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ABSTRACT

Before working with middle school gifted students, the teacher should be aware of the characteristics and learning style preferences of these students. For example, the years from 9 to 13 are a time of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive change--also called an "age of ambivalence." Many of these students tackle decision making sooner and reach the stage of formal operations (abstract thinking) earlier than their peers. Consequently, certain teaching preferences become apparent. Teachers should accept challenges brought by gifted students, and they should offer new and alternative ways of helping them view their problems. Several approaches or strategies for teaching reading and the language arts follow logically from traits of gifted students that have been identified: e.g., directed reading-thinking activity, the individualized approach, and the merging of instruction in reading and writing. Gifted students also need access to the library whenever possible, and the library serves as an excellent means for crossing subject matter boundaries. The characteristics of gifted readers are also related to certain types of literature. The kinds of books that gifted readers are likely to enjoy can be found among the selections in the annual list of "Children's Choices," a project of the International Reading Association-Children's Book Council Joint Committee. (Appendixes include an annotated list of readings taken from lists published from 1980 to 1985 and suggested reading/language activities to challenge gifted students.) (HOD)

Teaching Strategies to Fit the Learning Styles of Gifted Readers in the Middle Grades

Adapted from

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (30th, New Orleans, LA, May 5-9, 1985)

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Teaching Strategies to Fit the Learning Styles of Gifted Readers in the Middle Grades

The term "gifted" clearly means more than the possession of an IQ of 130 or above. Although children never score higher than their IQ levels, they may score lower for a variety of reasons. The definition of gifted children from the Council for Exceptional Children is a particularly good one. It states that gifted children do things a little earlier, a little more quickly, a little better, and a little differently than their peers.

In order to understand the characteristics and learning styles of gifted middle-schoolers, it is important to understand some things about middle-schoolers in general. This age of about 9 to 13 is a time of change for them: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive change.

Physically, they are undergoing their most rapid growth spurt since infancy. Body growth is generally faster than muscle development, which leads to poor coordination. This period includes the onset of puberty.

Socially and emotionally, this is the "age of ambivalence." These students have a strong desire to be independent, as well as a strong need to be like their peers. They have trouble making up their minds, but they don't want others deciding for them. They have a high level of dependency on their peers and they begin to question authority. They are beginning to feel attracted to members of the opposite sex. Their capacity for introspection develops so that they are constantly comparing themselves to their peers, a practice which may result in feelings of low self-

confidence and self-esteem.

Many middle-schoolers are undergoing a transition from concrete to formal operational thinking. There are spurts in brain growth, with the girls' growth at the 10-12 age being three times that of boys'. This situation reverses during the 14-16 age. Girls often hide their academic abilities, especially in math and science, because they feel it is unfeminine.

There are several characteristics of gifted learners that teachers should recognize when they work with these students. Some of these characteristics are listed below.

1. Gifted students may reach the stage of formal operations (abstract thinking) earlier than their peers.
2. They may master materials more quickly than others.
3. They tackle decision-making sooner than their peers.
4. They possess insightfulness, or the ability to understand the nuances of human relationships.
5. They have an insatiable appetite for new ideas.
6. They have an internal locus of control; i.e., they perceive their achievements as well as their failures as a result of their own behavior and attributes.
7. They are independent.
8. They are tolerant of ambiguity; i.e., they don't need to fit everything into categories and they realize that problems may have more than one solution.
9. Their thinking is fluent, so they have the ability to generate many ideas.
10. They have the ability to rearrange or reorganize elements of a problem.

11. They are persistent.

12. They have a good sense of humor and enjoy sharing jokes and riddles.

It is important to remember, however, that gifted students are not small adults. They are able to understand the concepts behind difficult issues intellectually, but their emotional maturity is not on the same level as their intellectual understanding. These children may experience feelings of isolation, a need for peer acceptance, and a sense of being different or inadequate.

In regard to their learning style preferences, gifted children generally prefer working alone to group work. They often prefer tactile and kinesthetic modes to auditory, but they generally like some sound in their environment.

As a result of the characteristics and learning style preferences of gifted learners, certain teaching preferences become apparent. In many instances gifted children should work on independent rather than group projects, and they should participate in discussions instead of listening to lectures. Their activities should be unstructured or flexible, but a traditional classroom setting with a formal classroom design works best.

Teachers should be facilitators of learning rather than disseminators of knowledge. Students should be given time to think and express themselves. Teachers should accept challenges brought by gifted students, and they should offer new and alternative ways of helping them view their problems. Teachers of gifted students need to welcome new ways of expression and be

open-minded. Because knowledge is interrelated, teachers should be willing to transgress subject matter boundaries.

