

FOR SOME EDUCATORS AND LEGISLATORS, THE IDEAL CLASSROOM SITUATION MAY BE ONE IN WHICH NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND: ALL CHILDREN MEET CERTAIN GRADE-LEVEL REQUIREMENTS AND MASTER A MINIMUM SET OF COMPETENCIES. BUT, FOR DR. JULIA LINK ROBERTS, MAHURIN PROFESSOR OF GIFTED STUDIES, FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR GIFTED STUDIES, AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE GATTON ACADEMY OF MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE, THAT SCENARIO SETS THE BAR TOO LOW. NO CHILD MAY BE LEFT BEHIND, BUT, AS ROBERTS NOTES, "FOR ANY KID WHO IS AT PROFICIENCY OR ABOVE, THERE IS NO PLACE TO GO, IF THAT'S WHERE INSTRUCTION IS FOCUSED. CONSEQUENTLY, IT IS A TERRIFIC IMPEDIMENT TO LEARNING." THESE ARE THE GIFTED AND TALENTED CHILDREN ON WHOSE BEHALF ROBERTS, A DISTINGUISHED UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR, HAS ADVOCATED DURING HER CAREER.

Roberts' career began as a middle school teacher in Kansas City, Missouri, and Stillwater, Oklahoma. It was during this time that she was offered a chance to teach literature to gifted students in the summer, an experience that had a profound impact on her. Shortly thereafter, she began an Ed.D. program at Oklahoma State University, receiving her degree in 1970. Dr. Roberts then came to WKU in 1974, working for several years with grants before joining the faculty in what is now the School of Teacher Education, where she continued her work in the field of gifted and talented education.

"Gifted and talented" is a federal designation that refers to children who demonstrate high achievement capability in one or more of the following areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, or the visual and performing

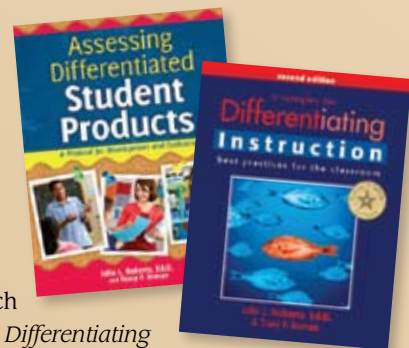
No Potential

BY JEANNE SOKOLOWSKI



arts. Roberts also describes them as marked by their pace of learning and desire for a complexity of content. Much of Roberts' scholarly writing addresses this question: How can teachers create a classroom atmosphere in which lessons are differentiated in order to allow all students to make continuous progress? With Tracy Ford Inman, she has coauthored two books which offer answers: *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices for the Classroom* (2nd edition) (2009) and *Assessing Differentiated Student Products: A Protocol for Development and Evaluation* (2009).

As Roberts and Inman note, several obstacles hinder the creation of a differentiated classroom: lack of time (to find resources and do the additional planning required); lack of instruction for teachers on how to differentiate; and a lack of understanding about how gifted children learn and develop. Many teachers subscribe to the myth that gifted children will somehow succeed on their own.





Super Saturdays students

the Summer Program for Verbally and Mathematically Precocious Youth (VAMPY), hosted since 1984 in cooperation with the Duke Talent Identification program. In addition, The Center also runs the Summer Camp for Academically Talented Middle School Students (SCATS), and during the academic year, coordinates Super Saturdays, which allow gifted students in grades one through eight a chance to learn outside of the regular classroom setting. It is the SCATS camp which serves as the setting for the practicum required of those graduate students working toward a gifted certification.

Left Behind

Roberts' scholarly publications provide much-needed resources for teachers; she also runs workshops on differentiation in the classroom. Her teaching at WKU — where gifted certification is offered — helps fill the gap in instruction for teachers in south central Kentucky and beyond. Western Kentucky University is the only institution in the state which has offered that endorsement sequence continuously since 1982, and teachers can complete the required practicum here, as well. And her tireless efforts at advocacy for gifted children include efforts to educate teachers and the community about the special needs of these talented students.

One of the most impressive of her accomplishments is the creation of The Center for Gifted Studies. Dr. Roberts and then-dean of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, J.T. Sandefur, brainstormed the idea for The Center in response

to public interest. What began as a series of informal talks with other deans, parents, and teachers eventually became The Center in its current form. Opened in 1981, The Center, which is self-supporting through tuition, fees, grants, and endowments (like the Mahurin Chair which Roberts holds and the Berta gift which funds an annual professional development seminar), is now in its 29th year.

