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What Are We Doing For The Gifted Child In Our Reading Programs?

by Robert L. Trezise, State of Michigan Department of Education

For the past decade or so a tremendous effort has been made to improve the reading skills of students who are reading poorly. Considering the massive numbers of students who are woefully deficient in reading skills, there is no question that we have needed to focus our attention on this group of academically handicapped students. However, in providing for the educational needs of these boys and girls, it is equally important to not neglect the reading needs of youngsters who are reading *above* grade level.

Indeed, although gifted and academically talented students are almost inevitably good readers, this does not mean that they do not have special needs in regard to reading instruction. As a matter of fact, the more highly gifted the student, the more likely that the regular reading program will be inappropriate for him or her.

Given the fact that gifted and academically talented students have special reading needs, what can we say about appropriate reading programs for these children?

Back in the 1920's, Terman found that close to half of the large number of gifted children he identified were able to read when they started school; and it is still true today that many bright children almost magically learn to read at home before they go to school. It seems obvious — but nonetheless it must be said — that when children can already read, they do not need to plod through the primers with the rest of the students. Yet, sad to say, this is exactly what many gifted youngsters are required to do, apparently under the assumption that even though they can read, they must still learn the reading rules.

But a first grader who can read does not need to “learn” work attack skills, consonant blends, and the like — he already knows these things. Decoding skills are, after all, not an end in themselves, but a means to an end. It is no wonder that when gifted children who can read are made to stay with the other children in the room in reading lessons, they very soon turn off from school and often become embittered and rebellious students as they plod along through the grades.

But beyond this, it should not be assumed that simply because a child is reading beyond grade level he does not need reading instruction. Reading programs for children who are gifted and academically talented need to include objectives that focus on such matters as getting them to read more widely, more critically, more creatively (a current IRA publication by Michael Labuda is called *Creative Reading for Gifted Learners*), and perhaps more rapidly. These children should be encouraged to become more familiar with the best children's authors (the last issue of the *Journal* had an excellent list by Jane Bingham of children's literature titles); they should learn to make inferences about what they have read; and they should be assisted in relating their reading to their own attitudes, feelings, and values.

Most important, though, gifted and academically talented students should be given ample opportunity to discuss what they read, preferably in small groups and with students — perhaps from other grades — who have similar intellectual ability. In conducting such discussions, teachers, aides, or volunteers should take pains to ask lots of

open questions (questions to which there are no given answers) and questions that do more than elicit low-level, factual recall. To use Bloom's terminology, good questions to use in discussing what gifted students have read will encourage the youngsters to apply what they've read, and to analyze, to synthesize, and evaluate it. The Junior Great Book discussion guides are a good source of appropriate questioning strategies to use with these youngsters, and so are the Taba materials. In general, there is surely no better way to increase the reading skills of gifted youngsters — reading skills in the broadest sense — than by having them do a great deal of talking about what they have read in small groups that are led by a discussion leader who knows how to ask questions at a high cognitive level. The quality of student discussions is, after all, pretty much determined by the quality of the teacher's questions.

Further, since we live in a virtual Golden Age of children's literature, it would be difficult to imagine a good reading program for gifted students that did not draw very heavily upon the wealth of trade books that are available — if not through the school

library, then through the state library. What better way to organize a reading program for talented readers than to have a group of students read books around a similar theme — let's say maintaining one's individuality in a conforming society (a common theme in children's books) — and having them discuss this theme from the standpoint of various authors?

Suffice it to say, then, that when we formulate objectives for reading programs, set up reading labs, or design district-wide Right to Read plans, gifted and academically talented students should not be forgotten. As a matter of fact, under the Reading Support Services program (section 43), it is perfectly possible to include objectives for these children. And Reading Support Services teachers who function as consultants should surely be prepared to render assistance to classroom teachers in helping them to meet the needs of their gifted readers, as well as the needs of those children who are in need of remediation.

Gifted and academically talented children have special and unique needs in terms of reading instruction. These needs should not be overlooked.