A good policy to follow when working with gifted students is to invert Bloom's Taxonomy. Gifted learners need more opportunities for divergent and associative thinking, and they can spend less time on the acquistion of facts and concepts.

Several approaches or strategies for teaching reading follow logically from traits of gifted learners that have been identified. The individualized approach to reading is ideal, because it allows gifted children to work independently, pursue their own interests, and read at a more rapid rate and handle more difficult materials than their peers. The pupil-teacher conference that is part of this approach gives the teacher opportunities to check understanding of the material at critical and creative levels of thinking. Record keeping by gifted students could be done at high levels in which they analyze the author's style, critique the character development, and create variations of their own on the author's theme.

Stauffer's (1975) directed reading-thinking activity (DRTA) offers gifted children opportunities to do both critical and creative reading. As students move through the story with the group, they are to make predictions about the story and modify or revise them as the story unfolds. Creative reading takes place later as they elaborate on divergent predictions, rewrite scenes, dramatize stories, or whatever. This approach allows gifted children to be part of a regular classroom reading group, an advantage when considering their emotional and social development.

Cassidy (1981) developed a special plan for gifted readers called Inquiry Reading. This approach provides structure, guidance, and feedback. It generally covers a 20 day cycle with 45 minutes each day being devoted to the activity. It works best in a group setting. The purpose is to allow children to investigate subjects of special interest. During the first week the children select the topic, make lists of questions, identify resources, develop contracts, and set tentative completion dates. During the second and third weeks they work independently, use the library, and interview resource people. They complete their projects and give presentations during the fourth week. There is a final evaluation. This method allows gifted children to raise questions, try out ideas, satisfy their curiosity, discover answers, and fill in gaps in their knowledge.

The Talented and Gifted Program (TAG) at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wisconsin (Weber and Freund, 1984) provides a special classroom which serves as a laboratory for innovation. One activity is self-managed reading groups in which students take turns assigning the readings. Students also compile vocabulary lists and lead group discussions. Learning centers are used to show the results of their independent research projects, such as investigations of hot-air balloons, and displays of World War II artifacts.

Merging instruction in reading and writing is one way of crossing subject matter boundary lines. Although students should not be required to write every time they read, they can be encouraged to do so. Writing gives them opportunities to expand

ideas, critique or evaluate what was written, and create new forms. For instance, a simple thought could be rewritten as a poem, or a story could be turned into a play. Children can rewrite stories from a different point of view or during a different time in history; they can write their own picture books for younger brothers or sisters; they can write lettters to editors after reading both sides of controversial issues. Teachers should minimize the mechanical aspects of writing since these children's thinking and oral language abilities may be far ahead of their writing skills.

The vocabularies of gifted students are often superior to those of other students, and gifted students are often interested in words. Studies of multiple meaning words, figurative expressions, persuasive words used in advertising, euphemisms, and connotative meanings are all possible ways of helping children expand their vocabularies. The teacher needs to provide resource materials, stimulating questions, some instructions or suggestions for developing vocabularies, and then let the students discover the answers for themselves.

Gifted students need access to the library whenever possible, and the library serves as an excellent means for crossing subject matter boudaries. Students should learn how to do library research and use a variety of study skills. They should become familiar with professional journals, research reports, abstracts, and works by major authors in certain fields. While they may wish to pursue their own special interests, they should also be exposed to a wide range of subject matter. Otherwise, these students might neglect unfamiliar subjects and concentrate

on only those topics which interest them.

Teachers can offer opportunities for gifted children to read extensively and make use of the library in several ways. They can allow children to read widely in school by providing time for them to read independently. They can suggest interesting research projects for students to pursue on their own, and they can offer a variety of methods and media for students to use when reporting on books which they have read. Sometimes teachers can arrange for gifted readers to read stories to younger children. Book clubs can be formed for special purposes, such as discussing a novel which all members have read or preparing bulletin boards or displays.

Some general guidelines for specific teaching strategies in reading and language arts for gifted students follow.

1. Provide formal instruction in skills, but do so more quickly than for other children. Consider Renzulli's curriculum compacting (Renzulli and Smith, 1980) which allows children to learn the basics quickly so that they can spend released time on investigation. Don't assume that they already know the basic skills.

2. Find material that is interesting and challenging. Consider using Cassidy's Think Boxes (1981), sets of activity cards that center on a theme being studied in class. They allow children to apply basic skills and work independently, while promoting creativity and originality and covering a broad range of themes.

3. Design activities that give students direction and provide them with a framework, but don't make these activities too confining.

