ability).<sup>4</sup>

Methodologically, this project is a social and political history that insists on the interrelationship of expert and non-expert voices. My research has included looking at interviews, newspapers, school committee meeting minutes, policy papers, Congressional hearings, special task force reports, and letters written by ordinary Americans to experts. Taken together, these documents allow me to read against the grain for evidence of experts’ and non-experts’ ideas about giftedness alongside examples of the mechanics of system-design: the putatively neutral, technocratic documents that enabled educational innovation in the form of gifted and talented programs. These samples provide a lens through which to reconstruct commonsense notions of merit, opportunity, equity, and equality. Federal archives—including Task Force Reports and legal briefs—serve as a foil to evidence of white parents’ attitudes.

While my dissertation consisted of five chapters tracing the history of giftedness over the course of three decades, the book manuscript will expand on my previous

work to tell a national story about the rise of gifted and talented programs. Currently, I am focusing my attention in two areas of revision. First, I study how the federal government created programs specifically for gifted and talented youth from minority and other disadvantaged backgrounds. Office of Economic Opportunity programs including the TRIO, Upward Bound, and Project Talent programs targeted gifted minority students as a way to address both educational and racial inequality. My analysis examines the various state actors who helped to realize these programs, and explores how students and families in these programs experienced them. Privileging the voices of non-expert, minority actors provides a fuller analysis that accounts for the diverse student populations these programs aimed to serve and would provide insight into why—despite the government’s efforts—these programs did not have a lasting impact on reducing inequality in access to gifted and talented programs. Thus, this political history would insist on the inclusion of minority voices to provide a more exhaustive account of the impact of these programs.

Second, I examine the partnerships forged between federal and philanthropic institutions for promoting gifted and talented programs. During Lyndon Baines Johnson’s administration, the federal government created a special task force to study the promise of gifted and talented education. The involvement of both the Lyndon Baines Johnson and Gerald Ford administrations illustrates how the flexibility of giftedness enabled it to be a successful educational reform movement for diverse actors with differing political commitments—Democrats and Republicans, civil rights advocates and eugenicists, all promoted giftedness at different moments throughout the twentieth century.

Various archival collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center have been instrumental in this regard. I relied heavily on the Fund for the Advancement of Education within the Ford Foundation records. Various grants supported programs for gifted children across the United States. These included: *The Gifted Child In Portland: A Report of Five Years of Experience in Developing a Program for Children of Exceptional Endowment*; seminars for gifted high school students in the Briarcliff Public Schools; programs for gifted children in the San Bernardino Public Schools; the Connecticut Committee for the Gifted; Texas

Education Agency; the Catholic School Board of the Archdiocese of Louisville; and the Lawrenceville School. In addition to programs for gifted students in specific geographic locations, the Ford Foundation also piloted the National Merit Scholarship Corporation—a program aimed at providing gifted students with the funding to continue their educations beyond primary and secondary school. Furthermore, the extensive collections on the Advanced Placement Program and Early Admission Program also show how the widespread acceptance of these programs today can be traced back to Cold War efforts to find and educate the nation's most gifted students.

The Fund for the Advancement of Education was not the only institution funding programs for gifted students. The William T. Grant Foundation provided funding to the National Association for Gifted Children, the National Institute on the Gifted and Talented, and the American Association for Gifted Children. They also provided the funding for a thirty-minute video which includes interviews with parents, educators, and experts on giftedness. This fascinating source will enable me to incorporate the sources and methods of the cultural historian in my analysis by analyzing not only the policies, but also the ways in which television helped to market and expand the reach of giftedness. Finally, JDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Fund records provided funding for programs aimed at gifted students such as the College Entrance Examination and the Advanced Placement Program.

While today, gifted and talented programs are challenged for the way they reproduce racial and gender inequality, the various holdings in the Rockefeller Archive Center related to giftedness reveal an investment in giftedness as a way of solving problems of racial inequality in the United States. Many actors acknowledged problems stemming from racial inequality in American schools, and expressed the belief that through their grants and gifted and talented programs, they could end educational inequality. While exactly the opposite happened, they provide a cautionary tale about not only interrogating the intentions of various historical actors, but also the impacts of their programs and policies. Moreover, the archival collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center illustrate the broad reach that giftedness had on primary and secondary education in the United States. Indeed, they show how philanthropic institutions partnered

with local, state, and federal governments to help promote gifted and talented programs. As the collections in the Rockefeller Archive Center demonstrate, gifted and talented programs transformed the landscape of public education in the United States.

Over the past years, when I've told people about my research, I'm often asked about the implications of my research on current education policy. This project does not make policy recommendations, nor does it offer parents advice on what kinds of schools they should send their children to. But having thought deeply and carefully about the origins and persistence of educational inequality, I have come to believe that while underperforming schools very obviously reflect educational inequality, the singular focus on improving so-called failing urban schools is somewhat misguided. As Nikole Hannah-Jones has shown, these schools are often labeled failures by white parents and the media at the expense of hardworking families and educators who, despite inadequate resources, have created loving, stimulating learning environments for students of color.<sup>5</sup> Instead, I hope this project illuminates the way schools and programs for gifted students perpetuate educational inequality, and inspires a more robust analysis of the interplay between "elite" and "failing" schools. I am under no illusions about the political viability of educational reforms that attempt to challenge merit-based admissions programs.<sup>6</sup> But modifications that only look to improve underperforming schools without challenging the role that seemingly excellent schools play in contributing to urban educational inequality will continue to fail.

