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Education: Meeting, the Needs of Gifted Children

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The Howard program is the only one in the nation aimed specifically at minority gifted and talented students, observes James H. Williams, an associate professor of educational psychology who founded the program in 1979 and continues to serve as its director, advocate and guiding spirit. Williams also directs the School of Education’s Graduate Leadership Program for Gifted Education, which prepares teachers, administrators and researchers for leadership roles in gifted education.
Education

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Seven-year-old Kamilah Jenkins, a District of Columbia second grader, has been reading since she was three. “I like books with pictures and books without pictures,” she says. “If the books don’t have pictures, I just make up pictures in my mind.” With her bead-adorned pony tails bopping in time to her words, she next makes an ingenuous confession: “I like being smart. I really like being smart. It makes me feel happy.”

Twelve-year-old George Kelly has never gotten a score lower than the 98th percentile on any standardized achievement test. He has the vocabulary and a bit of the demeanor of a college professor, but can get just as excited about baseball as about the physiology of the heart. Medicine is his major interest these days. But there’s also electronics, chemistry, sports, computers, rock collecting, crossword puzzles, piano, harmonica....

Sometimes, though, he finds his regular classes “do get boring.” Example: “I’d be sitting there doing ditto after ditto about things I already know and I’d be thinking about the other things I could be doing — like rearranging an Apple computer program so it would have more detailed graphics — and I’d just sit there and sigh [he sighs dramatically] and be bored stiff.”

Anthony (Tony) Thomas, 15, of San Diego, Calif., certainly can sympathize with George’s plight. He is a self-described computer nut who taught himself how to program by going to shopping malls and “messing around with the small computers” and who now has his eye on a career as a computer designer. “Given the chance, I’d stay in front of a terminal for days without leaving,” he says. “I can’t see why so many people are afraid of computers. They think a computer’s going to come out and bite them or something. But a computer only does what you tell it to do.”

Tony’s reputation as a computer whiz and the A’s he gets in his classes with seemingly little effort have earned him a nickname: “Brainiac.” “I think it’s kind of funny,” he says of his nickname, shrugging his shoulders in laid-back California fashion. “It gives me an ego boost.”

Kamilah, George and Tony were three of the 134 children enrolled last summer in the Satellite Summer Enrichment Program.
for Gifted and Talented Students sponsored by Howard University's School of Education.

The four-week program is designed to provide challenging experiences for gifted and talented students in science, math, computer science and writing; to develop their skills in critical thinking and problem solving; and to stimulate their creative abilities. It also gives participants the opportunity to interact with others with similar interests and abilities and with teachers who find their intellectual curiosity a delight.

Most of last summer's students had been enrolled in the second through ninth grades during the 1982-83 school year. Most were from the metropolitan Washington area (although there were youngsters from Illinois, New Jersey, California, Pennsylvania and Tennessee as well.)

The Howard program is the only one in the nation aimed specifically at minority gifted and talented students, observes James H. Williams, an associate professor of educational psychology who founded the program in 1979 and continues to serve as its director, advocate and guiding spirit. Williams also directs the School of Education's Graduate Leadership Program for Gifted Education, which prepares teachers, administrators and researchers for leadership roles in gifted education.

Although the personalities and interests of gifted children are diverse, what all gifted children share is "a thirst for knowledge," Williams says. "Gifted children are exceptionally curious," he observes. "If they have a special area of interest they will pursue that area with intensity. [Consider, for instance, Tony and his computers.] They have a lot of stamina. Their attention span is long. They generally learn material at a faster pace and are capable of exploring new topics in far more depth than the average student."

In more formal (or bureaucratic) language, an influential 1972 U.S. Office of Education report, "Education of the Gifted and Talented," defined gifted and talented children as "those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance...[They] include those with demonstrated achievement or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination: 1) general intellectual ability; 2) specific academic aptitude; 3) creative or productive thinking; 4) leadership ability; 5) visual and performing arts ability; 6) psychomotor ability."

Estimates of the gifted and talented children in the nation's schools, the report,
noted, range from 3 to 15 percent, depending on the criterion used.

