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Developing the Potential of the Gifted Reader

The advanced literacy development of most gifted students is an indication of an advanced ability to process language to obtain meaning. Cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists, in their examination of the reading process, have provided some new insights into how readers read to obtain meaning. Applying these insights to the gifted reader can help us understand the process and enhance the teaching of reading.

Gifted Reader Defined

Gifted readers are defined as students who have been identified both as gifted and as reading on a level two or more years beyond their chronological grade placement. Criteria for giftedness vary from school program to school program. For the purposes of this discussion, a gifted child is one "whose performance is consistently remarkable in any potentially valuable area" (Witty, 1940, p. 516). Note the emphasis on performance as opposed to a measurement of IQ, achievement, or creativity. Such an emphasis is appropriate for providing specific direction for classroom instruction. In addition, performance is easily recognized by the classroom instructor.

The emphasis on performance in identifying gifted readers requires an additional clarification. A distinction should be made between a gifted reader

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and a good reader. Clark's (1979) distinction between a high achiever and a gifted student can be applied to the difference between a gifted reader and a good reader:

While there can be no certainty as to clear distinction in every instance, gifted children usually exhibit the ability to generalize, to work comfortably with abstract ideas, and to synthesize diverse relationships to a far higher degree. The high achiever generally functions better with knowledge and comprehension level learning . . . they lack the range and diversity of the gifted. (p. 22)

Many students read well, some in advance of grade level, and can benefit from most of the reading process discussed and the instructional suggestions provided in the following pages. However, the distinction between the gifted reader and the good reader becomes apparent when the expected outcomes of the reading process are examined. The gifted reader is quick to integrate prior knowledge and experience with text information, is comfortable and productive in the application of higher level thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) to the written text, and is capable of communicating the outcome of this individualized processing of print.

Gifted Characteristics and the Reading Process

The gifted reader may intuitively develop reading skills prior to formal instruction or may learn to read at an accelerated pace after entering school.

By the time the gifted reader has reached the upper elementary or secondary level, cognitive processing or linguistic interaction with print is occurring at a sophisticated level even though the reader may not be conscious of the behaviors or their applications.

The gifted reader may not be able to verbalize or analyze the reading process, exercise conscious control over reading skills, or even identify specific behaviors as the same as those taught within the basal reading series. For example, a gifted reader may fully understand difficult and/or new vocabulary via the use of specific reading behaviors such as use of context cues, rereading, association with prior experience, and others. Yet the reader may not be able to identify those behaviors or describe how the vocabulary meaning was derived.

However, characteristics of giftedness, such as those identified by Clark (1979) as "differential cognitive (thinking) characteristics of the gifted" (see Figure 1) play an integral part in the high level of reading performance displayed by the gifted reader. The interplay of these cognitive characteristics of giftedness facilitates the processing of printed language to construct meaning. Those characteristics interact with each other in a symbiotic relationship.

For example, the characteristic identified as "high level of language development and verbal ability" provides for quicker and more advanced comprehension on all levels, but especially the applied level of comprehension as the gifted reader

Figure 1. Differential cognitive (thinking) characteristics of the gifted (Clark, 1979, p. 163).

- extraordinary quantity of information
- unusual retentiveness
- advanced comprehension
- unusually varied interests and curiosity
- high level of language development and verbal ability
- unusual capacity for processing information
- accelerated pace of thought processes
- flexible thought processes
- comprehensive synthesis
- early ability to delay closure
- heightened capacity for seeing unusual and diverse relationships
- ability to generate original ideas and solutions
- early differential patterns for thought processing
- early ability to form and use conceptual frameworks
- evaluative approach to themselves and others
- persistent, goal-directed behavior

picks up on cues within the language used and responds to meaning created by the author's selection of specific words. "Flexible thought processes" and "comprehensive synthesis" allow the gifted reader to process print rapidly and respond to, react to, and evaluate the author's message. The "heightened capacity for seeing unusual and diverse relationships" enriches the reader's perception of the conceptual frameworks and allows the gifted student to associate prior knowledge and experience with what is being described in the text.

