DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 089 223 CS 000 994

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TITLE What Are You Doing for Your Gifted? A Rationale and Some Practical Suggestions.
PUB DATE May 74
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (19th, New Orleans, May 1-4, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Grades; *Gifted; Reading; Reading Ability; Reading Achievement; *Reading Development; *Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a rationale for both extensive and intensive learning-to-read experiences for the gifted, arguing that gifted readers are too often left to read on their own. Three broad teaching strategies are discussed: "Helping Children Learn to Read to Learn," which discusses the reading-study skills and methods of developing an understanding of how scholars probe for new knowledge and how the store of knowledge is organized; "Guiding a Study of Literature," which focuses on the variety of human experiences, and through them, on exploring and clarifying personal and social values; and "Integrating Reading and Other Language Learning," which looks at the development of mutually reinforcing experiences in reading and writing. (Author/WR)

What Are You Doing for Your Gifted? A Rationale and Some Practical Suggestions

Ernest Hilton

Hilton
IRA - 1974

I hope to offer some sensible and useful ideas about teaching reading to gifted pupils. As a working definition of "gifted," I suggest that "gifted" children, in our context here, are those who learn to read easily and early, and who have the ability to read widely in more difficult or advanced materials than those who are "not gifted." To state my point of view on what we should do for those children I assert that it is important we develop their reading powers to the fullest, for those children are -- or should be -- professional and civic leaders in the years ahead. This is to argue that the reading skills, habits, and attitudes developed in the elementary school years must not be left to chance. Too often, I think, teachers leap cheerfully to the conclusion that the needs of gifted children are served if they are given freedom to read, largely on a self-selected basis, with perhaps some "sharing" or "discussion" activities. This leads to a reading curriculum of what I call the "cafeteria" type, on which I commented in my editorial in the April issue of Instructor. To proceed that way simply is not good enough. To do so is to shirk our responsibility to those children, and to society. And -- not so incidentally, either -- it is to miss a lot of stimulating and interesting teaching!

With that as background -- as the rationale, so to speak -- let me suggest three broad teaching strategies for developing reading programs with gifted learners: (1) Helping children learn to read to learn. (2) Guiding the study of literature. (3) Developing experiences which help them integrate language skills and understandings;

particularly, developing mutually reinforcing experiences in reading and writing.

I shall take up one at a time and, for each, explain what I mean by it and try to give practical teaching suggestions.

1. Helping children learn to read to learn. We must not rest content with the rather rusty statement that once children have "learned to read" (whatever that means) then the reading program becomes one of "reading to learn." The emphasis is right; what is lacking is recognition of the need to help them learn how to read to learn. Some, of course, do so largely on their own, but most don't. I suggest that for the gifted, something like one-third of the time allocated to reading instruction, from Grades 3 through 6, should be devoted to planned experiences in learning how to read to learn. And -- and this is a matter of central importance -- for this purpose the proper reading material is informational material, or expository material, or content material; not narrative, "story," material. Why? Because informational material is what they "read to learn." Fortunately, a great many informational-type (non-fiction) juvenile books are available. We should be able to assume, too, that all elementary schools are well supplied with reference books. There are the content subject textbooks, and these should have a solid place in the reading program; a point on which I shall say more later. More and more, reading textbooks -- at least for the middle grades and, I hope, for the primary grades too -- are including substantial blocks of informational material as the content for skills development. This is especially important, I think, because a well-developed reading textbook can provide, in one "package," a balanced diet of

content selections, in terms of subjects and topics dealt with; and in terms of some sensible gradation of difficulty. Few teachers have the resources -- or the time -- needed to create their own material.

Assuming, then, a readiness on the part of the teacher to deal with "learning to read to learn," and the availability of materials appropriate to that broad purpose, how does teaching proceed? What more precise objectives should give focus to what is done? Here, I want to enter a dissenting voice in the current search for very small, bittsy-piecy objectives -- and particularly so when we are considering gifted children, I think. Teaching and learning will proceed more fruitfully if we plan on the basis of reasonably large, inclusive goals. For example -- and an obvious example -- we must teach vocabulary; teach new words -- always in context, of course -- and the skills needed to master new words independently. To do that, we do of course break the thing down into such objectives as the ability to decode by applying knowledge of sound/symbol relationships, skill in using context clues, the use of knowledge of word structure, how to use the dictionary, etc., etc. But let us move quickly to develop the skill to <u>combine</u> these skills and to help children learn to use them flexibly. Beyond concern for vocabulary, we are of course concerned with helping children identify main ideas and see the relationships in details related to them; with the organizational skills, which include both the ability to perceive the way ideas are organized in what is being read and the ability to effect one's own organization of ideas gathered from reading; with developing the attitudes and mental

habits which make for evaluative reading; with skill in locating information; with development of the ability to read rapidly. For each such broad cluster of skills, we need to identify and focus upon the important specific skills. But let us not, I urge, carry that process too far -- let us not forget that reading is all of these, together.

