
The Gifted, Reading, and the Importance of a Differentiated Reading Program

A Presentation By
Dr. Bob Seney, Professor Emeritus/Gifted Studies
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rwseney@muw.edu

Many, if not most, gifted students are already strong and motivated readers. Too often, this has proven to be to their disadvantage and as such they have not received appropriate, differentiated instruction that will move them from being proficient readers to expert readers. Reading instruction for the gifted is often non-existent and their reading needs simply are not being met. Reading, just like any other subject or skill, requires special guidance and instruction. The task – and instruction – quite simply – is different. It is important to provide appropriate reading instruction that will move the reader into more sophisticated reading and at a much deeper level. In this session, we will review the unique needs of the gifted reader; provide a framework based on research and best practices that include a literature based approach, writing in response to literature, and moving readers into the “personal art” of reading.

Goals of This Session:

1. Present a brief understanding of the concept of differentiation *for the gifted*;
2. Review the unique needs of gifted readers;
3. Provide a framework for a reading program based on research and best practices that include a literature based approach, writing in response to literature, and moving readers into the “personal art” of reading.

Differentiation

Some Observations:

- Differentiation is a concept and strategy that still has **not** yet come into its own! We have not yet realized *The Future of Differentiation*, especially for the gifted.
- Today the common and popular use of the term, “differentiation,” has been reduced to “something different.”
- There is more differentiation being accomplished for low achieving students than gifted students.
- In earlier definitions, the concept of *qualitative modification* was important and this was the **most** significant element.
- The original intent or the purpose of this strategy, as used in gifted education, was to design curriculum and instructional opportunities that sought to meet the individual needs, abilities, and interests of each gifted student.
- This should result in using enrichment, acceleration, and rigor in providing individual academic challenge.

- It is important to recognize that *differentiation for gifted students* is different from general classroom differentiation.
- A current understanding of *Differentiation for Gifted Students*:

Differentiation for gifted students does not mean simply giving them more activities to do that the learner may see as more of the same (what we call "MOTS"). Instead, the content focuses on advanced concepts and complex ideas, and learners use strategies (step-by-step tasks) and thinking skills with greater degrees of sophistication. Indeed these students should be using the tools of a practicing professional – a disciplinarian – to produce authentic products that have value to a real-world audience. This all takes place in an environment that builds students' intrinsic motivation to take on more responsibility for their own learning; that is, they become autonomous learners.

Diane Heacox and Richard Cash (2014, p. 14)

- Heacox and Cash: *Differentiation for Gifted Learners: Going Beyond the Basics*.
 - ✓ Their rationale for this approach is based on current brain research:
 - Gifted students have more neural connectors in their frontal cortex;
 - Gifted learners process information more quickly;
 - Gifted learners are able to make complex connections between ideas and thoughts;
 - ✓ This approach provides an optimal strategy for gifted students allowing them to take advantage of their basic natures and skills and points them to study issues that are of importance to them.
 - ✓ Allows for more authentic learning: Real life problems – real life solutions.
 - ✓ Encourages them to move to more in-depth thinking to sort, categorize, and generalize into abstract concepts the great amount of facts that they have “naturally” acquired.
 - ✓ What might this look like? Students take the role of a professional and research areas of their interests. In this way, students not only learn the skills of that profession or discipline, but they have the opportunity to view issues through the lens of a specific professional. They produce real life solutions.

Who are Gifted Readers?

A Quick Review of the Literature suggests:

1. They have a passion for reading;
2. They learn to read earlier often spontaneously in preschool;
3. They learn to read independently soon after classroom instruction begins;
4. They read better (advanced reading abilities) and at a faster rate;
5. They read materials beyond the norm for their age;
6. They have an advanced and large vocabulary;
7. They require less drill – **if any** – to master techniques of the reading process;
8. They read longer;
9. They read a greater variety of literature;
10. Their reading interests differ considerably from their age group;
11. They are more likely to branch out from realistic fiction to fantasy, historical, fiction, and biography.
12. They continue to be voracious readers into senior high and adulthood.

[From my “Quick” Review of the Literature: Halsted: 2009; Gross: 1994; Hawkins: 1983; Whitehead: 1984]

This suggests that gifted readers have unique reading needs:

1. Regular reading instruction is often too easy for gifted readers and may well turn them off reading or make them “lazy” readers.
2. Basal reading programs do not meet their needs.
3. Instruction in basic word attack skills, simple comprehension, etc. is not necessary.
4. Instruction should be focused on the reader’s ability; the level of difficulty should match their ability.
5. The focus should be on developing higher level comprehension skills.
6. Instruction should be based on the study of literature.
7. Reading material must have appropriate challenge.
8. Reading material should “speak” to the readers’ interests.
9. Reading material from a wide variety of genres should be made available.
10. Book discussions, book conferences, and book circles have proven to be very effective with gifted readers: An opportunity for response and interaction with others and the text!

