

**Economics of Education:
Substantive Preparation Notes on the
Draft Recommendations on
Minorities and the Right to Education**

**Prepared for the
United Nations Minority Issues Forum on
Minorities and the Right to Education**

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by

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[Introduction](#)

BlackEconomics.org[®] is an organization with specialized expertise in Black American economic issues—including education. BlackEconomics.org[®] contributes these Substantive Preparation Notes on the “Draft Recommendations on Minorities and the Right to Education” (henceforth, “Recommendations”) to the United Nations (UN) Minority Issues Forum on Minorities and the Right to Education (henceforth, “the Forum”), The Forum is to be convened in Geneva, Switzerland on December 15-16, 2008. These notes primarily reflect an economic analysis of minority education issues.

All economists agree that human capital formation (education) is an important precursor to effective economic development. Consequently, the Forum is an important undertaking because it can assist the UN in forming economic developmental policies and instruments that accelerate economic development in nations that include minority populations.

Forum organizers have developed a list of seven very important recommendations to discuss. We take this opportunity to provide our comments on the organizer’s recommendations. However, we begin our comments with thoughts concerning the term “Minorities.” After addressing the seven recommendations, we highlight a critical topic that should be discussed in the recommendations.

[Minorities](#)

Forum organizers take great pains to discuss the adverse effects of discrimination against minorities, yet they use and validate a term that is itself discriminatory. By minorities is meant persons who constitute a subgroup within a state based on their unique racial/ethnic background, the language that they speak, the religion that they observe, or their gender. Consequently, it seems reasonable to define “minority” by referring to ethnicity (racial, language, or religion). If one selects this path to identifying minorities, then one can dispense with the word “minority,” which carries discriminatory connotations. Minority implies smallness. No one likes to feel small.

In addition, “minority” can be a misnomer because, while a particular racial, language, or religious ethnic group may be a minor subgroup within one state, the same racial, language, or religious ethnic group can constitute a major group in another state or in the world. For example, in the case of the United States, Caucasian Americans represent a major group at the moment, and people of color (Native Americans, Asians, Africans, Hispanics, Middle-Easterners, etc.) constitute minor subgroups. The reality is, however, that people of color constitute the majority of the world’s population; therefore, it is a misnomer to refer to them as “minorities.”

[I. Education](#)

Our comments on this component of the Recommendations concern: (1) Adopting “ethnicity” over “minority” as the featured term; (2) unwanted assimilation and

“enforced social segregation”; and (3) the trade-off between social harmony and self-determination.

1. Again, we believe that “ethnic (racial, language, or religion) and gender subgroups” is sufficient to describe “minorities” and should replace the latter term.
2. We support representative roles for ethnic and gender subgroups in determining the structure under which education is administered. While desegregation may be appropriate and effective in certain cases, the forum should recognize the likelihood of desegregation/assimilation creating a condition where “superimposition of superiority” by the dominant versus a smaller ethnic or gender subgroup is the order of the day. Ethnic and gender subgroups must be free to reject arrangements that will produce such outcomes.

“Superimposition of superiority” is most powerful when assimilation/desegregation processes are controlled by the dominant group in the state. The dominant group can permit selected members of ethnic and gender subgroups (usually a small percentage) to filter up into their society in the name of integration/desegregation, while leaving the majority of the ethnic and gender subgroups in their original condition. Ethnic and gender subgroup members who filter up often constitute the leadership in their subgroups; when they move into the dominant group’s society, they leave their subgroup headless. Often, conditions for the headless ethnic and gender subgroups are made worse by integration/desegregation, not better.

3. Social harmony and self-determination are compatible when all subgroups in a state are empowered by their own achievements. It is important, therefore, for the forum to espouse actions that will permit ethnic and gender subgroups to achieve some semblance of equality prior to integration, otherwise the “superimposition of superiority” problem surfaces.