Some moments ago I said I would have more to say about the content subject textbooks and their place in the program. After all, it is the reading of that type of book which will largely determine the child's success in secondary school and in college and -- for many of our gifted -- in graduate and professional study. (They are the ones who will, in their time, even probably write textbooks!) Our basic concern here is with the reading-study skills. I have already identified the major ones. As for teaching-learning strategy, the practical choice is whether to teach reading "along with" a content subject, say social studies; or to develop special reading experiences, in the reading period, with direct focus on textbook reading and study. A good argument can be made for either approach. Yet my own experience, in both elementary and secondary teaching and as a supervisor, has persuaded me that trying to do both -- that is, to teach social studies and reading at any one time, is difficult. One concern does, somehow, tend to get in the way of the other. A better formula, I think, is to develop very sharply focused skills lessons, using textbook sections, as reading lessons; then, to work with children in applying those skills as they "study" their textbooks in the several subject periods. More and more,

reading textbooks include sections (or "slices") of textbook materials, for building the reading-study skills.

Essentially, what I have said to this point is this: One of our responsibilities to the gifted is to help them become proficient in learning to read to learn. To that end, informational-type material is the proper content; and, we should deal directly with the reading of textbooks. I want to press the point further, in terms of what we can do -- and, I think, should do -- with gifted children. We must not only help them learn how to learn; we should whet their appetities for learning. If time allowed, this concern would be an interesting one to explore. We must go still further, and help children gain understanding of how knowledge is discovered; how we "find out about things," how scientists probe the unknown, how the historian works, how the archeologist proceeds, etc. We can do this by building "reading lessons" upon carefully selected articles. I think, for example, of an interesting article reporting how a scientist studied the "language" of dolphins; of another reporting how scientists are studying earthquakes and may, perhaps, learn enough so they can predict them. Not long ago I found myself reading an article in one of the airline magazines about ways scientists are trying to control the gypsy moth and as I read I thought, "This article should find a place in a reading textbook." And there is still a more advanced goal -- to help children, and especially the gifted -- begin to understand how mankind's vast store of knowledge is organized. What is archeology? What does a paleontologist do? Does an entomologist study bugs, or words? What period of time is referred to when we say something about the

"Middle Ages"? In what geologic time era did dinosaurs live? Again, if time permitted, it would be interesting to discuss practical ways and means. But this is all we have time for on my first point, that of helping children learn to read to learn.

2. Guiding a study of literature is the way I stated a second teaching strategy appropriate to our work with the gifted. Note that I say study, suggesting something substantially more than a program of self-selected, free reading experiences -- which, as I have said, is too often considered an adequate diet for the gifted. What is needed is a planned program of literary experiences, beginning in the kindergarten. "Planning," in this context, suggests several things. For one, it suggests guided reading different types, or forms, of literature -- short stories, biography, juvenile book length stories or "novels," poetry, drama, fables, fairy tales, myths -- perhaps, to reveal a personal bent, particularly myths. I mean to suggest, too, experiences with literature of different times, and from different places.....the long ago and the now, the here and the far-away. It suggests, further, a focus on plot, on characterization, on the language of literature. Above all, it suggests a wide -- and deep -- exploration of human experiences, in all its variety. It suggests an emphasis on personal and social values as expressed in that experience and, I must add, an emphasis too on the capacity for evil in the human animal. I am reminded, here, of a comment my brother -- a college professor -- made when he was establishing a "Humanities" program. The goal, he said, was to help each student understand that we must, each of us, try very hard not to be a s.o.b. It suggests an effort to illuminate

the ways in which we are alike, and the ways in which we differ.