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<sup>1</sup> Willard Abraham, *Common Sense About Gifted Children* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1958), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Talent Development: An Investment in the Nation's Future, Part II Supporting Data, p. 72, Folder: Outside 1967 Task Force on Education of Gifted Persons (Part II Supporting Data), Box 6, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Task Force Reports, LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, Texas.

<sup>3</sup> For a selection of key works on academic tracking, see Richarde Doneland, Gerald A. Neal, and Deneese L. Jones, "The Promise of Brown and the Reality of Academic Grouping: The Tracks of my Tears," *The Journal of Negro Education* 63, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 376-885; Donna Ford and Karen Webb, "Desegregation of Gifted Educational Programs: The Impact of *Brown* on Underachieving Children of Color," *Journal of Negro Education* 63, no. 3 (1994): 358-375; Maureen Hallinan, "Tracking From Theory to Practice," *Sociology of Education* 67 (1994): 79-91; Adrienne Hopkins and Kendra



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Garrett, "Separate and Unequal: The Underrepresentation of African American Students in Gifted and Talented Programs," *Black History Bulletin* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 24-30; Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press; 1986); Jeannie Oakes, Amy Stuart Wells, Makeba Jones, and Amanda Datnow, "Detracking: The Social Construction of Ability, Cultural Politics, and Resistance in Reform," *Teachers College Record* 98 (1997): 482-510; Allison Roda, *Inequality in Gifted and Talented Programs: Parental Choices about Status, School Opportunity, and Second-Generation Segregation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Annegret Staiger, "Whiteness as Giftedness: Racial Formation at an Urban High School," *Social Problems* 51, no. 2 (May 2004): 161-181; Carolyn Tyson, *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White After Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Amy Stuart Wells and Irene Serna, "The Politics of Culture: Understanding Local Political Resistance to Detracking in Racially Mixed Schools," *Harvard Education Review* 66, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 93-118; and Kimberly West, "A Desegregation Tool That Backfired: Magnet Schools and Classroom Segregation," *The Yale Law Journal* 103, no. 8 (June 1994): 2567-2592.

<sup>4</sup> Social scientists—particularly sociologists—have done an excellent job detailing the way in which the choice model dominates public education today. For a selection, see Douglas Archbald, "School Choice, Magnet Schools, and the Liberation Model: An Empirical Study," *Sociology of Education* 77, no. 4 (2004): 283-310; Chase M. Billingham and Matthew O. Hunt, "School Racial Composition and Parental Choice: New Evidence on the Preferences of White Parents in the United States," *Sociology of Education* 89, no. 2 (2016): 99-117; Patrick Denice and Betheny Gross, "Choice, Preference, and Constraints: Evidence from Public School Applications in Denver," *Sociology of Education* 89, no. 4 (2016): 300-320; Kelly Fong and Sarah Faude, "Timing is Everything: Late Registration and Stratified Access to School Choice," *Sociology of Education* 91, no. 3 (2018): 242-262; Chester E. Finn and Jessica A. Hockett, *Exam Schools: Inside America's Most Selective Public High Schools* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Lee Lauen "Contextual Explanations of School Choice," *Sociology of Education* 80, no. 3 (2007): 179-209; Amanda Lewis and Jared Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Francis Pearman II and Walker Swain, "School Choice, Gentrification, and the Variable Significance of Racial Stratification in Urban Neighborhoods," *Sociology of Education* 90, no. 3 (2017): 213-235.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah-Jones writes, "In early spring 2015, the city's Department of Education sent out notices telling 50 families that had applied to kindergarten at P.S. 8 that their children would be placed on the waiting list and instead guaranteed admission to P.S. 307. Distraught parents dashed off letters to school administrators and to their elected officials. They pleaded their case to the press...The Farragut parents were also angry and hurt over how their school and their children had been talked about in public meetings and the press." See Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Choosing a School for my Daughter in a Segregated City," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2016, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/magazine/choosing-a-school-for-my-daughter-in-a-segregated-city.html>.

Conant made a similar observation in *Slums and Suburbs*, writing "I should like to record at this point my impression of what my colleagues and I have seen in slum sections of big cities. Almost without exception we have seen white and Negro teachers and administrators struggling tenaciously and bravely against the adverse influences of the home and the streets. As one of my associates who had spent the best years of his life as a principal of a suburban public high school put it, "I visited junior high schools in New York City in some of the worst areas. I expected to find blackboard jungles; instead I found schools with high morale, tight discipline, imaginative principals and teachers." James Bryant Conant, *Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961), 23. Together, their comments suggest that what makes a school "good" is highly subjective, but is likely informed by race.

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<sup>6</sup> A quick glance at the *New York Times* comments page over Mayor Bill de Blasio's 2018 proposal to increase racial diversity in New York City's elite exam schools reveals striking similarities between the rhetorical strategies used by white parents in Boston to oppose affirmative actions for gifted and talented programs during desegregation and *NYT* readers' reactions to de Blasio's proposal today. Elizabeth A. Harris and Winnie Hu, "Asian Groups See Bias in Plan to Diversify New York's Elite Schools," *New York Times*, June 5, 2018, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/nyregion/carranza-specialized-schools-admission-asians.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer#commentsContainer>.