4. Ask questions that the material doesn't answer directly. Cause the students to react, infer, conclude, and evaluate.

5. Teach children to question what they read--and how to question it.

6. Provide time for the incubation of ideas and the working out of thoughts.

7. Provide a supportive environment with resources, encouragement, and opportunities for sharing and recognition.

The two lists which follow have been prepared to guide teachers in the selection of children's books and in the choice of teaching strategies for middle-grade gifted readers. These lists are only starting points, and should not be considered all-inclusive.

The characteristics of gifted readers are related to certain types of literature. Gifted children attack most problems with enthusiasm, so they are challenged by solve-it-yourself mysteries and sports accounts that allow them to make decisions on plays. These children often like to project ideas into the future, so science fiction and futuristic books intrigue them. Books dealing with value conflicts and nonconforming heroes help them as they struggle to construct their own value systems, and poety offers them opportunities to explore their emotions and appreciate language. Gifted children delight in humor, so books of puns, riddles, jokes, and puzzles are likely to tickle their funny bones. Books of fantasy appleal to their imaginations, and unusual informational books help satisfy, as well as further stimulate, their curiosity.

The kinds of books that gifted readers are likely to enjoy

can be found among the selections in the annual list of "Children's Choices," a project of the International Reading Association-Children's Book Council Joint Committee. Begun during the 1984-75 school year, this list is compiled by teams of children who read new children's trade books and vote for their favorite books. The annotated list which follows is taken from lists published from 1980 to 1985 and is directed toward middle-grade readers. It is a guide for helping gifted readers find books that will challenge and interest them.

Recommended Reading for Gifted Middle Grade Students

Selections from "Children's Choices" 1980-1985

Fiction

Left-Handed Shortstop. Patricia Reilly Giff, Delacorte, 1980. A nonconforming boy who prefers ecology over baseball.

Lover's Game. Barbara Cohen, Atheneum, 1983. A romantic novel in which Mandy relates great lovers from literature to real life.

Megan's Beat. Lou Willett Stanek, Dial, 1983. A values conflict for a teen-aged girl who writes a gossip column for the paper.

The President's Daughter. Ellen Emerson White, Avon, 1984. The problems a teen-aged girl faces when her mother becomes President of the United States.

A Ring of Endless Light. Madeleine L'Engle, Farrar, 1980. A young girl who relates to dolphins by telepathic powers.

Who Stole Kathy Young?. Margaret Goff Clark, Dodd, 1980. The kidnapping of a deaf girl. Danger, suspense, and excitement.

Fantasy

Dragons and Other Fabulous Beasts. Richard Blythe, Grosset, 1980. Anthology of folktales about unusual creatures from different cultures.

Dragon's Blood. Jane Yolen, Delacorte, 1982. An adventure story of a boy who trains a dragon to fight on a fantasy planet.

Hercules. Bernard Evslin, Morrow, 1984. An exciting retelling of the classic Greek tale about the man with superhuman strength.

In the Circle of Time. Margaret J. Anderson, Knopf, 1979. A time warp in which two children travel into the future.

Jumanji. Chris Van Allsburg, Houghton, 1981. A fantasy of two children who play a board game that becomes too realistic.

The Land Where the Ice Cream Grows. Anthony Burgess, Doubleday, 1979. A fantasy of sounds and words in the English language.

Meet the Vampire. Georgess McHargue, Lippincott, 1979. Myths and legends about vampires, including Dracula.

The Sorcerer's Scrapbook. Michael Berenstain, Random, 1981. A search for the unicorn's horn to save the Duke.

Mystery

The Castle of the Red Gorillas. Wolfgang Ecke, Prentice-Hall, 1983. A collection of 19 mysteries for the reader to solve. Solutions are given and mysteries are ranked by difficulty.

Clone Catcher. Alfred Slote, Lippincott, 1982. A suspenseful science fiction mystery about locating a runaway clone.

The Face at the Window. Wolfgang Ecke, Prentice-Hall, 1980. Mystery stories to challenge the reader. Solutions given.

The Ghosts of Departure Point. Eve Bunting, Lippincott, 1982. A supernatural story of a teenaged girl who returns from death.

The Invisible Witness. Wolfgang Ecke, Prentice-Hall, 1981. A solve-it-yourself detective story book with solutions included.

Masquerade. Kit Williams, Schocken, 1980. A book of riddles leading to the mysterious location of a lost jewel.

Maximillian Does It Again. Joseph Rosenbloom, Lodestone/Dutton, 1983. Detective cases to be solved by Maximillian, a seventh grader, and the reader.

Octopus Pie. Susan Terris, Farrar, 1983. A mystery that the reader helps solve about an octopus in a gifted classroom.