As a result of the interaction of these cognitive characteristics in reaction to the print being processed, the gifted reader may read faster and understand more. The interaction of personal knowledge and values with the message put forth by the author creates a personal response in that the literal statement read assumes an individual meaning and interpretation based on the reader's personal interaction with the text. "Reading, at least for the gifted reader, has become more than simple word decoding; reading has become an interactive process of different knowledge sources within the reader and within the print" (Wingenbach, 1983, p. 9).

The Gifted Reader and the Reading Process

The gifted reader in the early grades, but especially by the upper elementary, middle, or secondary grades, processes print fluently using cues both within the text and within self. Gifted readers go beyond learning to read and, instead, *read to learn*. These students have progressed beyond the skill acquisition stage and, in fact, no longer rely on reading skills commonly taught in the early grades such as word attack through syllabication or phonetic sounding out. Rather, they have internalized their own word attack processes and intuitively use root words, prior experience with words, context cues, receptive/expressive vocabulary knowledge, and other strategies to identify words or word meaning. As Smith (1971) states, "The beginning reader has to acquire special skills that will be of very little use to him once he develops reading fluency" (p. 3). These readers have quickly progressed to reading fluently.

The gifted reader processes text for immediate comprehension, going directly from visual features to meaning. This reading process utilizes a variety of syntactic and semantic cues in the language of the text, specific comprehension strategies such as anticipation, and the interaction of the reader's prior

knowledge and experience with the author's message.

Gifted readers, early in their reading development, require emphasis on mature comprehension skills as opposed to the usual basal series reading skills of the elementary level. The basic reading skills to which students are introduced in the early elementary grades focus on bottom-up or data-processing procedures which involve mechanical decoding such as unlocking letters, words, and sentences. The gifted reader has intuitively progressed beyond this emphasis to a level of reading which incorporates bottom-up and top-down processing and leads to reading comprehension rather than just reading or word calling.

At the same time, the gifted reader contributes meaning to the text by top-down processing (applying prior knowledge or experience, inference making). As indicated by cognitive psychologists' research, the reader applies other knowledge sources to the information presented visually (Anderson, 1977; Brown, 1977; Johnson, 1981; Pearson & Johnson, 1972).

Anderson (1977, p. 4) provides an example of bottom-up/top-down processing using a sentence developed by Bransford and McCarrell (1974) which can be easily processed bottom up in terms of word recognition and syntactic structure: "The notes were sour because the seams split." The sentence does not make immediate sense to most people from the top-down perspective. Still missing is the ability to *infer* the subject, to *anticipate* exactly what "notes" or what "seams" are referred to, or to *imagine* the object of the sentence. When the word "bagpipe" is added to the sentence so that it reads "The notes were sour because the seams of the bagpipe split," the top-down processing occurs, using inference, anticipation, and image.

Gifted readers generally process text top down, adding their own knowledge and experience. Teachers of reading should be aware of how much information is added by the reader and that it may at times interfere with literal level understanding. Gifted readers need experience in recognizing how much information is added to the text. Instruction in critical, creative, and inquiry reading techniques will provide this experience.

Comprehension Skills

Gifted readers employ specific comprehension skills such as anticipation of meaning based on visual cues, organizational patterns of text, and syntax. Goodman (1970) explains reading as "a

psycholinguistic guessing game" which involves an interaction between thought and language. Goodman continues:

Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from skills in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time. The ability to anticipate what has not been seen, or course, is vital in reading, just as the ability to anticipate what has not yet been heard is vital in listening. (p. 260)

For instance, commas setting off appositives are recognized as signals that supplementary or complementary information will follow; the appearance of "however" signals that some exceptions to what has just been stated will follow; organizational patterns such as cause and effect signal the need to look for two related descriptions, circumstances, or facts (e.g., "Because I slept late, I missed my bus.").

