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Elinor P. Ross
Tennessee Technological University

Jill Wright
Tennessee Technological University

MATCHING TEACHING STRATEGIES TO THE LEARNING STYLES OF GIFTED READERS

ELINOR P. ROSS and JILL WRIGHT
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville

How does a teacher provide appropriate instruction for gifted readers within the regular classroom setting? The first step is to become aware of cognitive characteristics and learning style patterns that are frequently associated with gifted readers. The next step is to use this knowledge in selecting instructional materials and methods that best match the gifted students' learning styles and preferences. The intent of this article is to assist the teacher in accomplishing both of these steps.

Many definitions of giftedness exist. According to Renzulli (1978), giftedness involves the interaction of three basic clusters of human traits--above-average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. The Council for Exceptional Children explains that gifted children do things a little earlier, a little more quickly, a little better, and a little differently from their peers. Tuttle (1978) outlines the following six areas of giftedness generally recognized by educators: general intellectual ability, academic aptitude in a specific area, creative and productive thinking skills, leadership, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor skills. Finally, Okabayashi and Torrance (1984) recently added the idea that gifted individuals are often capable of using both cerebral hemispheres interchangeably. Regardless of which definition is used, two points are clear: (1) Although gifted students exhibit above-average intelligence, giftedness means more than possession of an IQ of 130 or above; (2) An individual who is gifted in one area (e.g., reading) may or may not be gifted in other areas.

Characteristics and Learning Styles

In addition to above-average intelligence (or, perhaps, because of it), gifted students frequently exhibit cognitive characteristics and learning style preferences that are

different from other students. Knowledge of such differences aids teachers in planning reading lessons and programs that are better suited to the special needs and interests of gifted students. One must not be fooled into thinking that gifted students don't need teacher guidance--that they will do just fine "on their own." Research, such as that summarized by Tuttle and Becker (1980), has shown that when gifted students go unrecognized they frequently perform below their intellectual potential or drop out of school.

What cognitive characteristics and learning style preferences have been identified for gifted students? Teachers who work with gifted readers soon learn that such students master materials more quickly, prefer interesting and challenging material, and possess an insatiable appetite for new ideas. In fact, gifted students may go from one unfinished task to another because they are afraid that they might miss something. As a result, the teacher may consider them to be careless and irresponsible. Gifted students need incubation time to work through the full implications of their projects. It is important to provide this incubation time--time to think as well as time to express and discuss their ideas and their progress.

Gifted readers often reach formal operations (abstract thinking) earlier than their peers. They are able to make inferences, evaluations, generalizations, and conclusions. Gifted students are tolerant of ambiguity; they don't need to fit everything into categories and realize that problems may have more than one solution. Fluency, the ability to generate many ideas, and rearrangement, the ability to reorganize elements of a problem, are more highly developed than in other students. With these above-average reasoning and critical thinking abilities, gifted readers learn best by associative methods and poorest by rote.

Insight into situations and the ability to understand the nuances of human relationships are generally greater in gifted children. However, it is important to remember that the students' emotional maturity is not usually at the same level as their intellectual understanding. They may be intellectually able to understand the concepts behind difficult issues, but emotional immaturity and lack of experience may hinder their decision-making ability. Gifted

students are not miniature adults.

Self-motivation, persistence, and independence are other learning style characteristics associated with gifted individuals. In addition, they generally possess an internal locus of control; i.e., they tend to view achievements and failures as being results of their own behavior and attributes rather than being due to outside factors. For these reasons, they prefer unstructured or flexible activities. They appreciate having a framework for direction but nothing too confining. Gifted students prefer independent work to group projects. By working alone, they can pursue their own interests at their own pace. However, group work is sometimes needed to provide opportunities for social development and leadership. Gifted students may experience feelings of isolation, differentness and inadequacy. Well-designed group activities help to alleviate these feelings and fulfill their need for peer acceptance. Furthermore, gifted readers express a preference for discussion over lectures, and discussions require more than one participant.

Dunn and Price (1980) found that gifted students prefer tactile and kinesthetic modes of learning to auditory. Research by Ricca (1984) reinforced this preference for tactile methods of learning. Since tactile and kinesthetic activities are often neglected above the primary level, teachers should give special consideration to including more of them in the curriculum. Further support for this notion comes from a study by Barbe (1985). Barbe found that students who had the same learning style as their teacher made more academic progress than those whose learning style did not match those of their teacher. Teachers tend to teach according to the way they learn best. That is, a teacher's teaching style often reflects his/her own learning style preference. Awareness of other learning styles combined with an effort to incorporate a variety of learning styles into the curriculum is necessary if one's goal is to provide the opportunity for all students to maximize their learning potential.

Although gifted students may be successful with many different modes of perceiving and processing information, they express definite preferences as to how they like to learn and how they feel they learn best. How can teachers incorporate these characteristics and preferences into their

teaching when they are working with the gifted? What reading activities and strategies are best for gifted readers? Actually, there are several reading programs or approaches, a wide variety of enrichment activities, and many reading-related assignments in the content areas that correspond with the learning styles and personality traits of gifted readers.

Several features of the individualized approach are appropriate for the learning styles of gifted readers. Self selection and self-pacing enable these students to select more difficult materials and to read them more rapidly than their peers. Pupil-teacher conferences allow teachers to challenge students at critical and creative levels of thinking instead of drilling them on the decoding or literal comprehension skills which many gifted students have already learned. Student record keeping also can be on a high level, involving such tasks as analyzing the author's style, critiquing character development, and creating variations on the author's theme.

