

The power of the *Minority* and the minority of *One*: Martin D. Jenkins' Legacy to Gifted Education

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Abstract

Following the enactment of the *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act 1988*, there was much research into educational provision for culturally different students. However, this research was not an anomalous or instantaneous development; rather, it resulted from decades of academic activism. One such scholar was Martin D. Jenkins. An African-American man, Jenkins was born into a Jim Crow-governed society where pedagogical philosophy was marred by the belief that black students were inherently intellectually inferior. Although a rich literature exists which examines Jenkins' life and works, these texts limit his work to the 'historical', thus ignoring the continued significance of his research in twenty-first century Australia. This article critiques the strengths and weaknesses of Jenkins' work and his enduring legacy to gifted education. It is argued that Martin D. Jenkins was a seminal scholar within the field of gifted education who highlighted key issues such as identification, cultural disadvantage and the need for tailored support and enrichment programs for gifted students. It is concluded that Jenkins' work, albeit underappreciated, is not only noteworthy within a historical context, but for its continued significance today.



Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that “all history is a record of the power of minorities and of minorities of one” (Emerson, 2010, p. 315). In the area of Gifted Education, this history has been earmarked by the struggle for recognition, funding and opportunity. This being said, focus must also be given to the plight of the minority within this minority: gifted students from different cultural backgrounds. Following the enactment of the *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act 1988*, research into educational provision for gifted students from different cultures was at an all-time high (Davis, Rimm & Del Siegle, 2011). This act may be seen as a catalyst within the history of gifted education for cultural minorities, yet this was not an instantaneous development; rather, it was the result of decades of research and academic activism. One such academic, who gives resonance to the latter part of the above quote, was Martin D. Jenkins. While a rich literature exists which documents Jenkins' life and work (see Davis, 2013), most of these works limit the significance of his research by minimising it to the ‘historical’. As a result, little effort has been made to assimilate the scope and findings of his work to the modern classroom context. This article will critique the strengths and weaknesses of Jenkins' work and his enduring legacy to philosophy, policy and practice within gifted education.

Education and academia

Martin D. Jenkins was born in 1904 in Terre Haute, Indiana. His family was one of the few middle-class African-American families living in Indiana at the time — his father was a civil engineer (Davis, 2013). Jenkins' early education was conducted in segregated schools as mandated by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling nearly two decades earlier which legalised segregated schooling on the basis that schools be “separate but equal” (Kaplan & Owings, 2010, p. 143). Needless to say this was not the case, with black schools characterised by “inadequately prepared teachers, poor facilities and poor educational opportunities” (Randolph, 2010, p. 366). Despite the tenacity of the Jim Crow system and widespread educational inequality, in 1919 Jenkins was accepted into Wiley High School, an integrated educational institution, where his athletic and scholarly ability quickly earned him esteem (Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993). After graduating with a Bachelor of Science from Howard University in 1925, Jenkins soon entered the graduate program at Indiana Normal School for Teachers. It was at this university where Jenkins not only discovered a passion for education and academia but also met his long-term colleague,

Paul Witty. After graduating with a Bachelor of Teaching in 1931, Jenkins worked as a teacher at Virginia State College before completing his Master's degree in education in 1933 (Davis, 2013). The following year, Jenkins co-authored his first study with Witty, an in-depth analysis of the educational attainment of a group of gifted African-American students (Witty & Jenkins, 1934).

Throughout his articles, Jenkins never explicitly stated what drove his keen interest in the education of gifted students; however, examination of his articles reveals a common conviction that the widespread belief in the inherent "[intellectual] inferiority of Negro children" was inaccurate (Witty & Jenkins, 1934, p. 585). This conviction resonates throughout Jenkins' first article in which he outlined three key arguments which would define his future work: that gifted black students existed, that their giftedness resulted from genetic and environmental factors, and that identification of gifted students was crucial to ensuring that their learning was supported and enriched, thus enabling them to realise their own potential (Witty & Jenkins, 1934). However, given the dearth of published accounts of gifted black students, Jenkins and Witty's research required them to conduct a systematic search for gifted students between grades three and eight in seven Chicago public schools (Witty & Jenkins, 1934). Although scholars such as Terman and Hollingworth had conducted similar studies into giftedness, Jenkins was the first to focus solely on giftedness in African-American students from comparable backgrounds (primarily middle-class) (Davis, 2013). This focus not only strengthened the internal consistency of his research, it avoided the questions of validity and data reliability that surrounded Terman's culturally diverse sample group (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011). It should be noted that Jenkins' research design did draw on Terman's work in the way students were identified (teacher nominations) and in the application of the Stanford-Binet IQ test. One of the most pertinent results of Jenkins' first foray into educational research was the discovery of twenty-six gifted black students. At the end of the study, Jenkins had identified and collected copious amounts of data about each of these students including information about their hereditary background, educational attainment, character/personality and interests.