The Robot and Rebecca: The Mystery of the Code-Carrying Kids. Jane Yolen, Knopf, 1980. A futuristic space mystery solved by a robot and a nine-year-old girl.

Sports

Baseball: You Are the Manager. Nate Aaseng, Lerner, 1983. Decision-making by the reader about 10 World Series games with the actual plays described later.

The Best Sports Book in the Whole Wide World. Mauri Kunnas, Crown, 1984. Humorous text about Olympic events in which all partici-pants pants are animals. Cartoon-like illustrations.

College Basketball: You Are the Coach. Nate Aaseng, Lerner, 1984. Decision-making by the reader about 10 crucial situations from 10 NCCA basketball games with actual results provided later.

College Football: You Are the Coach. Nate Aaseng, Lerner, 1984. A comparison of the reader's decisions about 10 college bowl games with the actual plays.

Football: You Are the Coach. Nate Aaseng, Lerner, 1983. Reader involvement in decision-making about play-offs in football.

The Giant Book of More Strange But True Sports Stories. Howard Liss, Random, 1983. A collection of strange but true trivia about sports.

Informational Books

Bizarre Murders. Gilda and Melvin Berger, Messner, 1983. Accounts of actual murders committed in the U.S. and England.

Cindy, a Hearing Ear Dog. Patricia Curtis, 1981. The story of a

stray dog who is trained to help a deaf school girl.

Kon-Tiki: A True Adventure of Survival at Sea. Thor Heyerdahl, Random, 1984. Exciting story of the Ra expedition in which six men attempt to cross the Pacific on a raft.

Model Buildings and How to Make Them. Harvey Weiss, Crowell, 1979. A guide for making buildings from wood and cardboard.

More Science Experiments You Can Eat. Vicki Cobb, Lippincott, 1979. A collection of science experiments about changes in food.

Movie Stunts and the People Who Do Them. Richard Blythe, Grosset, 1980. A book about the techniques of stunt performers.

Ocean Frontiers. Eryl Davies, Viking, 1980. Information about oceanography, fishing, and ocean research with related projects.

Rescue! True Stories of the Winners of the Young American Medal for Bravery. Norman Anderson and Walter Brown, Walker, 1983. True stories of the young people who won this award.

The Sea World Book of Sharks. Eve Bunting, Harcourt, 1980. A combination of photographs and text about sharks.

The Story of American Photography. Martin W. Sandler; Little, Brown; 1979. The development of photography since 1839.

The Story of Nim: The Chimp Who Learned Language. Anna Michel, Knopf, 1981. A chimp who learns language and lives like a child.

Unbuilding. David Macaulay, Houghton, 1980. A creative book on dismantling the Empire State Building.

The Wild Inside. Linda Allison, Sierra Club/Scribner, 1979. Information about inhabitants of the home and the wilderness.

Jokes, Riddles, and Puzzles

Annie O'Kay's Riddle Round-up. Ann Bishop, Lodestar/Dutton,

Poem Stew. William Cole, Lippincott, 1981. A collection of food poems by well known poets.

A Swinger of Birches: Poems of Robert Frost for Young People. Robert Frost, Stemmer House, 1982. An illustrated collection of Robert Frost's poems that appeal to young people.

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READING/LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES TO CHALLENGE GIFTED STUDENTS

Vocabulary Activities

1. Become a Terminologist and compile a class file of significant words and their meaning.

2. Make as many words as you can out of the letters in a given word or phrase.

3. When having students write sentences using "new" words, add a different twist. Examples: (1) Use at least one word in each sentence that expresses emotion. (2) All of the sentences must relate to a given topic such as space travel, a picnic, the world of the future, or a favorite TV show. (3) Write all sentences without using the letter "a" or "s" or "i" (except when it appears in the vocabulary words). (4) Compose a two-line rhyme for each vocabulary word.

4. Make a miniature thesaurus of slang words and colloquial expressions.

5. Compose "Tom Swifties" by matching an adverb with an action and forming a self-describing sentence. Examples: "Sharpen your pencil and begin," said Tom pointedly. "I broke my leg," said Tom lamely. "Here comes the steam roller," said Tom flatly.

6. Compile lists of substitutes for "overworked" words.

7. Coin new words from your knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, root words, and derivations.

8. Make a list of palindromes. Palindromes are words that are spelled the same forward or backward (DUD, CIVIC, DEED). Make up a short definition for each word. Give the definitions to your classmates and see how many of the palindromes they can identify.

9. Prepare a list of as many acronyms as you can find. (Example: SCUBA stands for Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus). Then compose some acronyms of your own. (Example: DOOR-Definite Opening Of a Room)

10. Create and play language games which involve new words or words with multiple meanings, or games using the dictionary.

