

# Left to Chance Gifted Students & Independent Reading

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**S**election of materials, one of the required classes when obtaining a school library endorsement, teaches school librarians how to find, analyze, and build a library collection representing all learners. AASL emphasizes the importance of reading and collection development in the groundwork of the *National School Library Standards*, the Common Beliefs. In the beliefs, reading is described as “the core of academic and personal competency” and the encouragement of lifelong readers is a primary goal of school libraries (AASL 2018, 13).

When developing collections, school librarians can easily find resources recommending books for struggling learners and English as a second language (ESL) students, as well as students who are reading at grade level. As a new school librarian, I came away from my courses armed with lists and websites to help me meet the needs of these students. However, it wasn’t long before I realized there was a group of students I was missing—my gifted learners.

Even though all ages of gifted learners face this dilemma, it became apparent that my students in grades three through five faced even more of a struggle than older and younger students. Often, younger students branch out into middle-grade chapter books, and high school students reach for adult literature. However, it’s difficult to find materials for grades 3–5 that push students intellectually, without stretching the boundaries of mature content. I found myself scouring websites, stretching the limits of advanced searches on websites, and constantly looking at reviews and book levels. Though I could pick up a vendor catalog or a journal and find a focus on books appealing to ESL learners or “high/low” books (high interest, low reading level), try as I might, I couldn’t find much

addressing students who needed basically the opposite—high reading level, lower age interest.

This gap in literature plagued me for years and eventually became the focus of my own research. The asynchronous development of gifted learners is well known, but little has been done to address this characteristic regarding recreational reading. In fact, reading in general, as it pertains to gifted students, is an area that lacks research. My gifted students were challenged in their math or science classes, but lacked engagement in advancing their reading skills. When it came to recreational reading, something teachers knew was important, they assumed their gifted students would be able to find their own materials. The thinking was that because the students could *read* a variety of materials on their own, they could also *find* the materials on their own. However, it was apparent to me, as the school librarian, this wasn’t always the case. Many of our gifted students were not achieving high levels of independent reading. I decided I needed to dig into this phenomenon a bit more and find out what my gifted readers truly wanted and needed. By understanding their needs more clearly, I hoped to develop concrete ways in which I could better support their reading habits. The results of my research allowed me to generate a list of ten steps that teachers and librarians could take to help foster the independent reading habits of gifted students. Those ten tips follow the research findings in this article.

### Reading Benefits

Reading is a fundamental skill, to be sure, but reading often opens the door to so much more. Studies show time and again that reading is beneficial in a variety of ways (National Endowment for the

Arts 2008; National Center for Education Statistics 2013; Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 2010; and Sullivan and Brown 2013). Frequent readers ultimately have “better work habits, social and emotional development, language structure, and overall school performance” (Arthur 1995, 3). However, reading cannot solely exist in a curricular setting; it must extend beyond the school day for students and exist as an activity to partake in for personal enjoyment and growth.

Given the benefits of recreational reading, I wanted to know how I could best support my gifted readers in this endeavor when they were so often left to their own devices.

### Research Questions and Methodology

The purpose of my study (Churchill 2017) was to identify factors affecting gifted students’ selection of recreational reading materials. I wanted to find out:

- How outside sources influenced their choices
- What types of materials and formats they liked to read recreationally
- If they selected different materials in different locations
- What other influences impacted their recreational reading selections

In order to fully understand the complex variables influencing my students’ choices, I took a qualitative, exploratory, multiple case study approach to my research. I interviewed eleven of my fourth- and fifth-grade gifted students. I interviewed students individually over the course of several weeks and asked them to answer with their own thoughts and opinions. They were told there were no right or wrong answers. After interviews were



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completed, I identified common themes.

The results of my interviews were grouped into easily identifiable categories. Students talked about who influenced their reading selections, what they liked to read for fun, when and where they liked to read, and why they thought certain kinds of books were enjoyable.

### Who Influenced Gifted Students' Reading Selections?

In keeping with findings of existing studies (Adler et al. 2004; Conniff 1993; Gambrell, Codling, and Palmer 1996; Larsen 1999; Manning and Manning 1984; Tate 2014), the biggest influence on gifted students' reading selections, outside of themselves, was their peers. Students discussed how friends, classmates, and even siblings persuaded them to read or not read certain books. Parents and grandparents had some influence over their choices, though far less than peers. Only rarely were teachers mentioned as an influence, and only the students who were directly referred to me for help mentioned me as an influence. However, the ultimate influencer was the students themselves. Regardless of what their friends, family, and teachers said, the deciding factor was if the student thought the book would be interesting. They made their own decisions about what they chose to engage in on their own time.