Case study "B"

For Jenkins, one of the most inspiring outcomes of the study was the identification of a nine year old girl, 'B', with an IQ of 200 (Witty & Jenkins, 1934). Jenkins' excitement following the discovery of 'B' was compellingly obvious as, only shortly after the

publication of his first article, he co-authored and published an in-depth case study of 'B' with Witty (Witty & Jenkins, 1935). For Jenkins, 'B''s extraordinary IQ results in the McCall Multi-Mental Scale, Stanford-Binet test and the New Stanford Achievement Test (respectively) testified to the inaccuracy of claims that described "[the] Negro child ... as being inferior to the average white child" (Witty & Jenkins, 1934, p. 585). Moreover, 'B''s mother's testimonial that 'B' was of "pure Negro stock" with no record of white ancestry, provided Jenkins with further evidence (written in his trademark scientific style) of the fallacy of "white blood" theory or "the mulatto hypothesis" (Jenkins, 1939, p. 515). These theories centred on the belief that African Americans with white ancestors or "white blood" were "*inherently* mentally different from Negroes with less white blood" (Jenkins, 1939, p. 518).

Jenkins also emphasised the role which family support and 'B''s home environment had in enhancing her potential. However, when it came to schooling there was a severe lack of educational opportunities, which were restricted solely to acceleration — an option of which 'B''s mother disapproved. Jenkins' indictment of 'B''s school with regards to its failure to properly identify and nourish her giftedness aimed to illuminate the danger of scaffolding curriculum to meet the needs of students with average intelligence at the expense of high-achieving students.

It is unlikely that 'B''s case alone fuelled Jenkins' criticism of the American school system given that many other participants in his first study reported similar neglect. Nevertheless, the lack of educational provision and high expectations for gifted students are likely to have driven Jenkins' later assertion that the development and stimulation of gifted students "are both an obligation of and an opportunity for teachers of Negro youth" (Jenkins, 1950, p. 332).

A clinical approach

One of the most striking features common to each of Jenkins' articles was the strategic and scientific authority that pervaded his writing. Despite his obvious passion for gifted education and his abhorrence of the "mulatto hypothesis" (Jenkins, 1939, p. 515), each time he broached either subject he outlined it as a research hypothesis to be proven. In this way, each of Jenkins' papers was largely free of emotion and grounded in academic purpose. Only once did he address this tendency by drawing on the work of scholar T. R. Garth who argued that, in order to defuse the notion of inherent racial difference, "the problem must be attacked scientifically" (Jenkins, 1939, p. 511). This scientific, almost

clinical approach is most prominent in Jenkins' early work (1934–1939). However, when reading Jenkins' work it is also important to bear in mind the historical context in which he was writing: the Depression was in full swing, Roosevelt's 'New Deal' system had further decreased employment opportunities for unskilled workers (Hayes, 2001, p. 165), inter-racial tension was rife with white supremacists proclaiming the threat posed by "uppity niggers" (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2009, p. 55) and lynching remained an ever-present and lingering threat. Considering Jenkins' writing style in this turbulent socio-historical context further elucidates his reasons for not indulging in impassioned social commentary and, instead, opting for an academic, scholarly approach. First, the former was unlikely to achieve the desired attention and, second, it was even less likely to alter the obstinacy of institutions in which white supremacist discourse was gospel (Baker, 2007). Instead his approach to research design was levelled at increasing awareness of the need for specialist programs for gifted African-American students by judiciously disproving the racist (in the historical sense of the term; see Blum, 2002) dogmas that impeded such provision.