Writing Activities

1. Take a character from a story such as Robin Hood or Cinderella and rewrite the story in a 20th-century setting.

2. Write a humorous and non-scientific explanation for some natural phenomenon. Examples: Why monkeys have tails, leopards have spots, elephants have wrinkled skin, or leaves turn color in the fall.

3. Publish books by student authors. Bind the books for use in the school and/or public library. Set up a review board, negotiate contracts, select illustrators, arrange for publicity, etc. Send outstanding contributions to state or national magazines for possible publication.

4. Keep a diary describing memorable experiences.

5. Write stories about different phases of growing up, such as "Important Happenings," "Important People in My Life," "My Library," and "The Most Exciting Event of My Life."

6. Write scripts for radio programs.

7. Write an article to persuade classmates on a particular point of view.

8. Write newspaper advertisements selling newly established businesses such as, "Sam's Spider Store."

9. Write a newspaper obituary for an inanimate object such as the following: JUMBO CRAYON: Born, 1979. Expiration: backseat of a hot car. Achievements: contributed to prize winning 4-H poster. Survivors: Red Crayon, Blue Crayon, Yellow Crayon, etc. Outstanding Characteristics: Green.

10. Prepare wantads for specific nursery rhyme characters, such as, information about a runaway Gingerbread Boy.

Reading/Library Activities

1. Evaluate three magazine or newspaper accounts of a single news incident. How are they alike and different. Can you find any examples of bias.

2. Collect folklore such as rope-jumping rhymes, counting-out rhymes, legends, or folk songs. What elements do they have in common? Categorize your collection by time period, topic, nationality of origin, or some other method.

3. Make collections of mottoes or proverbs.

4. Study the history of languages.

5. If the class is to read a story with a definite geographical locale or other specialized content, become a specialist on the subject before the class reads the story.

6. View a television program; check facts presented in written materials with those given on the program.

7. Participate in a literature group.

8. Visit a lower grade and read or discuss a story to stimulate interest in reading.

9. As the class Poem Selector, collect and have ready appropriate poems for special days and events, weather changes, and timely happenings. These may be posted on a "poem pole" to attract the children as they enter the room. The poems are then read aloud.

10. Conduct an in-depth study of your favorite author by reading his/her works, finding about his/her life, and even writing letters to him/her.

Creative Activities

1. Implement a program for the school such as a costumed book parade, quiz show, puppet show, or character sketch.

2. Make up and tell tall tales.

3. Match book, movie, or song titles with people. Examples: Julia Child - "Something's Burning," IRS Auditors - "Suspicious Minds," or General Sherman - "Burn, Georgia, Burn."

4. Compile a Guinness Book of World Records or a Ripley's Believe It or Not using accomplishments of members of your class or school. For example, person who has the highest score in Pac Man, student who has travelled the furthest, person who has the longest name.

5. Create fractured titles for well-known books, songs, poems, TV shows, movies, etc. Change the titles by replacing some of the words with synonyms. Examples: "King of the Road" = Ruler of the Highway, "The House of Wax" = The Paraffin Dwelling, "Funny Girl" = Amusing Female.

6. Design new games.

7. Read about a local vacation site and then prepare a postcard featuring the place. Include location, historical facts, and other relevant information. Draw an appropriate illustration.

8. Listen to a poem or song and retell it in prose form.

9. Play charades with familiar cliches.

10. Create characters for a continuing story, adding episodes from time to time.

Critical Thinking and Problem-solving Activities

1. Set up evaluative criteria, evaluate children's magazines, and make a recommended list for the library.

2. Compare the illustrations in different editions of fairy tales.

3. Give modern scientific explanations for some of the phenomena of nature which the Greeks and Romans explained through myths.

4. See how many answers you can come up with for questions such as: What would happen if -- the oceans dried up? we had only two fingers? everyone always told the truth? everyone in the world suddenly became deaf? the price of gasoline increased to $25/gallon?

5. Compose a telegram, trying to give the essence of a book in 20 words.

6. Listen to various story beginnings and predict the outcomes.

7. Write or tell a different ending to a story. Hold a contest to see which ending is preferred and which ending people think is the real one.

8. If a book has been adapted for TV or the movies, compare the book with the TV or movie version.

9. Make a display showing examples of various propaganda techniques.

10. Prepare a short dramatic incident in the classroom. For example, fake an argument with a classmate over possession of a notebook. Have each student write a description of the incident to be read aloud. Lead the class in a discussion of how discrepancies creep into accounts and how perceptions differ because of the observer's beliefs, state of mind at the time of the incident, relationship with the persons involved, position in the room, etc.

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