The forum must be careful not to espouse conditions that will place members of ethnic and gender subgroups in a “Catch 22.” This condition is described by Coate and Loury (1993): Members of ethnic and gender subgroups do not become qualified to assume responsible positions in the society before assimilation efforts are undertaken because they know that they are discriminated against and will not be permitted to take these positions even if they are qualified.¹ After assimilation efforts, members of ethnic and gender subgroups do not qualify themselves because they know that they will be assigned responsible positions in the name of

¹ See S. Coate and G. Loury (1993), “Will Affirmative Action Policies Eliminate Negative Stereotypes?” *American Economic Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4, pp. 1220-42.

assimilation—whether they are qualified or not. This “Catch 22” situation reinforces the stereotype that ethnic and gender subgroup members are not qualified, and it is very harmful to the subgroups.

II. Core principles

Our comments on “Core principles” concern standards and measures:

1. We believe that education is a life-long process that is enhanced when it begins early. Nobel Laureate James Heckman’s extensive research reveals that educational outcomes, at least in America, are almost fully determined by the time a pupil reaches the age of five years old.² Therefore, a state that is interested in favorable outcomes for educating its populace must be willing to expend resources to ensure that the very young enjoy conditions that will prepare them well to undergo an education process.

The forum should request that states adopt a policy of allocating financial and material resources on a fair-share basis; i.e., the revenue and other resources expended per pupil should not be biased against ethnic and gender subgroups. This is a reasonable request under most social contracts; any other arrangement is likely to guarantee dissent.

After developing an educational system that is based on the fair-share principle, the state should then create national educational standards to which each student should be held.

2. While it is important to discuss problems and opportunities associated with education for ethnic and gender subgroups, a key problem/opportunity is measuring the real output of education. The Forum may help develop recommendations for enhancing educational opportunities and performance for ethnic and gender subgroups. However, current methods for measuring the real output of education are inadequate to properly track improvements that may be precipitated by implementation of those recommendations. Without adequate methods for measuring the real output of education, it is impossible to accurately assess when real progress is made in delivering educational services to ethnic and gender subgroups. Questions that surface in this regard include:
 - (A) Is “pupil hours” the best measure of the real output of education?
 - (B) How should pupil hours be quality adjusted (class size, teacher quality, test scores, etc.)?

² See D. Clement, (2005), “Interview with James Heckman,” *The Region*, Minneapolis Federal Reserve Board, June. Retrieved from the Internet on December 10, 2008; http://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications_papers/pub_display.cfm?id=3278.

- (C) Should we focus on outcomes or output when assessing the effectiveness of education delivery methods and systems?

Fraumeni *et al.* (2008) provide a good analysis of these questions.³ It seems reasonable that the forum might recommend using available methods and future improvements that are discussed in Fraumeni *et al.* (2008) for measuring the real output of education and/or to suggest that the UN take action to advance research on this topic.

III. Essential requirements for effective educational strategy

Our comments concerning this recommendation focus on segregation policies in education. It is common knowledge that ethnic and gender subgroups reflect “stereotype threat” behavior. That is, ethnic and gender subgroups’ test performance declines when a test is preceded by a reminder that “ethnic and gender subgroups traditionally exhibit sub-par test performances when compared to a dominant group.” A considerable amount of good research has been performed on this concept, with two excellent sources being Kang (2005) and Ayres and Brooks (2005).⁴

Given that that stereotype threat behavior is part of the education landscape, it seems important for the Forum to issue a recommendation that supports research for developing methods for inoculating ethnic and gender subgroups against this threat.

What this research points out is that, often, ethnic and gender subgroups benefit substantially by participating in a segregated educational environment. A recognized example of effective “segregated” education is Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States.⁵ Therefore, the Forum should be cautious in expressing too much disdain for segregated educational environments.