The problem with IQ testing

Although Jenkins' research design and methodological approaches were sound, the self-confessed weakness of his data lay in the use of intelligence testing. Since their inception, IQ-testing formulas have been at the centre of controversy, with questions of validity and reliability pervading research literature (Missett & Brunner, 2013). Many scholars have voiced their concerns regarding the shortcomings of IQ testing including the lack of acknowledgement of cognitive abilities such as executive function, planning and evaluation (Montgomery, 2009) and non-intellectual factors such as anxiety and/or emotional state (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2013). However, for Jenkins the flawed nature of IQ testing was rooted in the assumption of commonality and shared experiential knowledge among participants (Jenkins, 1939). For him, intelligence testing provided an inadequate measure of what was defined as intelligence according to hegemonic norms (Jenkins, 1939). Nevertheless, each of his research designs drew upon IQ testing either to identify or compare participants. While Jenkins' heavy reliance on IQ testing may have been due to the prominence of such tests at the time, his sustained reliance upon them raises questions about the reliability of his participant sample. That is, how many gifted students fell through the cracks because they were either not identified by their teacher or because they simply did not test well on the day? (Downs, 2013.) Despite this issue,

Jenkins was able to identify the shortcomings of contemporary intelligence-testing formulas as they did not take into account the division between the white and black community, cultural differences, discrepancies between participants' forms of capital (Sullivan, 2002), oppression and institutional racism and divergent habitus (Fruchter, 2007). In this way, in identifying the flaws of his own methodology, Jenkins also indicated a key flaw in the way that culturally different gifted students are identified.

Jenkins' legacy

As mentioned earlier, one of the key flaws within the few sources of modern biography about Jenkins is that they represent his work as fundamentally historical, something to be recounted (see Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). The problem with this view is that restricting his work to the past overlooks its transcendental potential. In reality, Jenkins' legacy is just as important today as it was at the time of publication. Jenkins' work proved that giftedness is as much about educational opportunity as it is about genetics and the child's environment (Jenkins, 1948). With regard to educational provision for culturally different students, educational opportunity means that specialised programs must be developed in close collaboration with a child's parents and caregivers. Just as Jenkins identified the key role 'B''s mother played in her development and in nurturing her giftedness, he also identified the importance of family (Jenkins, 1934), peer, community and school support (Jenkins, 1950). While this may seem like common knowledge within modern gifted education research, it is important to remember that, at the time Jenkins was writing, gifted education was still emerging as a field of research, whereas gifted education for students from diverse cultural backgrounds was barely heard of (Jolly, 2009). In this way, Jenkins was, indeed, a pioneer within gifted education who was able to suggest pragmatic solutions for the identification and enrichment of culturally different gifted students, including teacher development and training, financial aid to support retention rates in higher education, vocational guidance and counselling for maximising student potential, and the development of appropriate curricular provision (Jenkins, 1950).

One of Jenkins' key legacies to gifted education was his enduring academic campaign not only for increased identification of gifted black students but for educational institutions to properly scaffold curriculum and teaching to suit the individual learning needs of these students (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). Jenkins justified the need for this differentiation on the grounds that, although African-American youth generally

encountered similar problems to their white peers, their situation was further complicated by the “racial factor” (Jenkins, 1950, p. 324). Jenkins’ argument, that black youth typically have “special social and emotional needs different in degree ... and in kind from those of the youth population as a whole” (Jenkins, 1950, p. 324), still has resonance today in regards to issues such as poor retention rates, underlying climates of racial prejudice and disproportionate socio-economic disadvantage (Harris, 2010). However, in saying this, Jenkins was not suggesting a homogeneous, one-size-fits-all approach for culturally different students; rather, he stressed the fact that different “environmental experiences create for every individual child a unique problem pattern and a unique needs pattern” (Jenkins, 1950, p. 324), an idea that is reflected in modern educational provision such as Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) and models such as the Levels of Services (LoS) approach (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011). In terms of pragmatic strategy, Jenkins highlighted the need for educators to be reflective practitioners, using their professional and experiential knowledge to facilitate various experiences that stimulate their students to engage in “independent and creative work” (Jenkins, 1950, p. 329).