A second comprehension skill involves reader and text interaction through use of prior knowledge and experience, personal identification, and reader purpose. Reading comprehension as a process has been viewed as:

. . . building bridges between the new and the known. . . . Comprehension is active not passive; that is, the reader cannot help but interpret and alter what he reads in accordance with prior knowledge about the topic under discussion. Comprehension is not simply a matter of recording and reporting verbatim what has been read. Comprehension involves a great deal of inference making. (Pearson & Johnson, 1972, p. 24)

A gifted reader who is interested in history, has previously read and discussed various perspectives of World War II, and knows that a test will follow a reading of a social studies chapter on Germany during the late '30s and early '40s will comprehend the text on a variety of levels from literal to applied as interaction of prior knowledge, identification of interest areas, and purpose for reading occur.

A third comprehension skill involves the reader's awareness of the cognitive processing of text for information/concept gathering. "In part, literacy development involves learning how to get information from a text and to communicate information through a written text" (Bloome & Knott, 1984, pp. 1-2). Literacy development involves going beyond text for meaning by creating a personal interpretation based on concepts learned and schemas developed through previous reading in combination

with previous experiences. The individual's interaction of prior knowledge and experience with the text directs the interpretation of meaning which results from reading. Recognition of this personal interpretation is a part of the control readers exert over their reading process.

The awareness of cognitive processing as applied to the reading task is defined as "metacognition." "The emphasis in metacognitive studies is on how people take control of their own learning and regulate their attention and integrative efforts to comprehend new ideas and concepts" (Guthrie, 1982, p. 512). Gifted students in the process of literacy development have developed and do control specific reading strategies which are implemented as needed in the reading process. Gifted readers are also metacognitively aware of the activities incorporated and controlled within their reading process, although they may not be able to name or label the activities properly.

In Wingenbach's (1983) study of gifted readers, three categories of specific reading strategies were acknowledged as available for text comprehension. These categories and their components are as follows:

- I. Word-related strategies
 - A. use of context
 - B. synonym substitution
 - C. stated failure to understand a word
- II. Context-related strategies
 - A. use of rereading
 - B. use of inference
 - C. stated failure to understand a clause
 - D. use of information about the story
- III. Meaning-related strategies
 - A. personal identification
 - B. addition of information
 - C. hypothesis/anticipation
 - D. imagery

According to Babbs and Moe (1983) these types of skills and strategies "have long been taught by reading teachers as comprehension, critical reading, and study skills" (p. 423). Gifted readers appear to intuitively develop and use these comprehension strategies early in their reading development while the general reading curriculum does not emphasize these strategies until intermediate or secondary level. Gifted readers do, however, need reading instruction which sharpens and refines these intuitively developed skills.

Needs of the Gifted Reader

The typical school environment is not organized to accommodate the needs of the gifted reader. Even though each grade level or classroom usually has students assigned to low, middle, or high groups, such organization still may not meet the needs of the gifted. Their superior cognitive skills may mean that they far surpass other students in the highest group in their ability to analyze, interpret, and comprehend reading material.

In addition, great emphasis is placed in the elementary grades on decoding and low-level comprehension skills. According to Trezise (1978), the first principle in teaching reading to gifted children is that instruction in the basic word-attack skills should be kept at a minimum or, in the case of children who come to school already able to decode words easily, should scarcely be taught at all. Word-attack skills are a means, not an end. Once students have mastered them, as evidenced by their ability to read fluently, the spending of years learning and applying labels and definitions for the skills is a rote and meaningless waste of time. In fact, gifted students who begin school eager to continue learning through reading may soon decide that reading is not so much fun after all. The "system" has, however inadvertently, managed to squelch their excitement and enthusiasm for reading. And yet, strangely enough, much time and effort is devoted by the schools to trying to find ways to motivate reluctant readers!