### What Do Gifted Students Like to Read Recreationally?

It will come as no surprise to any educator who has had a gifted student that fantasy was a much-loved genre for this group. From Harry Potter to Percy Jackson to *The Hobbit*, fantasy provides these children with a chance to explore the ins and outs of identity and life's challenges. Judith Wynn Halstead offered an explanation for why this genre appeals so strongly

to middle-grade readers: "They discover it at just the age when they are entering their own personal quests for identity and beginning to consciously establish their personal values" (2009, 218). This idea is echoed in another study by Susan Lee Stutler that suggests the deep content of the genres of fantasy and science fiction appeal to these students. Themes often include self-discovery and self-determination, and there are often "quests for friendship, freedom, or survival" that help the characters come to a "deeper understanding of themselves and others" (Stutler 2011, 46). They also contain wildly descriptive settings and worlds that stretch the reader's imagination.

Students also frequently identified books in a series as enjoyable reading choices. Like readers of all ages and abilities, the opportunity to get to know characters, see how they grow and change, and follow similar stories over an extended period of time is an appealing prospect.

The last genre/format that stood out from my interviews was what I called nonnarrative nonfiction. Examples of these books include the *Weird but True* series, *The Guinness Book of World Records*, and *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. Gifted students have a huge desire to read in order to learn. In fact, several students made sure to point out that if they weren't learning, it wasn't as fun. These types of books include lots of facts and information in quick, easily digestible bites—something that is very appealing to young readers looking to learn new information.

### Where Do Students Get the Materials They Read for Fun?

Libraries were far and away the most prominent place where these students said they obtained their recreational reading materials. Whether it was a public library or the school library, they saw libraries

as a resource. Despite the fact that students identified the library as their primary source of recreational reading materials, circulation data showed students were checking out fewer materials from the school library than they had previously. Additionally, students often weren't aware the school library had certain materials they wanted to read. To me, these were inconsistencies. How could we be providing students with most of their independent reading books if they weren't checking out as often or weren't finding materials that they enjoyed as often? It could be that because the students were being interviewed by their school librarian, they felt the need to say libraries were more influential on their reading habits than they actually were. This would be something interesting to study with an outsider doing the interviews to see if they still rate libraries as a high source for independent reading materials.

### When and Where Do Gifted Students Read Recreationally?

Students did most of their recreational reading at home: either before or after school, during travel times, or while a sibling had an activity. In fact, only one student said they read for fun at school. This reflects what recent research has found (Scholastic 2015): recreational reading time in schools is decreasing drastically. The potential reasons for this are numerous and have been a source of discussion among reading professionals since the U.S. National Reading Panel discouraged the assumption that leisure reading would lead to the development of reading skills and fluency (2000). From No Child Left Behind and increasing emphasis on high-stakes tests to reading management programs and leveling systems, many factors influence this statistic. For our part, we must ask what can be

done to maximize reading time at home. Are there ways educators and school librarians can make recreational reading a priority in schools? These are important questions deserving deeper examination.

### **Why Do Gifted Students Choose to Read in Their Free Time?**

There were two reasons why students said they read for fun. The first is the simplest. They read because they like it and want to learn. Ultimately, these students will choose to pick up a book and read it because they enjoy reading as a hobby. Even though this love of reading and desire to learn is inherent in most gifted students, educators still need to foster those dispositions. We also need to teach students how they can challenge themselves as readers. We cannot let them stagnate in their reading growth; to do so would be a disservice to them.

The other reason was that they read to meet academic or personal reading goals. However, students held conflicting views on this kind of “assigned” reading in its various

forms. Many felt assigned reading, especially books read to meet their required reading program goal, were not considered “fun” and therefore did not qualify as recreational reading. Even voluntary programs involving the state children’s choice books and a book competition did not typically produce selections considered recreational because the students “had to” read those books. However, several students said they often found they ended up enjoying books that were assigned reading and decided to mark them as recreational reading anyway simply because the books were enjoyable. Similar sentiments are also reflected in the students’ statements regarding the school’s required reading program and the levels they were assigned. While most students identified the program as being a help to find books “in their level,” many also stated the program kept them from reading recreational materials they wanted to read because those were outside their goal range. The books that they read to meet their goal were often considered a means to meeting their goal, not something read for enjoyment. For a few though, the reading program and its goals were

secondary to the joy of reading the book, and as long as they enjoyed the book, they marked it as recreational.

There are many questions that could be asked to examine this particular aspect of the findings. While the research in the area of assigned reading is growing, very little of it focuses on how it impacts gifted readers. Yet another hole in the research landscape that needs to be filled.

### **Where We Need to Explore Further**

After analyzing the data, I came away with three main ideas warranting further exploration. The first is the role of the school library and school librarian in recreational reading. How can we make sure gifted students are aware of the library’s offerings and increase their number of check-outs? To that end, how can the school librarian impact this area in particular? The students who worked directly with me to find reading materials not only had higher circulation rates, but also reported enjoying more of the items they checked out. Clearly, a school

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librarian can have a direct impact on the recreational reading habits of a gifted student. How can we make this more intentional and widespread?

