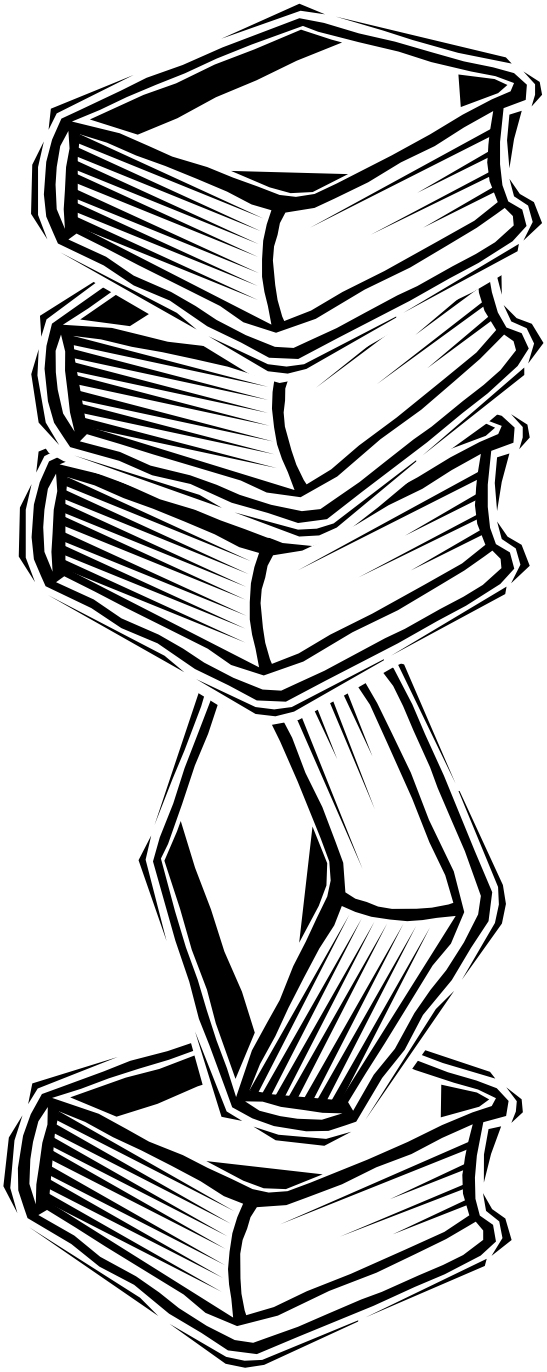
Gifted Readers

Who Are They, and How Can They Be Served in the Classroom?



by Andrea Vosslamber

Many of us may not perceive a link between the traditional tale of *The Three Little Pigs* and Stein's *Goosebumps* series, but Ivan, a 6-year-old in my classroom, did. I had used the story of *The Three Little Pigs,* along with other traditional tales, to point out the introduction, complication, and resolution structure of simple narrative. Ivan's mother spoke to me after the series of lessons and reported that her son had come out with a surprising comment. Having recently been to South Africa, where his grandmother had read him one of the *Goosebumps* books, he had forged a link. He told his mother that he had finally worked out what was "wrong" with the *Goosebumps* series—they had an introduction and a complication, but no resolution! Quite an insight for a 6-year-old. His behavior showed evidence of an advanced reading ability.

The Gifted Reader

Who is a gifted reader? In order to answer this question, we need to define what we mean by *gifted* and what we mean by *reading* (Jackson, Donaldson, & Cleland, 1988). A well-known definition of 'gifted' is put forward by Joseph Renzulli who posited that there are three clusters of human traits that interact in the gifted. The traits are as follows and are represented in three inter-linking circles:

- *Above-average ability*: This does not mean high IQ, but "a wide field of general and specific ability"
- *Task commitment*: "the capacity for sustained motivation, dedicated practice, and excellence in the development of ideas and products"
- *Creativity*: "involves fluency, flexibility and originality of thought, the ability to produce novel and effective solutions to problems, and to create clever and original products" (McAlpine, 1996, p. 35).

Renzulli's three-ring model will be used as the definition of gifted students for this article.

Reading may be defined as simply being able to decode text. However children who fall into the category *hyperlexic* are accurate decoders, even being able to decode pseudowords, yet have very poor comprehension (Jackson, Donaldson, & Cleland, 1988). Usually, however, *reading* is associated with the ability to comprehend, as well as decode. In discussing gifted readers, a *bottom up* definition of reading will be applied, namely, that reading is the ability to comprehend the message that the author intended on the basis of accurate decoding ability (Adams & Bruck, 1993).

The gifted reader is one who evidences the three aspects of giftedness that Renzulli proposes (above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity) in the area of reading. Both cognitive and affective behaviors of gifted readers may be explained within the framework of Renzulli's three circles. Cognitive behaviors refer to thinking processes, these being mainly found in the above-average ability ring, with the outcomes of these behaviors being within the task commitment circle. Affective behaviors are those more emotional aspects of giftedness. They will mainly arise within the creativity circle. However, just as there is overlap between Renzulli's circles, so there is overlap between the affective and cognitive realms. Thus, some affective behaviors may arise in other than just the creativity circle and vice versa.

Characteristics of the Gifted Reader

Above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity may evidence themselves in many ways in the gifted reader. Table 1 summarizes some of the more common indicators.