What such percentages and definitions don't tell, though, is the story of the special needs of gifted and talented children and how they are—or are not—being met.

A gifted child sitting in a class with children of average ability is a lot like the driver of a car stuck behind a tractor trailer on a busy two-lane highway, Williams notes. "The child [like the car driver] is unable to move forward as he or she would like and consequently becomes bored and frustrated .... If gifted children are not challenged and if their interests are not channeled, they can automatically become a problem in the classroom," he adds. "Because of their inquisitive minds, they can become a greater problem than the child who is of average ability."

Despite this, the notion that gifted children have just as legitimate educational needs as physically handicapped children or children with other disadvantages is often resisted. Many people see no reason why gifted children—ostensibly "the cream of the crop"—deserve any special attention or services. They are eager to raise the banner of elitism whenever the matter comes up.

Others are not hostile to the idea of aiding the gifted, just uncertain how it can best be accomplished. As that 1972 Office of Education report began; "Educators, legislators, and parents have long puzzled over the problem of educating gifted students in a public educational program geared primarily to a philosophy of egalitarianism."

But the report went on to say: "We are increasingly being stripped of the comfortable notion that a bright mind will make its own way. Intellectual and creative talent cannot survive educational neglect and apathy."

"The relatively few gifted students who have had the advantage of special programs have shown remarkable improvements in self-understanding, in ability to relate well to others, as well as improved academic and creative performance," the report found. These pro-
grams have not produced arrogant, selfish snobs; special programs have extended a sense of reality, wholesome humility, self-respect and respect for others. A good program for the gifted increases their involvement and interest in learning through the reduction of the irrelevant and redundant.

Consider some typical scenes culled from several visits to Howard's satellite program:

In a biology laboratory, Lynne Holcomb, a District of Columbia high school biology teacher, leads a dozen or so fourth graders in a rather strange chorus: "We're dissecting, not butchering. We're dissecting, not butchering. Remember: we're dissecting." The chorus is preface to the assignment of the day: to dissect a fish, then a grasshopper and then make detailed drawings comparing the parts of each.

At the end of the class, one emphatically exuberant girl who had been reluctant to wield her scalpel at first ("Yuk! This fish stinks!") proudly displays and explains the contents of her dissecting tray. She points out her fish's intestines, gills, heart, stomach, liver, backbone ... and tells what their functions are. "We're only going into fourth grade," she says. "And look what we're doing. We're dissecting."

A fifth-grade creative writing class taught by Annie Beard, a District of Columbia junior high school teacher, opens with a lively discussion of nursery rhymes that actually are sad or tragic. The children give examples — Humpty Dumpty with his great fall, Jack and Jill breaking their crowns, the Queen of Hearts bereft of her crown, the Caterpillar of "Alice in Wonderland" eating the mushroom, then throwing up — with enthusiasm.

Beard uses the subject to get the children thinking about some larger issues, "What happens to people if they hear about violence from the time they are very, very young?" she wonders aloud. "They will grow up used to violence and may become violent themselves," several youngsters suggest. "Well then, maybe we should tell little children happy, positive stories, not stories about Jack and Jill."

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The overall aim of all the instruction in the satellite program, Williams says, is "to make learning come alive." If the enthusiastic comments of participants are a good indication, that does seem to be what happens.

"I like everything about the program," observes Kamilah Jenkins, who says she "might be an architect or an engineer or a doctor." "I like learning new things — especially in math and science. I liked learning about how food goes through the esophagus before it gets to the stomach [as part of a lesson on the digestive process]."

"I liked it when we made magic pan cookies with coconut and chocolate [as part of a most popular measuring lesson]." I like it that there are lots of smart kids here."

Says George Kelly, speaking in the formal manner that seems his wont, "I like the idea of the program itself which is to learn about stimulating new subjects on a college/university setting that gives one an idea that one is actually going to college, gives new life to one's thoughts and makes one feel good." He leans forward intentionally, snaps his fingers as if to conjure up the exact expression he's seeking and continues: "We don't have as much work [assignments, homework] as in my classes during the school year. But the work we do here gives us thinking time."