Durkin (1981) cites a great void in the teaching of comprehension skills—the area where gifted readers should be spending their time. Questions tend to be at a low, seek-and-find level. Any attention to higher level activities concentrates on assessment and practice rather than actual instruction. Students may be asked to distinguish between statements of fact or opinion by putting a "yes" or a "no" in front of each statement without any time having been spent *teaching* the difference between the two types of statement. Endless workbook pages may continue the practice and assessment of this skill with no transfer to real-life applications. Teacher guides which contain lengthy explanations of how to teach decoding skills provide little or no direction in the teaching of high-level comprehension skills.

Teacher Fears

Teachers generally seem to be guided in their teaching of reading to the gifted by two fears. The

first is the fear that students will not develop the skills necessary for decoding unfamiliar words in the future. This is reflected in comments such as, "Sure, she can sound out words in the third grade, but what about when she gets to more difficult words in high school?" One would assume, however, that if the student has the ability to use decoding skills at one point (intuitively or however), she will most likely continue to have the same ability.

This fear seems to be guided somewhat by the teacher's dependency on the reading text and an attitude that if the publisher feels a particular skill is worthy of five years of review and practice it must be *really* crucial to reading success. Teachers must not hesitate to deviate from the text with all their students, average or gifted. No single textbook or single book of any kind can satisfy the rich literary talents or needs of the gifted (Gallagher, 1975).

In deviating from the text, the conscientious teacher is also likely to be faced with the fear of using another teacher's materials. Curriculum decisions are often made not according to what is the best reading program for a child, but by what the next year's teacher will say or do if one uses his/her materials. The gifted reader's reading program must accommodate advanced reading skill and interest. This means teachers must recognize the need for these students to move rapidly through materials, to have reading interests far beyond those of other students at their grade level, and to have a great need to debate and discuss their reading selections. Teachers must be willing to work cooperatively to accommodate these needs and interests.

Underachievement in Reading

The Marland (1972) report states that, as a group, the gifted are the most educationally deprived youngsters in our schools. While one might challenge this statement, when the actual ability of some of these students is compared to the level of instruction provided, a great gap is discovered. Stanley (1976) points to the need for more difficult tests to measure achievement at higher levels. A third grade student taking a third-level achievement test may easily score at the 99.9 percentile, telling the teacher nothing. The teacher could learn much more from a higher level test since it would uncover deficient skill areas.

The tendency to underestimate gifted students' reading ability is indicated by Harris (1970, p. 215). A 12.2-year-old sixth grade student with an IQ of

140 should be *expected* to read at the 10.2 grade level. Anything lower could be considered underachievement. This does not mean that the teacher of such a student must get high school sophomore-level books to accommodate the student's needs. It does mean that the skills and concepts addressed in the sixth-grade reading text will, at the very least, need to be supplemented by more advanced material.

Teachers often respond to the voracious reading habits of the gifted by assigning a written or oral report on each book read. Although book reports can serve a useful purpose, they are limited if they are devoted to merely stating characters, setting, and events. Even book discussions can be limited in value for the gifted reader if the teacher does not use appropriate questioning strategies. One high school student, commenting negatively on her senior literature seminar, said she had read the novel assigned with great interest and could not wait for the class discussion. However, the majority of the discussion was limited to what, when, where, why, or how something happened. This student had hoped to be able to share her own insights about characters, motives, word connotations, etc. Excitement on her part turned to disappointment.

Parents may also respond inappropriately to their children's reading achievement. A parent of a first grader worried that her daughter did not seem to enjoy reading as much as she had as a four- and five-year-old. She recounted how she had made her daughter read to friends and relatives who visited their home. One particular skill worthy of exhibiting to all was the child's ability to read a book while holding it upside down. Any attention to level of comprehension or quality of books selected by the child was not mentioned.

The needs of gifted readers must be taken seriously to avoid their being forced to plod along, reading material ridiculously below their level. Gifted readers are too often forced into underachievement by the schools (however well-meaning the schools may be in their programming) and are too often the only ones who recognize that a problem exists.

Meeting the Needs of the Gifted Reader

Trezise (1978) discusses curricular modifications necessary for meeting the needs of the gifted reader. The fact that the gifted reader enters school already reading or masters reading skills rapidly upon entering school requires a difference in the timing and pacing of their reading instruction. They

are ready for certain kinds and levels of instruction earlier than the average child. In addition, they are able to move through the materials much more quickly.

