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# THE GIFTED READER

Dr. Carolyn Cummings

With recent state allocation of funds for the education of the gifted and talented, there has been, and will continue to be, an increase in public school programs for students identified as gifted and talented. As a professional organization, the Michigan Reading Association needs to study the issues related to reading and giftedness and needs to be able to offer sound professional advice and guidance to local district personnel who are dealing with programming for these students.

The issues of identification of the gifted reader, differentiated programming, acceleration, motivation and teacher preparation will be discussed briefly as those among the issues that need to be addressed.

Bonds and Bonds (1980) define the primary gifted reader as, *"Children who, upon entering first grade, are reading substantially above grade level or who possess the ability to make rapid progress in reading when given proper instruction."* They further state that these children should exhibit interest, persistence and motivation for reading. Others in the field of reading more simply identify gifted readers as children reading two or more years above their

chronological age placement or grade level.

It is important to note that all gifted children are not early readers and that **all** early readers are not gifted. However, a review of the literature shows a high correlation between giftedness and learning to read early. Terman's (1925) study revealed that nearly half of the children in the study could read prior to kindergarten and that six percent could read before the age of four. Witty (1971) reported that fifty percent of the gifted children he surveyed learned to read early; some as young as age three. A survey conducted in 1983 by the Midwest Talent Search showed that more than 85% of the junior high age students who scored high on the SAT had been early readers. The Astor Program for Gifted Children (ages 4-8) in the New York City Public Schools administered the reading section of the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) as part of their admissions procedure. Students were between the ages of four years and five years and seven months of age at entry. Fewer than six percent were at the readiness, prekindergarten or kindergarten stages of reading. Over half (58%) were reading at first grade level, and the remaining 36% were reading from the second to the sixth grade level.

The implications from these reports suggest the need for reading readiness and reading assessment to be a part of even the earliest identification procedures for gifted programs for young children.

In addition, it emphasizes the need for appropriate differentiated instruction to begin at school entry. Most of these students are beyond the usual kindergarten readiness programs which stress auditory and visual



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discrimination and teach alphabet recognition.

In an article by Brown and Rogan, "Reading and Young Gifted Children," in the February, 1983 issue of the **Roeper Review**, the authors not only stress the need for differentiated programs, but also discuss the fact that these 'natural readers' are encouraged to become group-oriented and state that, *"For primary level gifted children who have already begun to read, modification towards the mean represents a serious regression."*

In order to maintain their enthusiasm and interest and keep them motivated, we must look beyond the regular reading program.

In considering programming for young gifted readers, we might look at what research tells us about how gifted students learn.

Gifted students as a group learn faster and more efficiently than others. Spache (1973) states that, *"These children do not require the measured pace of the basal program, the cumulative repetitions and the careful doling out of new words...isolated drill and repetition of skills outside of the literary context is viewed as boring and irrelevant."* Virginia Ehrlich (1982) as Director of the Astor Program states that *"Neither teachers no principals are ready to recognize the fact that the gifted child is not going to spend all year on one book, doing one page a day, and that many levels and many books per child are required for each grade."* This, she says, is one of the hardest facts to sell to a school system. Gifted children consume materials at a tremendous rate.

The Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (K-ABC), a new individually administered measure of intelligence and achievement of 2½ to 12½-year-old children, focuses on the mental process a student used rather than content, knowledge or learning rate. The authors suggest implications for reading instruction based on whether the student demonstrates simultaneous processing strengths ("right brain," Gestalt) or sequential processing strengths ("left brain," verbal, analytic). The information from the assessment could be useful in matching the approach to teaching reading to the gifted learner.

There are a number of learning-style or learning-preference instruments for older children such as Torrance's, *"Things Done on Your Own,"* and Renzulli and Smith's, *"Learning Styles Inventory."* Ann Boultinghouse (1984) recently designed an inventory for early elementary students. Students rate 27 different tasks or activities that they encounter in their primary classrooms. These tasks are part of nine different learning styles. Data collected from 700 students showed that gifted children liked independent, divergent, student-controlled activities. Inventories of this type could be helpful to teachers in providing differentiated challenging programs for the gifted reader that utilizes the reader's preferred learning style.

An issue in programming that is of continuing concern is that of acceleration. A number of authorities suggest acceleration alone is not satisfactory. The level of interest of the material or the topics may not suit the student. Passow (1982) suggests that in using only acceleration, the child may not have time to *"Reflect, savor, play around with ideas and create."* The alternative is to work on the breadth and depth of the subject or horizontal development. While there is no argument about the fact that teachers must be certain the student has mastered all skills necessary to being an accomplished reader, this usually can be done in a short period of time with direct instruction. In an address at the 1980 International Reading Association's annual conference, Charles Voluse of Xavier University stated, *"The independently-generated spontaneous reading prior to instruction is often highly efficient and attempts to redirect students through scope and sequence of skill development and is often antiproduative. It tends to interfere with the naturally acquired reading behaviors and diminishes self-esteem."* Several days or pages spent on each skill is unnecessary.

The goal of the teacher, then, would seem to be to determine the acquisition of comprehension skills, functional reading skills, literature, knowledge and reference skills as a basis for planning for the horizontal development of the reader.

Part of the earlier definition of a gifted reader was that the students show an interest, persistence and motivation for reading. Yet



we are told frequently that many gifted students have negative attitudes toward reading. The principal of an elementary school for the highly gifted states that one of the biggest problems related to reading in her school is the lack of a love for reading by many students. It has been suggested that because gifted readers have few problems with decoding and comprehension, teachers spend little time developing interest and purposes for reading and this may be detrimental and demotivating to the student. Martin (1984) provides a number of suggestions for teachers on selecting reading materials, designing prereading activities, providing challenges and identifying attitudes and interests of students.

Because a student is a good reader, we cannot assume he will love reading. Teachers need to realize the need to include this objective in programs for gifted readers as well as other readers.

A final issue to be considered is related to teacher preparation. In a survey of 150 school districts conducted by John Mangieri and Faye Madigan, one of the findings was that the regular classroom teacher was responsible for the majority of reading instruction to gifted students. In addition, little or no staff development was allotted by the school districts to upgrade the teachers' proficiencies in this area. I would suspect that a survey of Michigan school districts would not show very different results. As a professional organization, the Michigan Reading Association needs to continue to provide written materials, workshops at conferences and to work at being leaders in conducting research and promoting the best practices and materials to teach reading to the gifted. It must also promote the need for professional development for the teachers of gifted readers.

Providing differentiated, age appropriate, challenging and motivating reading programs for the gifted reader requires consideration for the students' learning rate and mental processing style. One needs to consider the students' choice of learning style and the students' interests and attitudes. Gifted readers need both professional expertise and commitment by those responsible for their reading instruction.

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