That the program includes many stu-
Students who relish "thinking time" has a lot to do with its selectivity.

Students initially may be referred to the program by parents, teachers or other professionals. To qualify for further screening, they must submit their most recent standardized achievement test scores at or above the 85th percentile (nationally) in reading, math or science. They then must take additional tests designed to measure their IQ, their mastery of basic skills, their creativity and their self-concept. They also must rate themselves in the areas of learning, motivation, creativity, leadership and communication skills and submit the assessment of their current teacher about these same qualities.

All this information is then weighed by Williams and his staff ("put in a matrix," to use the educational jargon) who arrive at a total score to determine a child's eligibility for the program. Of 200 youngsters rated and assessed last year, 139 were accepted into the program.

About 510 children have participated in the satellite program during the past five summers. While most are the children of middle-class professionals, the program always has included children whose parents hold low-skilled jobs and some who are welfare recipients. "In those cases [of the poorer students] you'll often find relatives will put together the money for the program [$300 last summer] and, of course, we would definitely give those students [partial] scholarships," Williams says.

The fact that most of the children in the program come from middle-class homes is simply a reflection of the fact that they have parents who most easily can afford the program, Williams notes. "Black gifted children come from all socioeconomic backgrounds," he emphasizes, "not exclusively from the middle class, as many believe." As that Office of Education report bluntly asserted: "The assumption that the gifted and talented come from privileged environments is erroneous."

In determining eligibility for gifted programs, Williams believes the kind of multiple assessment approach the satellite program uses is crucial. While paying lip service to the multiple assessment idea, too many school systems rely almost exclusively on IQ scores and/or achievement test scores, he has found, and in the process many minority children get shut out. (Many educators have concluded that IQ tests are culturally biased. They also point out that achievement test scores, while important indicators of some aspects of learning, fail to take into account a child's academic potential.)

"So many minority children are underachievers," Williams says. "They are not achieving at the level of their ability. This could be because of problems in the home or it could be they are not being challenged in the classroom and not given information in a way that appeals to them so they become bored and may become discipline problems."

The language deficits many low-income minority children exhibit also can mask their giftedness or potential for giftedness, he believes. A teacher who hears a child say "I ain't got no books today" may automatically classify that child as "dumb" when that child could be highly intelligent but comes from an environment where no one knows or cares about the niceties of grammar.

Another factor accounting for the high ability/low achievement pattern shown by so many minority children, Williams suggests, relates to their low self-esteem. To do well academically, educators and psychologists repeatedly point out, children have to feel good about themselves. And too many Black children, internalizing negative white attitudes about Black people, do not.

Still another factor that has some bearing on the high ability/low achievement pattern is something most Black educators don't like to talk about publicly, afraid their views will be misinterpreted or misused. And that is a strong current of anti-intellectualism so visible in some corners of Black life. Consider, for example, the Black youth who ignore Black physicists, poets and physicians while idolizing flashy sports and entertainment personalities.

Teacher Annie Beard is one who isn't afraid to face the issue. "Unfortunately, I
think, too many people in our race are more concerned with being cool than being smart," she says. "Too often the very things that we as a group of people hold up to be desirable work against being bright — at least in terms of academics. You’re respected if you’re streetwise, if you can outslick someone. To carry books, even, isn’t considered cool."

Given such an attitude among some Black folks and given the racist attitudes still held by an awful lot of white folks that lead them to question the very existence of intelligent Black people, it’s no wonder some Black gifted children feel isolated. And that’s another reason participants and observers believe Howard’s satellite program for the gifted is so important.

As George Kelly remarks: "It makes it a lot easier whenever I go somewhere knowing that there are some kids who are in the same position as I am — who are Black, gifted and want to learn more. Here [in the program] you’re expected to be smart. Nobody’s surprised that you’re smart."

Indeed, the fact that almost all the children enrolled in the satellite program have been Black is viewed by many parents as one of its chief attractions.