Because of their advanced cognitive abilities and interest in ideas, theories, and the abstract, gifted readers will desire to go deeper into ideas, to talk longer and in greater depth. They respond best to instruction when it is less tightly structured and allows for independent learning and critical thinking. The whole learning situation may have to be restructured to accommodate the enthusiasm and wide range of reading interests.

A program for the gifted reader should include concentrated work in three types of reading—critical reading, creative reading, and inquiry reading. Each of these requires different skills and responses by the reader.

Critical reading skills can be grouped into six basic areas: inference, assumption, deduction, interpretation, prediction, and evaluation. Critical reading does not occur automatically. A reading program which resorts to merely asking that the students read *more* books may broaden their background but does not necessarily provide skill development. Instead, students may be more appropriately asked to select and read books according to themes such as jealousy or good overcoming evil. They might read by author, comparing and contrasting style, motive, etc. They might elect to become an expert on a particular author or poet by reading biographies of the writer and searching for articles which offer new or contrasting information on the writer and his/her times. This activity might culminate in the student developing a creative presentation on the writer.

The types of material used may help to vary a critical reading program. While fiction is often analyzed in the upper grades, there is a notable lack of evaluation of more expository material, such as newspapers, news magazines, and research findings. Since these materials are necessary for efficient, informed living, they should be a basic part of a critical reading program. The combination will provide variety as well as the opportunity to transfer skills from one type of material to another.

Creative reading may be regarded as the highest and most neglected aspect of reading (Torrance, 1965). It involves synthesis, integration, application, and extension of ideas. A story may be dramatized through the use of music, dance, or visual arts, or a character or theme may be developed in a new and different way (Boothby, 1980).

Crucial to creative as well as critical reading is vocabulary development. Studying figurative language, connotations, and etymology can enrich the vocabulary of the gifted. These skills can be provided through any number of activities. Students may be asked to rewrite a fairy tale or nursery rhyme as a news item or from another point of view. Students might rewrite a story substituting multi-syllable or unfamiliar words. Thus "The Three Little Pigs" becomes "The Minute Porcine Trio." What better way to get students using a thesaurus and dictionary?

Older students could, while reading a historical novel, make predictions concerning what might have happened if a particular event had occurred somewhat differently. Or, they could explore how the reporting of a particular event might have varied if it had been written from the point of view of a female rather than a male.

Inquiry reading is also important for the gifted reader. Using this method of reading, students can conduct research on a topic of interest to them and develop their reading and writing skills in a meaningful context (Cassidy, 1981). Pupils are encouraged to choose a topic, do the necessary reading and research, and communicate their findings to others. This process makes *reading to learn* a reality for those who have already *learned to read*.

Gifted readers should have experiences which increase their metacognitive awareness. Metacognition involves knowledge and control of one's own cognitive process (Catron, 1984). Students who are aware of what they are thinking and the strategies they are using are better able to guide and control their own reading behaviors (Wingenbach, 1983). Teachers can facilitate metacognition by helping students identify reading strategies and determine when they might be used effectively. They might ask the students to recall strategies they used as they read a particular assignment. If, for example, a teacher is able to help a student identify strategies used while reading and to consider their effectiveness, the student may be able to respond more efficiently with appropriate reading strategies in the future.

Conclusion

Gifted readers often either begin reading long before entering school or are able to master reading skills with great ease and speed once they have entered school. Their superior abilities require modifications in their reading program if they are to

achieve their potential and their time in school is to be productive.

Curricular emphasis for these students should be on reading to learn rather than learning to read. Decoding skills should be minimized if taught at all. Comprehension skills should be emphasized through critical, creative, and inquiry reading. Reading for the gifted should provide opportunities for expanding previously developed comprehension skills, for building a rich vocabulary, and for becoming thinking people who look beyond the printed word as they read.

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