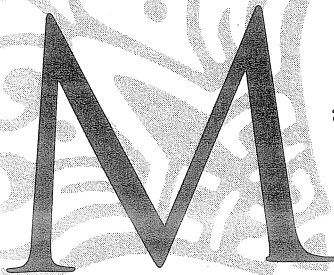


## CHAPTER 18

# READING INSTRUCTION



any gifted students come to school already reading. Others come with the potential to develop their reading skills quickly. Traditional practices and materials do not promote the development of deep and enthusiastic reading among capable readers. To support and broaden their reading, talented readers need early individualized assessment, skill instruction based on that assessment, and many opportunities to read a variety of literary genres.

## WHAT WE KNOW

Research on reading for able learners was prolific in the 1980s and 1990s. A picture of gifted readers, from precocious young children, to gifted elementary and middle school students, to advanced readers of adolescent age, was established. How to choose appropriate books, how to teach using classic and contemporary literature, and how to develop reading skills and an eagerness to read were studied. More recent research

has built upon these understandings to place reading in the models and curricula of today's schools.

Many talented students are gifted readers. Studies show that up to half of gifted students entering the first grade are exceptional readers, reading from one to three grade levels ahead of their age-mates (Bonds & Bonds, 1983; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, Hughes, & Boyce, 1996; Witty, 1971). Bonds and Bonds suggested that primary gifted readers are those 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" (p. 4). Moreover, such students further demonstrate a strong interest in and motivation for reading. According to Brown and Rogan (1983), "intellectually gifted children almost by definition are good readers" (p. 6). Other gifted students may not be early readers, but have the potential for high performance given appropriate instruction.

### *Interest in Reading*

There is evidence that capable readers lose interest and enthusiasm for reading as they progress in school. Martin (1984) investigated the reading attitudes of 124 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, 41 of whom were classified as gifted. One in five of the gifted students expressed negative attitudes about reading. Students cited uninteresting and unchallenging assignments associated with reading instruction and lack of choice in selecting what they read as reasons for their dislike of reading. Further evidence of the decline in reading attitudes as talented learners progress through school was reported by Anderson, Tollefson, and Gilbert (1985), who evaluated the questionnaire responses of 276 gifted students in grades 1-12. They investigated attitudes toward reading assignments, reading workload, and preferences for recreational reading. They found that younger students read more for pleasure than older students and that their interests in reading were not significantly different from average ability readers: They held a preference for fantasy, mystery, and adventure. Anderson and her colleagues also reported that girls indicated more interest in leisure reading than did boys, and that older gifted students found their reading assignments easy and tediously long. In a later study, Henderson, Jackson, & Makumal (1993) noted that although reading lessons are often labeled by gifted students as being easy, some of the readers had gaps in their skills and were not able to make the necessary analysis connections and interpretations in what they read. Teachers have often reported that very able students do not always mentally attend to instruction that seems "easy," and thus, miss vital instruction that they do, in fact, need.

### *The Needs of Talented Readers*

The literature has focused on the importance of the initial primary experiences of gifted readers for setting the tone for their future approaches and

attitudes toward reading. Students who enter school reading at considerably higher and more sophisticated levels than the rest of their classmates require special, advanced instruction to meet their needs (Gross, 2004; Jackson & Roller, 1993). Brown and Rogan (1983) and VanTassel-Baska (1998) strongly advocated that differentiated instruction must begin in the primary years and be continued throughout the school years. "Keeping gifted children plugged into the regular reading program frustrates and often destroys their belief that their schools and all the wonderful books found there were going to be exciting and joyful" (Brown & Rogan, p. 6). Differentiated reading instruction includes expanded vocabulary study, exposure to quality materials of fiction and non-fiction at the appropriate level of difficulty, and activities that capitalize on students' problem-solving and creative abilities. Opportunities for developing and applying higher level thinking skills through content that engages the reader on many levels, questioning strategies, discussion, written assignments, and sharing ideas with students of similar skills and interests are important components of appropriate instruction (Bailey, 1996). In essence, the requirement for reading instruction to be enriching, challenging, paced appropriately for the gifted student, and built on books that serve as a means for achieving these instructional goals has not diminished (Bonds & Bonds, 1983; Brown & Rogan; Coleman & Cross, 2005; Feldhusen & Van Tassel-Baska, 1989).