"I was anxious for Kamilah to be around Black children over the summer who had an interest in academic achievement," says her mother, Wilhelmina Jenkins, a physics instructor at Howard. "There were not a large number of Black children in her class last year [in a racially mixed public school in northwest Washington] and I wanted to make sure she knew there were plenty of Black children who achieved very highly and were motivated. Otherwise, I was afraid she would get a slightly skewed viewpoint."

Jenkins’ 13-year-old son, Kosi, attended a residential program for gifted children at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore last summer. "Out of several hundred children," she says, "only two or three were Black. It was disheartening."

George Kelly’s mother, Margo — a computer specialist/information systems
Feizul Reza Ali, a student in the College of Medicine, leads a physiology class.

Feizul Reza Ali, a student in the College of Medicine, leads a physiology class.
Woodrow Lucas (left) and Marc Dancy examine parts of a fish they are dissecting. Their next dissecting target: the grasshopper beside it.

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Gulf Oil Corporation recently made a substantial grant to WHMM-TV, Howard University’s public television station. The sole purpose of the grant? To help finance the production and airing of “America’s Black Forum,” the university’s first national programming effort and the nation’s only black-produced television news show.

“America’s Black Forum” will air weekly on PBS stations, on 18 commercial stations and on Black Entertainment Television (BET), this country’s first and only black cable satellite network. The program will feature prominent civil rights, business, political and professional leaders. They will present, interpret and evaluate issues and data vital and relevant to blacks everywhere.

Of course blacks everywhere have long depended upon black-owned-and-operated media for accurate and unbiased news. Gulf, too, appreciates the importance of black media and of direct, straight-forward communication with the black community. This explains our past history of scheduling Gulf’s commercial and corporate messages in black newspapers and magazines. A natural continuation of this commitment is our sponsorship of “America’s Black Forum.”

We hope that our support of television station WHMM and of Howard University itself will attract additional and well-deserved corporate and foundation grants. That would suggest that Gulf is not alone in believing that “human energy is America’s greatest resource.”


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children to stay depressed at the same level? Why can't we develop those who have the ability to become leaders?

When the Howard educator goes on in this vein he seems to be voicing a modern version of the "talented tenth" idea advanced by W.E.B. Du Bois. In an essay published in 1903, Du Bois started out with these words:

"The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races."

And he concluded:

"The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men."

In her introductory notes to this essay in her volume, "The Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois," Virginia Hamilton acknowledges that the talented tenth idea constituted "one of the most misunderstood tenets of Dr. Du Bois' educational philosophy." "Many took Dr. Du Bois' essay, 'The Talented Tenth,' to mean that a learned elite should have control over the untrained and ignorant black masses. Nothing could have been further from the truth. For Dr. Du Bois, the finest achievement to which an educated black man could aspire was the leadership of his people."

James Williams shares this interpretation — and this belief. His own concern with helping gifted Black children maximize their potential so they can become future leaders dates back to the late '60s and early '70s. At the time he was working on his master's degree at Teachers College of Columbia University and his doctorate at the University of Iowa — both in educational psychology. [His undergraduate work was done at North Carolina Central University in Durham.]

"At Columbia and Iowa, the professors always presented child development as an area in which everyone was born with the same ability but by the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, minority children were way down on the [learning] curve," he recalls. "I heard that over and over and over again. And I just said, 'I don't believe this. If I ever get out of here [graduate school] I'm going to do something to change this trend.'"

The satellite program is a direct outgrowth of that resolve.

So, too, is the related Graduate Leadership Training Program for Gifted Education which also was started in 1979. The underlying rationale for that program is that a teacher with specialized training is better able to recognize, understand, challenge and aid gifted children. Consider, for instance, the motto frequently voiced at educational conferences: "It takes a gifted teacher to teach a gifted child."

Howard is the only predominantly Black university in the nation currently offering a graduate-level program in gifted education. "There are very few Black teachers being trained in gifted education, very few who have the credentials to enable them to work with minority gifted students," Williams says. "Even in an integrated school system, you'll find that teachers of the gifted are always white. It's a credentialing thing that always leaves us [Blacks] out. So if Howard doesn't do it [offer advanced training in gifted education], it seems like it might not get done."

