

ACHIEVING EQUITY

in Gifted Programming



Dismantling Barriers and Tapping Potential



A Prufrock Press Book

April Wells

ACHIEVING
EQUITY
in Gifted Programming



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What the Experts Say

"In order to see a child's true potential, they must be exposed to intellectual opportunities that are appropriated to their level and background, and build off their experiences. Our talent development program has been a gamechanger for our students from underserved populations because it has provided each child the opportunity to access higher order thinking skills. With these skills, students begin to tap into their true potential, which otherwise may have gone unnoticed."

— Carmela Riley, District U-46

"April Wells, an award-winning educator and leader, has a long track record of breaking down barriers to talent development for *all* of our children. Her unique combination of practical experience, knowledge of the research and literature, and fierce advocacy has resulted in a first-rate resource for educators, families, and policymakers. I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in improving how we approach advanced education."

— Jonathan A. Plucker, Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University

"April's mission to establish equitable access to gifted education arises from her own very personal journey. Her informed perspective as a young student, a teacher, a parent, and now as an adult educational leader fuels her tireless efforts to remove barriers for all high-potential students. She urges us to honor all students, their original language, and the culture from which they come in exposing them to enrichment and providing access to academic challenge. April's call to focus on local norms and local needs, along with high support balanced with high expectations, compels us to embrace the inevitable, but necessary, discomfort inherent in changing current educational systems."

— Julie Luck Jensen, Past President of Illinois Association for Gifted Children

"April Wells brings authentic, 'boots on the ground' experience to this book, having created multiple programs for children who are often overlooked for gifted education services. Her work comes together in the AIM program, which increases access to gifted programs by focusing on cultivating higher level thinking skills in young children. This program is consistent with a talent development approach to gifted education that emphasizes alternative identification methods, talent spotting, early intervention, and enrichment."

— Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Ph.D., Northwestern University



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Dedication

To Charles, Kennedy, Sydney, and Geneva, my life is better because of your presence. Endless thanks for being the source of my motivation. Charles, I am grateful for your strength and resolve that, at times, carried me through this process when I wanted to quit. Your reassurance and support provided a mirror for me to reflect to see what is truly inside me. To Kennedy, Sydney, and Geneva, I hope my willingness to pursue my passion will incite an insatiable desire in each of you to achieve greater than your hearts could ever imagine.



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Acknowledgments

Writing this book caused me to believe in myself on a level that I had not tapped in recent years. In the face of the unknown—this is my first book, unless you count the young author books I wrote in elementary school—I embraced extreme discomfort and equally compelling joy. I learned how to give myself grace. I owe a great deal of thanks and gratitude to two pillars in my life, who, although they were not here to witness my work, are vitally connected to everything I have been able to achieve. I believe they had an idea how my story would unfold. Thank you to my Nanos, my grandmother, and Larry, my uncle, for always believing in me, helping me to see beyond limitations, and simply (yet most notably) being there. And, to my parents who gave me a gift that set this plan in motion, thanks for life, love, and support.

My experience as an educator brings a smile to many faces, but one face in particular is marked with distinction in my memory. I will forever be grateful for the late Ronald O'Neal, Sr., (Papi) for encouraging me to pursue my leadership degree in education. Without his guidance, I never would have come close to touching the work in gifted education in the way I have been able to. He encouraged me to obtain my leadership degree so that, whenever

an opportunity presented itself, I would ready. Thanks to him, when gifted education called, I was able to answer.

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Thank you to my mentor, Julie Luck Jensen, who recognized my spark for gifted education and fanned it by encouraging me to present at staff meetings, attend an Illinois Association for Gifted Children conference, and go to my first National Association for Gifted Children annual convention. Thank you also for being my first consultant. You have been a great resource for my endless questions and an even better friend.

My work is central to me, and it is about making withdrawals from deposits that so many others have made into me. To that end, I would like to thank Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Ph.D., and Rhoda Rosen, Ph.D., for partnering with me through the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University to bring innovative programs to District U-46 and to hundreds of students who remind me of my younger self.

