

Wells, A. (2020). *Achieving equity in gifted programming: Dismantling barriers and tapping potential*. Prufrock Press.

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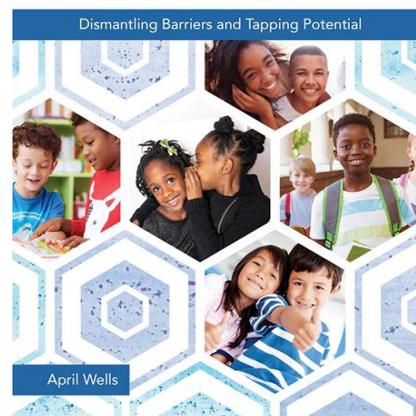
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Defining giftedness is a challenge for educators. Every state has its own definition and requirements as the federal government offers no guidance for what services should look like (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). The lack of definitions, along with variance in programming, leads to disparities across states and districts that leaves this area open to inequities. Often such programs are not provided in all districts for all children from all backgrounds equally. *Achieving Equity in Gifted Programming* serves as a call to do more to help all students tap into their true potential by creating more equitable gifted programs. The goal is to help educators recognize gifted students who are, as Wells calls them, “overlooked gems.”

April Wells writes in a very approachable tone, making her text accessible to a practitioner audience. Wells brings a wealth of experience to writing about the issue of underrepresentation of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners in gifted education. Growing up in poverty, Wells’s giftedness was overlooked until she entered middle school. She later returned to work in the same district where she was formerly a student, as a gifted specialist to assist with the redesign of the gifted and talented program after a discrimination lawsuit was brought against the district. The story of the program’s redesign is the inspiration for Wells’s book, a clarion call for other districts to follow in their footsteps.

**ACHIEVING
EQUITY**
in Gifted Programming



According to Wells, to remedy underrepresentation in gifted education, we must dismantle barriers, combat cultural biases, and address systemic issues. She begins her argument by exploring the concepts of giftedness and privilege, along with issues and causes of underrepresentation of *culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse* (CLED) students. She acknowledges the disproportionality in education, in that more students of color are represented in special education and disciplinary actions than in advanced programs. Wells purposefully works to close the theory to praxis gap by bringing the theoretical perspectives of equity pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy into the practitioner space. To offer an example of how to bring theory into practice, Wells shares and frequently ties back to her firsthand experience with redesigning her district's gifted program, walking her audience through the discrimination lawsuit and the district's subsequent response, decisions, and solutions.

Achieving Equity in Gifted Programming offers critiques of current gifted programs and practices without being abrasive. Wells addresses how gifted identification policies act as barriers, in that such policies often use a single measure that is based on a dominant, White view of what giftedness looks like. Wells explains how racial bias influences who is seen as gifted, leading to underrepresentation. She argues, "as varied as cultures are, to define giftedness on the basis of the predominance of traits from the dominant, some might say oppressive, culture is inherently a racist practice" (p. 63). Her recognition of such definitions brings to light one of the many ways systemic racism exists in schools. Educators' privilege and implicit bias are seen as barriers, and Wells calls on us to reflect on ways we may inadvertently uphold systems of privilege.

To honor more diverse ways of being and knowing, Wells suggests universal screening measures to help minimize any unconscious biases present within schools, along with suggesting the implementation of talent development programs for all students as more equitable practices. While acknowledging that every student will not be seen as gifted, by offering talent development "students must be viewed as at-potential instead of at-risk" (p. 53). This push to shift our framing of students cannot be understated and is critical to providing an equitable, quality education for all students. Wells rightly calls on us to view our students through a strengths-based lens by presuming all students are competent and capable. This is integral to designing equitable programs.

Wells presents several useful ways for practitioners to help themselves rethink and revise their own gifted programs. One tool is the ABCs of Equity as a guide to a redesign that highlights key topics educators should consider. Wells lists 26 terms to consider when redesigning inequitable gifted programs. Another tool is Wells's adaptation of Coleman's (2020) D-STEM Equity Model to create the Gifted Equity Model, a framework to show how analyzing barriers, cultural brokering, and scholarly pursuits can be applied to redesigning more equitable gifted programs. Similarly, each chapter ends with

three to five reflection questions to help educators reflect on their own situations. Questions like, “What barriers to gifted identification exist in your school or district” (p. 16) and “What are the ways you or other educators tend to deny that privilege is occurring?” (p. 78) build on the content of the chapter, pushing readers to make meaningful connections to and initiate conversations in their own practice. While these questions are a useful starting point, they might be even more effective or impactful if done by a school-based team committed to school reform. However readers approach the text – as a team or individually – they are able to walk away with a plan for how to start this important work of redesigning their gifted programs.

