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Guiding the Gifted Reader. ERIC Digest #E481.

Educators are voicing concerns regarding the place of literature in the classroom, calling for the use of literature to supplement basal readers in the elementary curriculum and raising questions about the knowledge base of senior high students in literature and history (Ravitch & Finn, 1987). Meanwhile, school systems are expanding their offerings

for gifted students.

At the confluence of these trends stands the gifted student, whose particular reading requirements teachers, librarians, and both reading consultants and consultants in gifted and talented education attempt to meet. These professionals face the perplexing questions of how to offer challenging reading to gifted students, how to guide their reading, and how to know what books to recommend to them or their parents. Another relevant concern is how to develop programs that use literature in ways that are the most helpful to gifted students and make the most effective use of their abilities. In programs for gifted students it is important to go beyond a basic response to the need for more literature in the curriculum.

One way to approach the question of guiding gifted readers is to consider their intellectual and emotional development in light of reading and literature. What are the intellectual and emotional challenges they face specifically because they are gifted? What reading programs can be offered to help them meet these challenges successfully?

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GIFTED CHILD AS READER

As is so often the case in gifted education, we can express the reading characteristics of gifted children by using variations on the word more. They read earlier; some are spontaneous preschool readers, and nearly all learn to read independently soon after classroom instruction begins. They read better, requiring less drill (if any) to master each technique of the reading process. They read longer; during the peak reading years (grades four through eight) many of them spend many more hours each week reading than their classmates do, and some gifted youngsters continue to be voracious readers into senior high and adulthood, when most people find less time for leisure reading (Whitehead, 1984). Typically they read a greater variety of literature; they are more likely to branch out from realistic fiction to fantasy, historical fiction, and biography (Hawkins, 1983).

READING AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The presence of an ability implies a need for the opportunity to develop that ability. Thus Barbara Clark (1983) outlined cognitive characteristics that differentiate gifted children from others, and then went on to list needs related to each characteristic. Her list includes the following needs:

*To be exposed to new and challenging information about the environment and the culture.

*To be exposed to varied subjects and concerns.

*To be allowed to pursue ideas as far as their interests take them.

*To encounter and use increasingly difficult vocabulary and concepts.

*To be exposed to ideas at rates appropriate to the individual's pace of learning.

*To pursue inquiries beyond allotted time spans.

All of these needs can be met easily and inexpensively through a program based on books and reading. If the opportunity for group book discussion is added, the program will also meet other cognitive needs listed by Clark:

*To have access to intellectual peers.

*To share ideas verbally in depth.

*To have a longer incubation time for ideas.

*To pursue ideas and integrate new ideas without forced closure or products demanded.

*To build skills in productive thinking.

*To draw generalizations and test them.

PROMOTING INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BOOKS

Teachers working with groups of gifted students can use books to promote intellectual development by (a) using literature as a supplement to the readings in basal texts, (b) forming discussion groups based on books, and (c) following programs such as the Junior Great Books discussion format.
As interest grows in the use of literature in the reading curriculum, textbook publishers are beginning to supply appropriate materials. Teachers can also develop their own programs by requiring students to read whole books in addition to their reading in the basal series. For gifted students, this requirement can be positive, rewarding them for something they already enjoy. Students can keep reading notebooks, in which they write title, author, date read, and a short comment on the book. To ensure both quality control and choice, it is best if the student can select the required reading from a list prepared by the teacher or librarian.

Book discussions can be led by teachers, librarians, or volunteers and should focus on themes and ideas in the literature read, with the emphasis on higher level thinking skills rather than on plot summaries and fact questions.

One formalized method of discussing literature is that promoted by The Great Books Foundation. The Junior Great Books program offers a series of 12 readings for each grade from 2nd through 12th, as well as training courses for leaders.

For individual gifted students, books can be part of the educational program if an adult (parent, teacher, librarian, or other mentor) offers reading guidance, discussing what the student has read and making suggestions for related reading--always keeping in mind the student's interests, reading ability, and reading background. The goal is to expose the student to a variety of books of high quality and stretch the student a little beyond his or her previous awareness. Gifted students do not automatically know what is good literature; they need information and guidance to find the best.

Adults offering reading guidance or leading book discussion groups will need suggestions for books that are appropriate for gifted students. The most extensive lists available are found in "Books for the Gifted Child" (Baskin & Harris, 1980), "Books for the Gifted Child, Volume 2" (Hauser & Nelson, 1988) and "Guiding Gifted Readers" (Halsted, 1988).

LITERATURE AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In recent years educators and parents have become more aware of the need to nurture the social and emotional development of gifted children in addition to meeting their intellectual needs. Gifted children and youth must face the same challenges as they grow that everyone else faces, but the phenomenon of giftedness can make growing up more difficult for them. They may experience isolation, feelings of difference and even inferiority, and the sense of being misunderstood or not understood by their classmates and by adults. Because of their extreme sensitivity and intensity, they may be more seriously affected by teasing and criticism than most. They must continually choose between the alternatives of using their ability or fitting in with their group (Gross, 1989). These affective concerns can also be addressed through the use of books. In many novels for children and young people, the issues just listed are major themes, whether or not the characters are identified as gifted. Adults who read and discuss such books with gifted young people can guide them in preparing for or coping with the extra dimensions that being gifted adds to the process of growing up.

PROMOTING EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BOOKS

Those who use book discussions to meet emotional needs are using a form of DEVELOPMENTAL BIBLIOTHERAPY. Developmental bibliotherapy offers a way of assisting individuals who are facing a particular life stage or a specific situation--such as

giftedness--for which they can be better prepared through reading and discussion. Rather than merely recommending a book to a child, it includes three components: a reader, a book, and a leader who will read the same book and prepare for productive discussion of the issues the book raises.
To be effective, the leader must be aware of the process of bibliotherapy: IDENTIFICATION, in which the reader identifies with a character in the book; CATHARSIS, the reader's experiencing of the emotions attributed to the character; and INSIGHT, the application of the character's experience to the reader's own life. The leader then frames questions that will confirm and expand on these elements.

Like reading guidance, developmental bibliotherapy can be used with individuals or with groups. However, using it well requires more background than reading guidance, and the leader must be alert for indications that the child should be referred to a mental health professional. More information on developmental bibliotherapy can be found in GUIDING GIFTED READERS (Halsted, 1988), and background information on clinical bibliotherapy, the forerunner of developmental bibliotherapy, can be found in BIBLIOTHERAPY: THE INTERACTIVE PROCESS (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986).

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RESOURCES

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