When I returned to District U-46 to work on the gifted charter, I was fortunate to meet some amazing friends. I am thankful for the loving guidance from Barbara Johnson in helping me to grow into my leadership disposition.

Thanks to my tribe of educators, students, parents, and stakeholders of District U-46, who also beat the equity drum that creates a sound that sustains us as we work.

I would also like to thank Joel McIntosh, Katy McDowall, and the team at Prufrock Press for opening doors for this timely and timeless conversation about equity in gifted education to be taken to more extensive platforms.

May we all continue to be a voice for those whose anguish and tears go unheard.

Introduction

This book represents an intersection of both theory and practice on how educators can respond to the disproportionate participation of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students in gifted education programs. Much of what is shared originates from my cumulative experience during my tenure as a gifted administrator in Illinois. Research on talent development as an instructional intervention, cultural awareness, and social justice in education converges and supports the establishment of inclusive gifted programs. Including research and implementation considerations, *Achieving Equity in Gifted Education* offers educators a platform to address underrepresentation. Each chapter poses an opportunity for educators to address their own understanding of CLED learners in gifted education and to disrupt a problem that has plagued the field for decades.

The school environment and experiences in which students partake are correlated to academic gains. An effective environment and challenging experiences are particularly important for students from diverse backgrounds. Enhancing access to rigorous learning environments fuels the growth of equity in gifted education. Disproportionate participation in gifted education can be viewed

as a social justice issue that plagues the nation, but educators can redesign practices and policies in order for gifted programming to adequately represent the students whom educators are responsible for serving. Providing greater access to gifted education for advanced youth benefits not only their academic growth, but also their psychosocial development.

There is a gifted gap (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018). Each at-potential student not adequately served by gifted programming represents potential that is lost and assesses a tax paid by the nation. The absence of bright, diverse learners in the nation's classrooms represents lost opportunities. Brains are malleable. Students from all backgrounds start off at commensurate levels of innovation and questioning ability, but the longer they are in school, CLED students fall behind. Educators recognize the limits of some students' backgrounds, but that does not absolve educators of their responsibility to reflect on how to cultivate talent in students from *all* backgrounds.

Underrepresentation in gifted programming can be addressed; it does not have to go on in perpetuity. This work is positioned at a critical junction in gifted education. When the population of students identified for gifted services is juxtaposed against the nation's demographics, the cry to respond is resounding. Addressing equitable access to gifted programs is essential. The public education system has a notable role to play in equalizing opportunities in gifted education for students from marginalized groups. Across the nation, students with equal talents experience unequal outcomes. Educators and other stakeholders in the field recognize the problem—and there have been some successful approaches—but there is still considerable work to do. Educators' investment has been noted, but those in the gifted education field have not always embarked upon the necessary steps to further the conversation into more involved commitment that translates into sustainable action. The pursuit of equity means that program administrators must be cognizant of the barriers to gifted identification. The following barriers to identification are addressed throughout this text: English as a second language (ESL), referral or nomination processes (e.g.,

two-phase identification systems), identification procedures, previous learning, cultural conflict, and biases.

Uncovering blind spots and understanding gifted students through a culturally aware lens are critical to addressing underrepresentation. Recognizing blind spots in gifted education requires robust attention. Understanding the intersection of poverty and race is also central to addressing equity in gifted programs. Although poverty is not the only reason for students being excluded from gifted programs, it is a prominent issue in the discussion of disproportionality. Income inequities exacerbate underrepresentation. Note, however, that poverty is palatable, and it is easier for educators to view poverty as a source of disproportionality, but there is more to underrepresentation than poverty. There is a cultural perception gap that also impedes minority students from being identified for gifted programming. This gap represents the faulty way in which educators view students. The cultural conflict that arises from not fully understanding the differences may lead educators to have erroneous views of students from diverse backgrounds. These views may dictate educators' interactions, beliefs, and thoughts about students. Culturally proficient educators recognize the danger of such blind spots. From the research-based programming implementations described in this text—as well as further work and reflection—educators will be able to uncover blind spots and develop their skills in understanding students through a culturally responsive lens, permitting students from all backgrounds to access gifted programming.

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