### *Basal Reading Programs*

Despite the growth of alternatives, the traditional means of reading instruction in grades 1–8 in most schools continues to be a basal reading series. Advocates of basal reading programs have always viewed the complete package of books and supplementary materials as the heart of any reading program and the best way to ensure the mastery of skills required for independent reading (Aukerman, 1981; Carnine & Silbert, 1979). However, basal programs provide a structured system of instruction that is aimed at the average student in the grade level, and these systems do not provide modifications radical enough for precocious readers (Ellsworth, 1992). In Thompson's (1996) work using classics for reading instruction, he recalls and confirms Ganopole's (1988) belief that controlled-vocabulary basals and other sequenced skill programs actually fragment learning and are thus detrimental instead of helpful.

Caldwell (1985) reported that 80–90% of the reading programs in elementary schools used basal readers; in 2005, Education Market Research (EMR) reported the number to be 75%. In 1984, Mangieri and Madigan investigated 150 school districts and found that the same basal series was used for talented, as well as grade-level, readers; in 2005, the information from EMR showed that the five most-used basal programs had no text for advanced readers. The amount of attention given to gifted readers has been minimal. Aldrich (1996) searched commercially published textbooks for language arts resources of high

quality for gifted readers, and described what she found as a "scanty collection of worthy materials" (p. 218).

Unfortunately, a cross-case analysis of 12 different classroom teachers in 11 different schools indicates that few opportunities for differentiated reading instruction exist (Reis et al., 2003). Researchers conducted a year-long field study of grade 3 and grade 7 classrooms and found some evidence of differentiated instruction in three classrooms, but little in the other nine. Talented readers were characteristically engaged in using the same basal program as grade-level readers and reading low-level trade books with little guidance from their teacher. In terms of performance on imaginative oral or written explanations, gifted elementary students failed to produce their best work unless they were actively prompted (Robinson & Feldhusen, 1984).

### *Reading for the Talented Learner*

As VanTassel-Baska (1998) says, "The gifted child's major contact with the world of ideas is through literature. . . . Intellectual growth in gifted children depends on their access to and regular involvement in the reading process" (p. 451). At the instructional level, Reis and her colleagues (2005) applied the Schoolwide Enrichment Model to reading and found that students in grades 3-6 increased reading fluency, reading achievement test scores, number of hours spent reading, number of books read, and enjoyment of reading when compared with learners engaged in other forms of reading instruction, including Success For All. The Schoolwide Enrichment Reading Model (SEM-R) was used to enrich the reading experiences of students in four schools including children with special needs, those from diverse backgrounds, and those of low-socioeconomic income families. While other students continued with remedial reading instruction, the students in the randomly assigned treatment group were encouraged with high-interest books and self-selected reading and activities. Those who received the enriched reading time scored significantly higher in reading comprehension, fluency, and attitude toward reading. The researchers believe the results are applicable to all readers, including talented readers (Reis et al., 2005).

Grigorenko, Jarvin, and Sternberg (2002) conducted three large-scale studies (1,303 students in middle and high school, mostly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) that examined the infusion of the triarchic theory of intelligence (Sternberg, 1985, 1999) into already existing curricula, including the language arts. Teachers of the experimental groups were given materials and instruction on how to make the tasks of this theory—analytical, creative, and practical—integral to their reading instruction and assessment. The content already in the curriculum remained the same, but the methods of teaching were enriched. Teachers of the control groups were given instruction in how to improve memory aids useful to students. Pre- and posttests in vocabulary and comprehension showed that the students in the triarchic groups advanced



more than their peers in the control groups. The students and their teachers also rated the "interestingness" of the triarchic program higher. A very important aspect of this in-depth study showed long-lasting changes in teachers' behaviors and a growth in their ability to choose methods that improve learning.