[Again from my “Quick” Review of the Literature]

*“...a reading program for gifted and talented readers should emphasize **reading to learn** rather than **learning to read**, then program goals should be differentiated from those of beginning or struggling readers.”*

Patricia Wood

Consequences for Reading Instruction:

- Obviously the basal reader with its emphasis on word attack skills, vocabulary study, comprehension drills, etc. is not appropriate;
- Consider three basic concepts:
 - Use literature to supplement or better yet **replace** basal texts;
 - Form discussion groups based on books:
 - Go beyond plot and fact questions
 - Focus on themes and style
 - Use higher level questioning strategies: Think in terms of **Depth: Conceptual Thinking** (Factual, Procedural, Conceptual) combined with **Complexity: Creative Thinking** (Recall, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, Create)
 - Follow discussion formats from programs such as the *Junior Great Books’* Shared Inquiry Method, which focuses on interpretation.
 - Many novels have discussion guides at the end: One very good example with higher level, interpretative questions is Avi’s *The Book Without Words* (2005, Hyperion Books). The two activities are good but need to be “elevated” for gifted readers.
 - Provide instruction in the study of literature at an early age;
 - Teach the *Elements of Literature*
 - Discuss the different *Methods of Analysis*
 - Use Rosenblatt’s *Level of Responses*
 - Teach the *Response Analysis Approach*.
- Provide reading guidance: Students often do not know what good, appropriate, and challenging literature is best for them.
- Know the reader and know books: *Then Make the Match! Appropriateness and Challenge are the keys!*

My Suggestion for Selecting Literature for Younger Readers *BUT* always remembering that we must first read all literature and remember the interests of the students for whom we are selecting books [Basic criteria: appropriateness and challenge] is to look at Young Adult Literature. We must also recognize that some YA Lit will be inappropriate and that typically YA Lit ranges from about 6th grade through high school.

Our Goal for Readers:

- Is to help every single reader, especially gifted readers to become skilled, passionate, habitual and critical readers.
- Nancie Atwell calls this stance “The Personal Art of Reading.”
 - This involves helping readers to choose books, develop and refine their literary criteria, and carve out identities for themselves as readers.
 - The goal is that every reader is able to say: “These are my favorite authors, genres, books, and characters this year, *and this is why.*”
 - Personal preference and choice make up the foundation for reading to become a *personal art*.
- This begins early in the life of the reader and continues through high school.
- If reading comprehension – *the making of meaning* – is your concern, then be aware that the only delivery system for reading comprehension is **reading**.
 - Most so called strategies for reading comprehension are actually study skills [finding main ideas, supporting details, causes and effects, plot events, settings, character motivation] and research shows they don’t always transfer to reading.
 - These skills are highly appropriate for non-fiction in which we want our readers to “carry away” information but they intrude upon *the life of the story* and they may hamper the love of literature.
- Nancie Atwell’s extensive research and work with readers have produced this list of “conditions” to motivate readers and to help them move into their “reading zones”:
 - Book talks and mini-lessons;
 - A large, diverse classroom library;
 - Quiet, daily in-class time to read;
 - Readers’ free choice of books, authors, and genres;
 - Recommendations of books from friends and teachers;
 - Comfort during in-class reading time;
 - Students’ letters to the teacher and friends (in lieu of book reports, essays, etc.);
 - Individuals’ conversations/conferences with the teacher about their reading;
 - Individuals’ lists of books they want to read someday;
 - Homework reading of at least 30 minutes every night.
- Observation: *Notice that reading as a personal art doesn’t contort or clutter the landscape with reading activities....* (Atwell, 2007: page 17)
- All of this underlies and supports my approach that we must understand our readers, understand a wide range of literature, and be familiar with appropriate literature and ***Make the Match!***

The Reading-Writing Connection

Nobody but a reader ever became a writer.

Richard Peck

Writing is a natural and necessary outgrowth of literary study.

Alex T. Gruenberg

By reading literature often and widely, students more readily learn to write...Reading and writing are similar process of composing meaning; practice with one contributes to the success of the other.

Rebecca Olness

Two Concepts:

1. The primary reason for exposing learners to quality literature is for its aesthetic value; a secondary benefit is its influence on student writing.
2. By reading literature often and widely, students more readily learn to write.

➤ Calkins (*The Art of Teaching Writing*)

- The reading-writing connections begin when teachers help children fall in love with a single poem, book, or essay.
- When a book means something to a reader, we can ask:
 - What did the author do to make us laugh?
 - What does the author tend to do?
 - How did the author create that effect?
 - Can I borrow any of these techniques in my own writing?

➤ Olness (*Using Literature to Enhance Writing Instruction*)

- Your students' writing will only be as good as the classroom literature that surrounds it.
- Reading aloud by teachers provides powerful models for students' writing.
- "While enjoying a story, students hear the language of good writers, are exposed to rich vocabulary and develop literary awareness." [A sense of story.]
- Use authors as mentors. Encourage students to find their favorite author and then use as a model in their own writing.
- Teach *Audience as Focal Point*.: "Consideration of the audience's identity helps the writer to focus on many elements of his or her writing."
- Have students keep a notebook for ideas, thoughts, reactions, and words. Don't call it a journal!
- Use a variety of good books in the classroom.
- "Immersion in literature is one of the best ways to encourage students to write in a particular genre."
 - Students who read realistic fiction, know how to end story, use plot and character development and resolve conflict.
 - Students who read nonfiction are able to organize text and illustration to express information clearly.
 - Students who read "how to books" are able to give explicit and sequential directions.
 - Students who read newspapers and magazine articles are better equipped to write factual and concise reports.
- Literature is a natural way to explore new vocabulary: "...most vocabulary is learned through reading or listening to others read."
- Don't forget that picture books are a great way to illustrate writing techniques and style. Picture books are not only for the very young.

[Based on Rebecca Olness (2003)]

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