Stauffer's (1975) directed reading-thinking activity (DRTA) also offers gifted students opportunities to read critically. As they move through the story, they make predictions and form hypotheses about the story, suspend judgment until more clues are given, and modify or revise their predictions as the story unfolds. Teacher-led discussion encourages them to think about what they are reading and find reasons for supporting and adjusting their predictions. Although gifted readers usually prefer to work alone, the DRTA offers the interactions with other group members that is important for their normal social development.

Cassidy (1981) developed a program called Inquiry Reading, which meets several of the criteria for the learning styles of gifted readers. The program generally covers a 20-day cycle with about 45 minutes each day being devoted to Inquiry Reading. During the first week, students select their topics, make lists of questions about these topics, identify resources, develop contracts, and set tentative completion dates. The next two weeks they work independently, using the library, interviewing resource people, and conferring with the teacher. During the fourth week they complete their projects and give presentations to an outside audience. The final step is an evaluation of the

activity by the teacher and each student. This procedure allows pupils to study topics that interest and challenge them, pursue new ideas, work independently, use tactile and kinesthetic modes for developing their projects if they wish, and complete their Inquiry Reading activities before moving on to something else.

Some schools develop their own programs for gifted readers, such as the Talented and Gifted (TAG) Program in River Falls, Wisconsin (Weber & Freund, 1984). Reading groups in this program are self-directed, with students taking turns leading group discussions, developing vocabulary lists, and assigning readings. Another aspect of this program allows students to display their independent research projects at learning centers.

Since reading takes place in all areas of the curriculum and often crosses content area boundaries, gifted readers can apply their special abilities to many subjects. The connection between reading and writing is a logical one, and students should be encouraged to write frequently in response to what they read. Writing gives them opportunities to expand on ideas, critique or evaluate what they read, and create new forms of written material. For instance, a simple thought could be rewritten as a poem, or a story could be turned into a play. Students can rewrite stories from different points of view or from different times in history; they can write picture books for younger children to read; and they can write letters to the editor after they have read both sides of controversial issues. Mechanical aspects of writing are of less importance than thinking and language skills, because knowledge of the mechanics of writing may lag behind the gifted reader's ability to think and use language.

Vocabulary development takes place throughout the curriculum. The vocabularies of gifted students are often superior to those of other students, and gifted readers are often very interested in words. Studies of etymology, multiple meaning words, figurative expressions, persuasive words used in advertising, euphemisms, and connotations are interesting topics for gifted readers to explore. The teacher should give some instruction for developing vocabularies, ask stimulating and thought-provoking questions, provide resource materials, and then let the students discover the answers for themselves.

Each content area can provide activities for challenging gifted readers. Students may write to government agencies for free literature about specific topics, and they can use this material as a basis for special research projects. Pupils can use the newspaper for tracing stock market developments (mathematics), finding cause-and-effect relationships in current events (social studies), and analyzing the effects of pollution on the environment (science). Students must read critically in order to compare different biographies about the same person, different versions of the War Between the States, and discussions of nuclear energy from books with varying **copyright** dates. Although they need to learn the same content as other students, gifted readers can investigate topics in more analytical and penetrating ways.

The school library is a rich source of reading activities for gifted students, and they should have free access to it whenever possible. Teachers can encourage gifted readers **to use the library for research reports related to content** area study. Although gifted students want to pursue their special interests, they should investigate unfamiliar topics also. If all of their reading is self-selected, their interests will be too narrow and they will fail to develop new interests. Teachers should encourage the gifted to read fine literature and review some of what they read, using a variety of media and methods. Simple summaries of books are perhaps least effective for stimulating thought. The librarian might also work with gifted readers by helping them form book clubs for such purposes as discussing novels, presenting skits, preparing displays, and communicating with authors.

General Guidelines

Certain instructional practices are in keeping with the learning styles of gifted readers, while others are considered to be generally inappropriate. The guidelines listed below point out some things that teachers should and should not do for gifted readers.

1. Do provide formal instruction in basic reading skills and don't assume that gifted readers already know them, even though they appear to be reading well. They need a solid foundation. This instruction may be "compacted"

(Renzulli and Smith, 1980), however, so that children learn low-level skills quickly and move on to higher levels of reading.

2. Do spend time teaching creative and critical comprehension skills, but don't spend much time teaching decoding skills.

3. Do find materials that are interesting and challenging, and don't insist that gifted readers read only books on grade level when they are capable of reading more difficult material.

4. Do design activities that give students direction and framework, but don't make the framework too rigid or confining.

5. Do allow gifted readers to work independently much of the time, but not all of the time. Provide some opportunities for them to read in group situations so they will have opportunities to interact socially with their peers.

6. Do ask questions that are not answered directly by the material, that require readers to infer, conclude, and evaluate. Don't ask many literal recall questions.

7. Do enourage students to engage in stimulating, long-term, thought-provoking activities. Don't expect them to do many workbook pages, ditto sheets, programmed exercises, or reading kit activities.

8. Do provide a wide variety of enrichment activities, but don't allow them to "skip a grade."

9. When gifted readers finish their work early, do offer a variety of creative and problem solving activities. Don't require them to do more of the same kind of work.

10. Do provide opportunities for gifted readers to share the results of their work, but don't stress how these students differ from their peers.

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