At the organizational level, the issues of grouping, enrichment, and acceleration impact reading curriculum. How the curriculum will be delivered, the pacing and materials utilized, and the configurations of students who receive it are all aspects of the philosophy under which a school operates. These are addressed in more depth elsewhere in this volume. Yet, it must be acknowledged that reading ability pervades every corner of the curriculum, and therefore is central to these organizational discussions.

At the curricular level, VanTassel-Baska and her colleagues (1996) developed thematic, literature-based units to address literary analysis and interpretation, persuasive writing skills, and linguistic competency to align with International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English (IRA/NCTE) Standards. The units, an application of the Integrated Curriculum Model (ICM), were investigated through a field study of 100 gifted students in experimental classes and 54 gifted students in comparison classes (VanTassel-Baska et al.). No basal series was used for either group. Students in the experimental classes showed significant gains in all targeted areas of instruction.

The Junior Great Books Program continues to be considered a strong choice for teaching students how to work with complex and rigorous texts that invite a number of interpretations. The program's foci on questioning, meaning, formulating opinions, and supporting ideas with evidence from the reading selection are hallmarks of a high-level thinking approach (Aldrich, 1996; Killion, 2002a, 2002b; National Diffusion Network, 1994-1995).

Thompson (1996) set forth an argument for the use of classics as the basis of a strong literature-based reading program for the gifted. *Classics* are defined as "the rich body of authentic past and contemporary international literature (poetry, fiction, and nonfiction) that is, for various reasons, timeless, and that forms for all of us our sometimes tacit and sometimes explicit sense of good reading" (p. 59). He argued that through classical literature, students can have intelligent experiences, develop educated vocabularies, develop critical and creative thinking skills, develop values and a sense of humanity, and acquire knowledge of intellectual and cultural heritage.

Mallea (1992) pointed out that high-quality adult literature, classic and contemporary, can be key in re-igniting enthusiasm for reading in teens. A curriculum that is based on popular, culturally relevant literature and that allows teen readers to confront and wrestle with important personal and societal issues is highly motivating. Dixon (1993) found that the seminar approach to reading instruction, with open discussions about this same kind of provocative, relevant high-quality literature, is an effective mode of instruction for gifted teens. Students who have been taught from their early years how to interact intelligently and personally with the written word can grow in ways that benefit them for life.

## WHAT WE CAN DO

### *At Home*

☛ Parents should be encouraged to read to and with their children beginning when the children are very young and continuing as long as possible. A family reading time gives children the message that reading is valued. There should be time to discuss what individuals are reading and opportunities for whole-family discussions about what is read in the group. Family stories that are compared and contrasted to what is read are especially good to engage children.

### *In the Classroom*

☛ Advanced readers should be assessed individually in the primary grades. If a student is already reading when he or she enters school, further assessment by the teacher is needed to determine the extent of specific skill instruction necessary for the student.

☛ The reading curriculum should provide opportunities to read a variety of genres. Students tend to read in the area of greatest interest, and self-selection is important to maintain student interest. However, students should also be encouraged to do exploratory reading and research over an extended period of time.

☛ Reading skills and the use of literature should be integrated into the curriculum in ways that build knowledge, analysis, and appreciation for ideas and people. Opportunities for interaction, free and guided discussion, and engaging activities around literature should be provided.

☛ It is highly recommended that high-quality, culturally relevant trade books, rather than a basal series, be the primary reading material. There should be plenty of independent reading time in a curriculum for advanced readers of all ages.

### *At School*

☛ Administrators need to recognize that talented readers do not need to jump the hurdles of the grade-level reading curriculum. School leaders can set a climate that accepts the talented reader in the elementary grades by encouraging access to advanced material and providing grouping opportunities that are appropriately challenging for the students.

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