The core courses in the curriculum are Psychology and Education of the Gifted, which examines the historical development of gifted education and deals with the characteristics, needs and identification of the gifted; Methods and Materials for Teaching the Gifted, which covers curriculum development for the gifted, with special emphasis on creating and using multi-ethnic teaching materials; and Supervised Practicum/Internship, which enables participants to translate theory into action by working directly with gifted students or with an agency or organization concerned with the gifted.

Many graduate students have met the qualifications for the practicum by working in the satellite program, either teaching or handling administrative details. So far about 20 master's degrees have been awarded through the program.

One of these recipients is Annie Beard who for 16 years has taught social studies at Browne Junior High School, located in a lower-income Black neighborhood in northeast Washington. "Over the years I noticed that we had some very exceptional children," she observes. "But I never really thought I was trained to bring out their best attributes in order to lift them to their highest potential. When I read about the Howard program, it seemed just what I wanted."

Convinced that her school needed a gifted and talented program, she enrolled at Howard for the 1981-82 academic year. "I wanted to make it popular to be smart," she explains. "Smart children never wanted anyone else to know they were smart. I wanted them to be proud they were smart. Another thing: I've always found there are all kinds of special rewards for people who are underachievers, but none for overachievers or the exceptional children. So I wanted to provide some special rewards for them."

Drawing on her studies at Howard and aided by a small grant from the District of Columbia school system, Beard established a program in her school that first identified gifted children and then grouped them together for more advanced offerings in math, English, social studies, science and computer science, while enabling them to interact with other students in other classes. The gifted students' teachers all received in-service training, while the parents — on their own initiative — organized to boost the program and raise funds for special activities.

Beard's experience setting up the pro-
program at Browne as well as her experience teaching in Howard's satellite program last summer has reinforced her belief in the necessity of programs directed at the Black gifted. "I think the whole point is we [Black people] have a lot of special children," she observes. "We really do. But I think a lot of them are turned off at a very very early age because they have no one to fight for them. It's just like that [United Negro College Fund] commercial goes: 'A mind is a terrible thing to waste.' I think we are wasting a lot of minds and I don't think we—as a people—can afford it."

Not surprisingly, Williams cites Annie Beard as an example of the type of student he hopes the Graduate Leadership Training Program for Gifted Education will continue to attract. "She's a mind-shaker," he says. "That's the whole idea. That's what I wanted to do: to get people in here who would be that type of leader."

But the graduate program is facing hard times. It had been supported in 1979, 1980 and 1981 by grants from the Office of Gifted Education of $95,000 the first year and $76,900 each for the second and third years. With the advent of the Reagan Administration and the consequent passage of the Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981, the Office of Gifted Education was dismantled and funds previously allocated for gifted education became part of block grants awarded to states to use as they saw fit. Many financially hard-pressed states saw fit to put programs for the gifted far down on their priority lists.

One consequence of all this was that Howard's funding for the graduate program was discontinued.

The elimination of the federal grant has forced the graduate program to reduce the number of teaching assistantships it could offer. Not only has this hurt the graduate program—by making it more difficult to recruit and retain students—but it also has hurt the satellite program. Previously each satellite class was taught by a regular teacher and a graduate student holding a teaching assistantship. But last summer the number of teaching assistants was reduced to three.

In addition, a major private donor who had given the satellite program $10,000 in 1981 and again in 1982 was unable to support the program for a third year. Money from this source had been used to award partial scholarships to low-income students or to those whose parents had more than one child in the program. Forced to rely solely on fees to operate the program, Williams was able to award only 43 scholarships last summer, compared to 75 the summer of '82.

To make matters even worse, a large number of parents waited until the very last minute to pay those fees. So it was that a few days before the program's anticipated June 27 opening, Williams was pacing in his office, puffing nervously on cigarette after cigarette and worrying out loud: "I'm playing it right up to Sunday night before Monday morning to know where we stand [i.e. whether enough parents would come forward with the money so the satellite program would be able to go forward as planned.] It's tough."