The second idea benefitting from closer examination is the concept of assigned, or even encouraged, reading and gifted students. While many students liked having guidelines to help them find materials that would push them, they also didn't like being restricted to only those materials. How can we help achieve a balance of this in our schools?

Finally, the results showed that, like their lower-ability counterparts, gifted boys on the whole read less and less proficiently than their female classmates. While this is a common finding in literacy literature, to see it reflected in gifted boys is concerning. What can we do to encourage gifted male students in their recreational reading?

## Ten Steps Librarians and Teachers Can Take

Ultimately, my research resulted in a list of ideas that school librarians, classroom teachers, and gifted coordinators can implement to ensure they are meeting the needs of gifted readers. Here is a list of ten actionable steps to take in order to achieve this goal:

**1. Facilitate peer groups.** Research says that students are most influenced by their peers when it comes to reading motivation. Capitalize on that by providing time and space for students to talk about books that they are enjoying.

**2. Engage in reading conferences.** By taking the time to check in on students' choices and progress with their independent reading materials, you can easily assess if your gifted students are engaged with

the materials they have selected and discover what motivates them to read.

### 3. Provide large amounts of fantasy and science fiction.

Because adolescents are interested in the journeys of self-discovery and the rich environments that occur in these genres, they are popular choices for young readers, especially gifted students. Having lots of choices in these genres will help keep them reaching to the shelves for more to read.

### 4. Provide a wide range of genres, including nonnarrative nonfiction.

Though many might gravitate toward fantasy and science fiction, gifted students can be challenged by new genres and formats. Some students also might not fall into the mold of enjoying the unrealistic genres and prefer more true-to-life books.

**5. Become familiar with as many titles as you can.** By learning about many popular and classic books, you will be able to match books with readers more easily. Ultimately, students decide to read a book based on if they think they would enjoy it or not. If you can find materials that they would enjoy, you are well on the way to getting them to read more.

**6. Take advantage of home reading** without being strict about requirements. Since most recreational reading takes place outside of school hours, try to encourage students to take time to read at home. However, requiring minutes or checklists can be demotivating to students, especially gifted readers. So choose flexible and engaging home reading programs and incentives.

**7. Level within reason.** In other words, be flexible with reading "programs." While students appreciate some guidance on how potentially difficult books may be, they don't like being limited to only materials in strictly defined

reading levels. Encouraging parents, classroom teachers, and even the students themselves to be flexible with leveling can keep students engaged and excited about what they are reading.

**8. Provide time for free reading in school.** While educators can't control what students spend time doing outside of school, we can make time for recreational reading during the school day. Make reading a priority in your classroom, library, and school and emphasize the importance of the activity by participating in it yourself.

**9. Pay extra attention to the reading habits of gifted boys.** Like their grade-level counterparts, gifted boys read less recreationally and have lower reading goals and achievement. By attending to the needs and interests of male students, educators can find motivating materials and continue to hold high expectations for reading achievement.

**10. Collaborate with colleagues** (other librarians, classroom teachers, gifted coordinators, etc.). The demands on educators are many. In order to maximize our influence, we can all work together to help meet the needs of gifted students. School librarians can help classroom teachers with peer clubs, reading recommendations, home reading programs, and more. Collaboration is a powerful tool, and we can use it to encourage our students to find a lifelong love of reading.

## Conclusion

Gifted readers deserve a school librarian who takes time to cultivate a relationship with them and provides them with ample opportunity to find what they want. They need teachers and parents willing to let them read the things that engage them recreationally. This isn't

necessarily a simple task. “Teachers struggling to meet basic requirements have little time to suggest and follow through with extra reading for brighter students. Parents may find it difficult to keep track of what their children are reading. Guiding children’s reading appears to be one more unaffordable luxury in an increasingly busy world” (Halstead 2009, 7). Yet, we must persist in providing these opportunities to all students, not just the ones we deem in more need of our attention. As Albus Dumbledore said in an oft-mentioned series in this study, “It is our choices, Harry, that show who we truly are, rather than our abilities” (Rowling 1999, 333). Our brightest students should not stagnate in their growth because we assume that “merely providing books,” as Judith Wynn Halstead says, is enough. We must “fill in the gaps” and “bring gifted children and books together more effectively” (Halstead 2009, 7). We simply cannot leave this to chance.



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She was a member of the initial *NxtWave* cohort, obtaining a doctorate in Educational Leadership with an emphasis in School Libraries. She has a forthcoming article in *The Michigan Reading Journal* on using picture books to expand vocabulary. She has served as the Nebraska School Librarians Association Secretary and has been a member of AASL’s Innovative Reading Grant subcommittee and the Program Reviewer Committee.

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