Wells’s direct experience with a discrimination lawsuit positions her as an authority to demonstrate what this work looks like in practice. Her frequent referral to her own program’s redesign provides concrete examples of how theory can be used to inform practice. Her work skillfully connects the academy to the classroom. The text is not prescriptive and does not suggest a singular focus or application, but rather encourages individual practitioners and schools to find a solution that works best for their needs. The connection between Wells’s lived experience as a child living in poverty whose own giftedness was overlooked to her professional work redesigning her district’s gifted program positions her to speak with authority about how inequitable practices can marginalize students and limit their potential.

Throughout the book Wells repeatedly calls on educators to identify and assess barriers that prevent CLED students from being admitted to gifted programs. This is a necessary and worthwhile effort. Often as educators we tend to default to a deficit view of what students can or cannot do, especially given the pressures of standardization. While she calls for dismantling barriers that uphold underrepresentation, Wells frequently uses the term “high-ability learners,” which actually creates a barrier. The term encourages, and even requires, educators to rely on normative constructions around ability and performance, and students’ capabilities. She examines culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners, but does not explicitly include or discuss students with disabilities. The absence of disability/ability in this conversation is similar to its absence in critical pedagogies, which has been critiqued by scholars within the field of Disability Studies in Education (Danforth & Gabel, 2016). The possibility of students being twice exceptional – being both gifted and disabled – is not presented here, despite being recognized by the National Association for Gifted Students (2019). This is a limitation of the book given Wells’s acknowledgement that CLED students are often subjected to overrepresentation in special education. The usage of “high ability learners” can potentially allow practitioners to overlook this population in their redesign. Wells recognizes that “the heavy emphasis on minimum competency has far-reaching impacts on achievement” (p. 67), and while we all must realize all students are capable of more, we must also be mindful of how terms like “high ability” can enable educators to subjectively assess competency of students. Instead of high-ability learners, I might suggest readers recognize what Gabel (2002) coins as “ability diversity”

(p. 183) to reframe disability labels as another means of oppression, along with Wells's recognition of the impact of culture, language and economic status on assessments of ability. A truly equitable approach to gifted education must consider all aspects of students' identities and experiences and the ways in which they intersect to either enable or disable a student.

To dismantle the barriers she discusses, Wells encourages practitioners to initiate talent-development programs and culturally responsive teaching practices, but does not offer specifics as to how to do this or what it looks like beyond the reflection questions. Ladson-Billings's (1995) foundational work could supplement this for readers looking for more explicit examples of what culturally relevant pedagogy looks like in practice. Although Wells provides an overview of the issue and a starting point through each chapter's reflection questions, readers may be left searching for readings on these ideas in order to learn how to implement them in their classrooms. For example, in Chapter 6, Wells calls on educators to address their privileges and implicit biases, citing data that show that the teacher workforce is predominantly white women teaching a student population that is much more diverse. She says "educators also need to learn about what they know and do not know about students' cultural diversity" (p. 73), but does not offer any suggestions for what this work looks like in action. To assist educators in this work, I suggest exploring Broderick and Leonardo's (2016) conceptualization of goodness and smartness as property as a means to uphold dominant systems of being and doing. Their argument encourages us to take an even more nuanced equity-based framing through exploring intersectional considerations, directly supporting the reflections on privilege and bias Wells rightly points out must take place in schools.

Achieving Equity in Gifted Programming is a strong introduction to equity issues in gifted and talented programs, and prepares practitioners to take the next steps of digging further into solutions. Wells makes a strong contribution to the literature by providing a detailed example of program redesign with actionable steps. Recognizing that readers will not walk away with a "single remedy," Wells gives readers "additional tools to add to [their] repertoire as [they] advocate for diverse populations" (p. 6). Wells's work helps us to take the initial first step of mindful awareness and reflection on privilege and inequities in education. We must meaningfully consider all the barriers we construct or uphold in schools in order to truly help all students tap into their full potential.

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About the Reviewer

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