IV. Equal access to quality education for ethnic and gender subgroups

Here, we reiterate the need for an acceptable method for allocating resources for ethnic and gender subgroups’ education. As expressed above, the fair-share principle seems most appropriate. It should be noted that educational expenditures on a fair-share basis means that valuable resources are allocated to ethnic and gender

³ See Fraumeni, B., Reinsdorf, M., Robinson, B., and Williams, P. (2008), “Price and Real Output Measures for the Education Function of Government: Exploratory Estimates for Primary & Secondary Education,” *NBER Working Paper Series 14099*, June. Available on the Internet at: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14099>.

⁴ See Kang, J. (2005), “Trojan Horses of Race,” *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 118, No. 5; pp. 1489-1593. Available on the Internet at: <http://harvardlawreview.org/issues/118/March05/KangFTX.pdf>. Also see Ayres, I., and Brooks, R. (2005), “Does Affirmative Action Reduce the Number of Black Lawyers?” *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 57, No. 6; pp. 1807-1854.

⁵ For background information on the effectiveness of HBCUs, see Robinson, B. and Albert, A. (2008), “HBCU’s Institutional Advantage: Returns to Teacher Education,” *Understanding Minority-Serving Institutions*, M. Gasman, B. Baez, and C. S. Viernes Turner, editors, State University of New York, Albany.

subgroup communities. Such expenditures can stimulate economic development because jobs are created and property values are likely to appreciate—if school quality is sufficiently high. Most importantly, high quality educational institutions in ethnic and gender subgroup communities help build cultural capital, which is central to long-lasting economic and social development.⁶

V. The learning environment

Without doubt, adverse stereotypes of ethnic and gender subgroups is an enemy to effective education. How can one expect a member of a dominant group to provide fair and unbiased educational service to ethnic and gender subgroup members when the former has been conditioned by media that is laden with adverse images of the latter? These images present ethnic and gender subgroups in a negative light and form the basis of negative stereotypes. A logical answer to the foregoing question is that the expectation is irrational.

To clarify and sharpen the question with respect to Black Americans, consider the following hypothetical scenario: A recent White American college graduate is appointed to teach mathematics to a class of mainly inner-city Black male high school students. The teacher grew up in a suburban Midwestern United States environment with very limited exposure to Black Americans. Her immediate residential community included no Black Americans. Her elementary and secondary schools had populations that were less than two percent Black. Blacks constituted less than five percent of her college's population. Her life-long exposure to Black Americans was primarily through media, which projected a preponderance of adverse images of Black Americans, mainly as criminals (drug dealers, rapists, and thieves), prisoners, athletes, musicians, comedians, and law enforcement officers. Can one expect such an instructor to hold unbiased and positive expectations about educational attainment and life achievements for her students? Should one expect the teacher's attitudes about academic success for her students to affect her classroom performance and to ultimately have an impact on student educational attainment and achievement?

The above-described hypothetical scenario is representative of many real-world situations, and highlights an important indirect effect of adverse stereotypical images on ethnic and gender subgroup members' prospects for obtaining a high-quality education. Another important and similar indirect effect occurs just beyond academic life and affects ethnic and gender subgroups' prospects for capturing gainful employment. An effective analysis of the economic mechanisms through which the latter events flow are described in Robinson (2009).⁷

To counteract these scenarios and to place ethnic and gender subgroup students and prospective employees on an "even playing field," it is essential that teachers and

⁶ For insights into the importance of cultural capital, see G. Borjas (1999), *Heavens Door*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

⁷ See Robinson, B. (forthcoming in 2009), "Black Unemployment and Infotainment," *Journal of Economic Inquiry*, p. 1-20. This article is available from the author upon request until published.

decision makers receive appropriate training to counterbalance their biases. Therefore, we applaud the Forum's recommendation that instructors of ethnic and gender subgroup students receive "bias reduction" training so that instructors can prevent their biases from hampering ethnic and gender subgroups from obtaining a high-quality education.

