

Gifted Readers and Reading Instruction

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Children who have exceptional ability in reading and working with text information are considered gifted readers (Mason & Au, 1990). Gifted readers read voraciously, perform well above their grade levels, possess advanced vocabularies and do well on tests (Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 1991). They usually have advanced language abilities in comparison with children of the same age. They use words easily, accurately, and creatively in new and innovative contexts and speak in semantically complex and syntactically complicated sentences (Bond & Bond, 1983).

Their cognitive ability mirrors their language ability and therefore, the cognitive abilities of gifted readers vary from the norm. Those gifted in reading have a unique ability to perceive relationships, solve problems, demonstrate observational skills, and to grasp abstract ideas quickly (Witty, 1971).

Cognitive needs of gifted Children

Clark (1983) outlined cognitive needs that differentiated gifted children from others:

- To be exposed to new and challenging information about the environment and the culture.
- To be exposed to varied subjects and concerns.
- To be allowed to pursue ideas as far as their interests take them.
- To encounter and use increasingly difficult vocabulary and concepts.
- To be exposed to ideas at rates appropriate to the individual's pace of learning.
- To pursue inquiries beyond allotted time spans.

Many children later identified as gifted enter school knowing how to read. Approximately half of the children classified as gifted by intelligence tests could read in kindergarten, and nearly all of them could read at the beginning of first grade (Burns & Broman, 1983). Their reading abilities develop naturally, without formal instruction, in home environments where literacy is valued and language usage is encouraged (Durkin, 1966). They have been immersed in a print-rich environment and have "puzzled-out" for themselves how to read (Teale, 1982).

Gifted readers are so advanced that they have little to gain from the reading materials and activities normally given to others of their age and grade. They require far less drill and

practice than their peers (Witty, 1985). Gifted readers have special needs just as other exceptional learners do. The greater the ability in reading, the greater the need for a special program commensurate with that ability (Hoskisson & Tompkins, 1987; Wallen, 1974). Gifted readers benefit from special programs and may be penalized if not provided with special attention to help achieve full potential (Tuttle, 1987). In short, they need the same diagnostically based instruction that should be afforded to all learners (Bond & Bond, 1983; Carr, 1984; Rupley, 1984).

Features of programs for gifted readers

A major concern of teachers of reading is providing quality differentiated instruction for the highly able readers in their classrooms. A logical means for providing such instruction is ability grouping. Gifted readers should be grouped together so they can feel safe in verbalizing and sharing their insights (Sakiey, 1980). Students grouped by ability for reading instruction were found to have increased understanding and appreciation of literature.

Guidelines for working with gifted students

Researchers, (Bartelo & Cornette, 1982; Bagaj, 1968; Cornette & Bartelo, 1982; and Sakiey, 1980) have presented some general guidelines for working with gifted students:

- Instruction in basic word attitude skills should be kept to a minimum
- Challenging materials should be made available, especially to young gifted readers
- Instruction should facilitate critical and creative reading
- Use of analogies should be studied, especially in classes for older gifted students
- Inductive, rather than deductive instruction should be provided
- Flexibility in assignments should be provided
- Unnecessary repetition in instructions should be eliminated
- Students' divergent and diversified interests should be nurtured
- Independent projects such as sociograms, time machine models, newscasts, games based on story themes and simulation role-playing activities should be encouraged

Shaughnessy (1994) recommended expanded literacy activities for the gifted. Guest speakers in the classroom, creative writing and connecting books with television or movies are examples of recommended activities.

Four general options are available to meet the needs of gifted students: (a) special classes or schools for the gifted, (b) accelerated programs (skipping grades), (c) mainstreaming gifted students in regular classrooms, and (d) enrichment programs for mainstreamed gifted students (Schwartz, 1984).

Acceleration and individual enrichment

Two avenues available to meet the needs of gifted readers in the classroom are reading acceleration and individual enrichment (Johnson, 1987). Reading acceleration involves placing students on their instructional level in reading without regard to grade placement. Enrichment involves delving deeper into reading material at the student's grade level.

Reading programs for the gifted should take into account the individual characteristics of the

children, capitalize on the gifts they possess, and expand and challenge their abilities. Tasks should be commensurate with ability and achievement.

Renzulli (1988) recommends that activities for the gifted emphasize higher level thinking skills, controversial issues, and less structured teaching strategies. Polette (1984) suggested heavy emphasis on the following factors: higher cognitive levels of thinking, critical reading, vocabulary development, wide exposure to literature, productive thinking, imaginative thinking, visualization, exploration of values, and a language arts approach. Frezise (1978) advised rapid pacing and timing: "going deeper" into a topic, less rigidly structured learning environments, and provisions for critical thinking, reading and writing.

Model reading programs for gifted learners

Specific instructional programs for gifted readers vary from school to school and district to district. The most common programs specially designed for the gifted are described below.

The triad enrichment model (Renzulli, 1977) provides gifted children with the opportunity for self-directed reading and independent study. The enrichment triad consists of three types of activities: (1) Exploratory activities in which students investigate avenues of interest and then decide on a topic or problem to study in depth, (2) activities in which students are provided with the technical skills and thinking processes needed to investigate the research topic or problem selected in step one, (3) investigative activities in which students explore their topic or solve their problem through individual or small group work. Students then develop an end product that reflects their learning.

Inquiry reading (Cassidy, 1981) also enables the gifted reader to conduct research on topics of interest. In this four-week program for grades three and up, students select a topic, carry out research, and present their finding to others. The approach can be used by classroom teachers during the time usually reserved for basal reading instruction.

Trevis (1984) recommended that teachers have gifted readers read and discuss literacy classics as part of the Junior Great Books Reading and Discussion Program. Junior Great Books is a highly developed, structured program encouraging careful reading of complex materials. Discussions of the readings are designed to be challenging and interesting and to focus on the universal themes that are present in the books.

Other recommended instructional models for gifted readers include AIME (Swaby, 1982), reading-strategy lessons (Goodman, Burke & Sherman, 1980), DRTA (Bates, 1984) and vocabulary development through literature (Howell, 1987).

Conclusion

Gunning (1992) provided an excellent summary of the characteristics of a model program for gifted reader:

To grow intellectually, gifted students need challenging books. They need fiction with complex plots and carefully developed characters, and informational books that explore topics in depth. They should read books and periodicals that spark

their imaginations, broaden their horizons, and cause them to wonder and question.

Equity demands that the exceptionality of gifted readers be recognized and that appropriate programs designed to meet their unique needs be made available. All students, including those gifted in reading, deserve an educational program designed to help each individual achieve his or her full potential.

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