The scene had a happy ending, as we know. The program did go on—134 children and 13 teachers strong. But the happy ending shouldn't mask a pervasive reality: the need for outside funding for both the satellite and graduate programs remains critical. Funds are needed, too, to support research on Black gifted children.

"There hasn't been any major research on minority gifted students since the work Jenkins did back in the '30s and '40s," Williams says, referring to educator Martin D. Jenkins, a former president of Morgan State College (now Morgan State University.)

In a September 1936 article in The Crisis, for instance, Jenkins shared some of his findings from a study he made of gifted Black children in Chicago public schools:

1) "Where adequate opportunities are afforded for educational and cultural development, gifted Negro children are found with about the same frequency as are gifted white children."

2) "Gifted Negro children are typical gifted children. The typical gifted child is accelerated in school—he is young for his grade..., but he is always a voracious reader, exhibiting an intellectual curiosity which is seemingly insatiable."

3) "The superiority of gifted Negro children cannot be attributed to white ancestry... It was found that the group of superior children exhibits the same degree of race mixture as does the general Negro population. Most of the children are of predominantly Negro ancestry."

"The chief value of this study from the scientific standpoint," Jenkins reported, "is that it adds to the already abundant evidence that differences in intelligence are a matter of individual rather than of racial differences."

In numerous other articles, Jenkins examined such questions as the differences between gifted and average Black students; the backgrounds of gifted Black students; the problems they face (e.g. "The superior Negro youth is likely to become preoccupied with racial matters to the detriment of achievement in other areas."); and the need to encourage those with unique intellectual gifts (e.g. "The Negro group can ill afford to squander its intellectual capital; no group in America needs more to mobilize and utilize its most capable individuals."))

Williams' intent is to follow Jenkins' work by expanding the pioneering educator's Chicago research model. The raw data for Williams' studies will be drawn from the information he has assembled on some 750 children who have been tested for admission into the satellite program over the years. Thus has the satellite program assumed another important role: that of a laboratory for research.

The ultimate aim of his research, Williams says, "is to show that there are Black gifted children and that they come from all socioeconomic backgrounds."

Along the way he hopes to explore many related questions. Examples: What
role does family background play in the development of giftedness? What about birth order? What about the kind of activities children elect to pursue? What about child raising practices? Are there similarities in the child raising practices of an unemployed welfare mother with a high-IQ child, for instance, and an educated middle-class professional with a high-IQ child? How do you account for the discrepancy between ability and achievement shown by some gifted children? Can you pinpoint factors that seem to boost motivation for learning and those that tend to suppress it? Can a profile of a typical Black gifted child be drawn? If so, what does it look like?

Williams plans to take a sabbatical so he can begin to come up with some answers to these questions "in a scientific way, so the findings can be acceptable anywhere." "Until we put it [research findings] in the literature," he says, "there is not going to be a change in thinking about minority gifted people."

As it is, undertaking an ambitious research project and running both the satellite and graduate programs make for a very full agenda. Williams (who is also a husband and the father of three) is a man who seems to have time and patience for everyone — whether child, parent, teacher or visiting journalist. He is a man who seems composed of equal parts scholar, teacher and PR man and who plays each part with verve. He is, above all, a man driven by a mission, a mission to identify and nurture Black gifted children and to share with the world their value. Given all this, some of his supporters worry he'll burn himself out.

Last summer, as the satellite program came to an end and a new semester was soon to begin, an exhausted Williams was planning to get in his car and drive "anywhere" for a few days just to get away from it all for awhile. But he was soon back in his office, renewed and ready to do battle again.

"There are a lot of people in this society who still believe there are no minority gifted children — or that there might be one here and one there but that they are the exceptions to the rule," he said as he sat at his desk and pounded away at what has become his familiar refrain. "So that's why I can't wait to sit down and start to put some things on paper... 'cause I'm gonna show this country something!"