VI. The relationship between desegregation strategies, cultural autonomy and integration in the quest for social cohesion

Here, we have concerns with the degree of emphasis that Forum organizers have placed on cultural autonomy and the related implications. Specifically, we disagree that ethnic and gender subgroup students should be taught the dominant language "at later stages" of their educational process, and that these students should have access to education "in their own culture" and "through their own language."

In our view, education enables one to compete; one can compete effectively on an "even playing field." To compete successfully one must be equally or better prepared. Delayed exposure to a dominant language reduces prospects that ethnic and gender subgroup students will master that language. Non-mastery of the dominant language precludes the ability to compete on an equal basis.

We do not disagree that it is important for ethnic and gender subgroups to gain knowledge about their culture. However, that knowledge should be in context, because these students must live in that context. It is inappropriate, then, to expose ethnic and gender subgroups to a unidimensional ethnocentric education. Rather, the state should adopt a policy that education be fully integrated, with all ethnic or cultural and gender subgroups being represented in the curriculum. The Forum should recommend that such a policy be adopted.

VII. Content and delivery of the curriculum

Our two comments on this recommendation concern the emphasis on ethnic and gender subgroup languages and stereotypes in curriculum materials. First, while ethnic and gender subgroups should have an opportunity to learn their native tongue through a formal educational process, it is excessive to mandate that the entire curriculum be taught in that native tongue. As noted above, there are limited resources for providing educational services. The preoccupation with learning in native languages, if taken too far, could result in insufficient resources being allocated to teach the *lingua franca* of the day—science and mathematics.

Second, we note the role of the media in forming and perpetuating adverse stereotypes of ethnic and gender subgroups. Therefore, it is insufficient for the Forum to advocate for the removal of these stereotypes from curriculum materials. Rather it is necessary for the Forum to adopt a recommendation that the state take action to thwart the formation, promulgation, and perpetuation of stereotypes in the media.

While there are “Free Press” implications, adverse stereotypes inflict undeserved pain, and elimination of undeserved pain is a human right.

Adverse role of sports in the education of ethnic and gender subgroups

This section highlights a very important topic that should be reflected in the Forum’s recommendations. The confluence of many circumstances often results in an apparent over-investment in athletics by ethnic subgroups, which has adverse consequences for these subgroups’ educational attainment. In the case of the United States and Black Americans, the case is made that the vast majority of Black youth would experience improved long-term economic well-being if they invested less in athletics and more in education. A recent commentary on the subject explains how powerful the result would be if Historically Black Colleges and Universities would produce “More Physicists, Fewer Fullbacks.”⁸ Given the seemingly natural creativity of Black Americans, it stands to reason that innumerable high-quality intellects would usher forth from Black communities when the current levels of time and energy that are dedicated to athletics are redirected to the pursuit of education. The Forum should seek to determine whether over-investment in athletics is prevalent and injurious to the education of ethnic and gender subgroups. If so, then the Forum should seek a prescription for this problem.

Conclusion

It is difficult to overstate the importance of educational opportunities and actual educational attainment in improving the quality of life for ethnic and gender subgroups. Therefore, the UN is well founded in convening a “Forum on Ethnic and Gender Subgroups and the Right to Education.” The draft Recommendations that were prepared by Forum organizers serve as a good starting point for fashioning final recommendations to send forward to the UN for consideration.

BlackEconomics.org[®] has provided comments on each of the seven major recommendations. In addition, we have challenged the use of the term “minority” and have suggested the use of “ethnic and gender subgroups” instead. Finally, we highlighted a very important topic that should be discussed in the recommendations—the adverse role of sports in the education of ethnic and gender subgroups.

BlackEconomics.org[®] stands ready to provide assistance and support during the remaining stages of the Forum’s efforts to develop recommendations for the UN on ethnic and gender subgroups’ right to education.

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⁸ See Robinson, B. (2008), “More Physicists, Fewer Fullbacks,” *The Root*. Available on the Internet at: <http://www.theroot.com/id/48008>.