Now, all this calls for careful and informed -- even tasteful -- selection of materials, and for the highest level of teaching skill. Here, we are dealing with subtle matters, and what we seek is -- what is the best word? -- understanding? appreciation? valuing? taste? Whatever the word, our goal is not as easily specified as are the decoding skills, nor as easily learned, nor is growth toward the goal as easily observed or measured. Though the goal may seem elusive, it is greatly to be prized. The matter of how -- of method, if you will -- and the matter of what -- of materials -- invite discussion, if time permitted. A few words on these concerns, at least. There is great value in group experience here; in talking things over, in sharing, after reading a selection. This is one argument for use of textbooks, of course -- and another argument is that, again, few teachers have the resources or time to develop their own materials. Oral reading has an important place in the study of literature. Creative teachers find interesting approaches. At Instructor, we were delighted, recently, with a manuscript from an upper-grade teacher in Oregon who reported on how his students formed a kind of Storytellers Club, worked on the art of storytelling, and went forth to tell stories to children in lower grades. Another interesting manuscript from a primary teacher told of using juvenile trade books, with each child becoming a "specialist" in a particular book. That child then was ready to help others with that book -- to help with the words; more, to "talk about the book" with others reading it.

Reading to children is always worthwhile. I have only good memories from reading aloud to children in my own classroom teaching days -- and to risk inviting quick mental computations about my age, I may mention reading The Trumpeter of Krakow, Treasure Island, Caddy Woodlawn, Sticks Across the Chimney, The Wind in the Willows ... and, of course, the treasury is a full one, and a wide variety of choices is open to each of us.

3. Developing experiences which help children integrate language skills and understandings; particularly, mutually reinforcing experiences in reading and writing. This is a matter which has long been of interest to me, and one on which I did some experimenting in my classroom teaching years. I was pleased to have Dr.Jean Robertson, Instructor's reading consultant, take it up in a recent article, and part of what I have to say about it today derives from that article.

We can begin by helping children understand that what we read, someone wrote. In discussing what is read -- both in the study of literature and in learning to read to learn, where the content is informational, -- we can talk about the authors and about the experiences out of which they wrote. I remember reading parts of the Lewis and Clark Journals with my sons, and the example comes to mind as a useful one -- useful for the purpose of emphasizing the importance of written communication, which in this example has preserved for us the precise details of that historic journey. If children are reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, it is relevant to know the experiences in which her writing was rooted; to know

it in some detail. And as a corollary of deepening understanding that what we read is what someone wrote, we can sharpen children's awareness that we write for others to read. What we call "creative writing" is often very loosely handled, and too colored with emotion, for my taste. Yet it is important, and particularly so if we extend the boundaries to include expository writing. If children are studying soil conservation, there are many opportunities for well-organized and precise writing experiences, for note-taking and outlining. Gifted children can be challenged to do substantial writing of the kind more often called "creative" -- I remember, as one example, a very long short story Barbara Conwell wrote, in sixth grade, entitled "How I Escaped From the Colorado State Penitentiary."

But these examples of language interrelationships are broadly sketched. We can be more precise. For example, the use of "phonics" in reading and in spelling (which, of course, means writing) can be emphasized, with a focus both on the differences involved, and on the "like" relationships. We can focus on the use of descriptive words, with examples in what children read and in how they write. We can focus attention on figurative language, again with reading examples and writing examples. We can focus on the way we use connectives as signals, as we do when we use the word "unless" to set conditions. We can focus on larger syntactic structures -- for example, any time middle-graders work with clauses, we can have "back-to-back" lessons in which writing and reading relationships are made clear.

But it is time to summarize. I have argued that the gifted are ill-served if we fail to provide systematic, organized

learning experiences in reading. I have suggested that those learning experiences may be directed toward three goals. First, we can help them learn to read to learn. To work toward that goal we use, largely, informational materials. We sharpen the reading-study skills; beyond that, we stimulate interest in learning, we help children understand how knowledge is acquired and how knowledge is organized. Second, we guide children's study of literature, with a clear focus on exploring human experience. Third, we can profitably explore the relationships in the broad study of language; particularly, in the elementary school, relationships between reading and writing.

And, of course, we do also encourage and provide for wide exploratory, individually-selected reading. My whole argument, really, is that "free-choice" experiences are not enough for the gifted; to so argue is not to argue that such experiences have no place in the curriculum, but rather to argue that they are not enough in themselves.