Several programs are available for gifted children through The Center for Gifted Studies, including

The SCATS, VAMPY, and Super Saturday programs all offer valuable opportunities for gifted and talented children to interact with their intellectual peers, Dr. Roberts notes. These programs, she adds, are filled with a diversity of children from all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Most significant, however, is the fact that interaction with others who are both their age mates and their intellectual peers provides these children with a comfortable and stimulating experience. These are children who

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have not only unique cognitive needs, but special social and emotional ones, as well.

What is it like for a gifted child in a regular classroom, where she may not be able to fully realize her talents? “Well, it’s lonely,” Dr. Roberts explains, “and if you’re not careful, children think something is wrong with them because they don’t see the world the same way as their peers.” Gifted children are sometimes forced to act as tutors to struggling peers; Roberts is quick to point out that research has shown that this doesn’t cultivate empathy in gifted students, nor do their peers who are struggling to learn the material view them as role models. In these instances, Roberts says, “you really

WKU provost and president, and the dean of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences for The Center. And it’s worthwhile to note that Roberts is the type of person who makes things happen when it comes to gifted and talented children. She has a passion and a talent for advocacy and building long-term relationships with those in charge of the allocation of local and federal funds. Her advocacy skills were recognized by the National Association for Gifted Children in 2001 when she became the first recipient of the David W. Belin NAGC Advocacy Award.

Another of her projects which recently came to fruition is the Gatton Academy of Mathematics and

Science in Kentucky. Though it took about ten years to become reality, Roberts persisted in her efforts to get the Academy up and running. While the idea for a statewide residential school for math and science for gifted high school students was not a new one — the North Carolina School of Mathematics and Science has been around for thirty years now — securing support for an institution like this, funded by the state budget, required continued advocacy, and a good relationship with lawmakers and others in decision making positions. Luckily, she and Jody Richards, then Speaker of the House, shared a commitment to bringing the Academy to Kentucky. It opened two years ago, the fourteenth school of its

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take a peer relationship that’s already a little strained and exacerbate it.” In fact, she adds, when gifted children move to other instructional settings (separate classes or different schools altogether), this opens up opportunities for other students, and new leadership emerges from the children remaining in the classroom.

Her concern for the spectrum of needs of gifted children fuels her dreams for the future of The Center for Gifted Studies. “I’d love for this to be a counseling center for children and their families,” she states. “And I’d like for us to be able to offer assessment capabilities.” Though not possible yet due to staffing limitations, Dr. Roberts gratefully acknowledges the support of the



Julia Roberts speaks at a Javits grant press conference



SCATS students walk past the Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science in Kentucky

kind in the United States, and Roberts marks the dedication ceremony as one of the most significant moments of her career.

Dr. Roberts has also experienced great success in the realm of grant proposal writing. She has been the co-director of five Eisenhower Math and Science grants, co-director of one Field-Initiated Research grant, and principal investigator of three Jacob K. Javits grants, including the current one entitled Project Gifted Education in Math and Science (GEMS). The Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program is the main source of federal funding for gifted services and programs. The Javits legislation was successfully passed in 1989, due in large part to the advocacy efforts of Roberts with former Congressman William H. Natcher of Kentucky, whose vote as Chair of the Appropriations Committee was decisive in getting that legislation through. Roberts notes that the Javits grants have provided funds for much needed research about gifted education with a focus on children who have traditionally been underrepresented, and funding for services for children who are gifted and



The Gatton Academy

talented. Her current Javits grant will focus on identifying and providing services for gifted math and science students in six local elementary schools.

Other projects in the works include a book she is co-writing with her daughter, Julie Roberts Boggess, who is an elementary school librarian in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee. They were invited to put together a survival guide for first year gifted resource teachers. Roberts is also hard at work lobbying for Equity in Excellence, federal legislation aimed at helping gifted kids from low income families. And a responsibility and an honor has recently been bestowed on Dr. Roberts: her election to the Executive Committee of the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children. Roberts is one of seven representatives, and the only one from the United States.

With her long list of accolades and accomplishments, the Council would have been hard-pressed to find someone better suited to work on behalf of these special kids. Julia Link Roberts' life and career is a testament to her own gift for leadership and service. ■