Jenkins’ significance in other contexts

In twenty-first century Australia, Jenkins’ work does have significance for educators. Although Jenkins’ work was focused on giftedness in African-American students, his arguments and strategies can be used to assess and accommodate the needs of a range of gifted students from subaltern backgrounds and cultures. However, Jenkins’ argument with regard to teacher *expectations* of students has particular pertinence (Jenkins, 1950). It has been well documented by a range of contemporary scholars that prejudice and stereotypical beliefs about ‘the other’ (conscious or not) have a capacity to cloud a teacher’s ability to identify giftedness in students from different cultural backgrounds (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011; Lansdowne, 2008). These backgrounds may include Indigenous students, students from different cultures, students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) and students with disabilities. Each of these groups is largely underrepresented in gifted programs, a fact which may be attributed to poor teacher awareness, a lack of identification strategies and cultural bias regarding what constitutes ‘intelligence’ (Baldwin, 2004). This situation too may be linked back to Jenkins’ identification of the flaws of intelligence testing due to the reliance of the tests on hegemonic (primarily white, Anglo-Saxon) perspectives on intelligence and how it is measured (Jenkins, 1939). Indeed, in his final scholarly article dealing with giftedness,

Jenkins stressed the need for further research into giftedness in African-American youth and for schools to develop “functional testing programs” designed to assist in identifying these youth (Jenkins, 1950, p. 328). It is simultaneously heartening and poignant to consider this statement sixty-four years later: on the one hand, there exists a wealth of literature devoted to gifted education yet, on the other, culturally different students continue to remain underrepresented in gifted programs (Harris, 2014).

When considering Martin D. Jenkins' work, possibly the most disheartening aspect is the way it is (or is not) remembered. After completing his case study of ‘B’ with Witty, Jenkins went on to gain his doctorate with his dissertation also focusing on giftedness in African-American youth. Following this achievement, he continued his academic career taking up several posts at different universities before being offered the position of President at Morgan State College (Davis, 2013). Throughout the twenty-two years he worked at Morgan College, Jenkins remained firm in his conviction that the college should be integrated and actively secured the establishment of scholarships to increase retention rates for students from poor socio-economic backgrounds (Davis, 2013). Over time Jenkins' focus shifted to higher education and urban affairs until he eventually retired in 1970 and became the Urban Affairs Director for the Council of American Education (Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993). Jenkins died eight years later from complications following a heart attack (Davis, 2013).

Despite the transcendental relevance of his articles and their continued significance today, Jenkins' contribution to gifted education has gone largely unnoticed in the annals of gifted education. Indeed, Kearney and LeBlanc went so far as to describe him as a “forgotten pioneer” whose work “was quickly marginalised at the edge of a field and may eventually vanish” (Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993, p. 199). Fortunately their prophecy has not yet come true with the aid of digital commons. Nevertheless, it is a saddening notion that a man who dedicated most of his life to dispelling (or at least correcting) the blinding force of racial prejudice has had – if we are to accept Kearney and LeBlanc's theory – that same prejudice trigger the very diminution and collective ignorance of his seminal work. It is therefore imperative to identify the importance of Jenkins' work and its continued significance today.

Concluding remarks

The implementation of the *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act 1988* marked the beginning of an era of intense scholarship into provision for culturally

different gifted students (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011). However, the enactment of this act and the scholarship that followed was not an isolated event; it was the result of the plethora of research conducted by scholars fighting against a tide of educational rhetoric which aimed to sideline gifted education on the grounds that the gifted student “needs no special provision, he will take care of himself” (Jenkins, 1950, p. 328). One such seminal scholar was Martin D. Jenkins. Despite having grown up in an era of deep-seated segregation, oppression and turbulent race relations, Jenkins proved himself as an eminent educator and scholar with a passion for advancing the plight of African-American students. To restrict the significance of his work to the past would be a grave injustice. Jenkins' work continues to have relevance today, educating scholars, teachers and policy-makers about the needs of culturally different students, the necessity for better forms of identification and the need for ongoing, tailored support and enrichment programs. In this way, Martin D. Jenkins' legacy to gifted education is one that has not diminished with years but remains just as pertinent today. Thus, if Emerson was indeed correct and history is a record of the power of minorities then, in regards to gifted education for culturally different students, Martin D. Jenkins was an integral and seminal author of this history.

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