Above-Average Ability

Several points listed in the above-average ability column are worthy of comment. Despite the move away from intelligence tests as *the* way to define giftedness, they can still be used as a measure, particularly in the logical, mathematical, or linguistic areas of giftedness. It must be remembered, however, that most intelligence tests must be administered by a qualified psychologist (McAlpine, 1996). Secondly, mention is made of an ability to comprehend text well. Some differentiation between comprehending well as opposed to average comprehension needs to be made. Catron (1986, p. 136) listed the specific skills that gifted readers possess, as opposed to those skills employed by average readers:

1. anticipation of meaning based on visual clues
   - punctuation, the use of commas to set off appositives;
   - syntax, the use of *however* to signal exceptions;
   - organizational patterns, such as cause and effect signaling the need to look for two related descriptions, circumstances, or facts;
2. use of prior knowledge and experience, personal identification and reader purpose; and
3. awareness of the cognitive processing of text for information/concept gathering. Links are made between the present text and what the reader has previously read, and, as a result, concepts are formed or developed.

My pupil, Ivan, clearly was engaging in this process.

Some of these differences in comprehension, which separate the gifted from the average reader, can be seen in the results of research conducted by Fehrenbach (1991). Taking a group of gifted readers (identified by high intelligence, high language basic skills test results, and high reading comprehension results) and a group of average readers (identified by the same test measures, but with average results), she tested them by having each student read aloud an easy passage. Each student was instructed to verbalize his or her thoughts as often as he or she chose and at least at points indicated by asterisks after every few sentences. Any student who did not stop to comment at an asterisk was asked, "What are you thinking?" In the second session, the same procedure was followed for students reading a difficult passage. Her findings showed that gifted readers used six strategies significantly more often than average readers, namely—rereading, inferring, analyzing text structure, watching or predicting, evaluating, and relating what is read to content area knowledge.

Many gifted children learn to read early, and as much as this may be a sign of giftedness, it is not always so. Some of the children who are hyperlexic, do learn to read very early, but because they have little or no comprehension are not termed gifted readers (Jackson, Donaldson, & Cleland, 1988). It is also noted that young gifted children do not necessarily learn to read early (Alvino, 1989), something Piaget also noted in his studies on the development of children (Polette, 1992). This may be the case even where young gifted children have participated in preschool programs designed to help them to learn to read early (Jackson & Cleland, 1982).

Table 1
Indicators of Gifted Reading Ability in Terms of Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness

Indicators of Above-Average Ability	Indicators of Task Commitment	Indicators of Creativity
• Advanced IQ (Hartley, 1996) • High scores on language achievement tests (Anderson Tollefson, & Gilbert, 1985; Hartley) • Higher levels of reading than peers (Catron, 1986; Gaug, 1984; Hartley; Trezise, 1978) • Large vocabulary (Catron; Greenlaw, 1986; Smith, 1991) • Good memory of things read (Smith) • Strong comprehension of texts (Smith) • Early reading (Baskin & Harris, 1980; Cathcart, 1994; Halsted, 1988, 1990; Trezise, 1978)	• Long attention span (Ringler & Weber, 1984; Smith) • Voracious reading (Halsted) • Selection of high level reading materials (Ringler & Weber) • Spontaneous reading of materials to prove/disprove points (Ringler & Weber)	• Complex thoughts and ideas (Smith) • Good judgement and logic (Smith) • Forms the relationships between concepts (Smith) • Produce original ideas and products (Halsted; Smith) • Appreciates beauty (Greenlaw) • Sense of humor (Greenlaw) • Divergent thinking (Catron; Halsted) • Problem-solving strategies used to solve unanswered questions (Halsted) • High level of sensitivity and empathy (McAlpine, 1996) • Concern over moral and ethical issues and a strong sense of justice (McAlpine) • Social leadership abilities (McAlpine)

Task Commitment

Some interesting comments are made about the voracious reading habits of gifted readers. Gifted readers may read into the night (Hartley, 1996), or read twice the number of books than average-ability readers (Halsted, 1988). Reading fulfills an extra sense of urgency about "needing-to-know" that gifted children seem to have (Halsted). These reading behaviors are tied to the perception that reading is fun, and therefore, it is a preferred activity (Anderson, Tollefson, & Gilbert, 1985).

Creativity

An interesting anecdote comes to mind in the area of divergent thinking. A 6-year-old whom I once taught came to me in class and asked if he could shut the door because the sixth-grade students in music were too loud. I replied that they were not really that noisy, and we needed the door open to keep the room cool. He replied, "Okay then, I guess I'll just have to think a bit louder."

On a cautionary note, much as the creative traits listed above may be evident in a gifted reader, one must be aware that they are not necessarily specific to gifted readers, nor will each gifted reader necessarily display all of these affective behaviors.

Underachieving Gifted Readers

A group of children who may be gifted but may not show above average ability or related task commitment behaviors could be labeled as underachieving gifted students. Home life and school life can be contributing factors to such students. The child may be from an economically or socially disadvantaged background with little or no access to books (Baskin & Harris, 1980). In addition, English may be a second language, and therefore the giftedness is masked by language difficulties (Cathcart, 1994). Conversely, the child could be disadvantaged by a wealthy (or poor) background where too much entertainment (e.g. TV, video games, and so forth) is provided that intellectually pacifies the child (Baskin & Harris, 1980). High expectations at home may lead to a perfectionism that inclines children not to try, in case they do not meet their own expectations (Halsted, 1988). In the affective realm,

the child may feel a sense of isolation due to intense interest in subject matter that peers do not understand (Trezise, 1978). The gifted child may need to choose between fitting in with the group and showing ability (Halsted, 1990).

School life can also be difficult for gifted readers. Children may be frustrated by the material provided. It may either too highly pitched, emotionally, for the child (Cathcart, 1994), or the material may be far too easy or immature (Trezise, 1978). Cathcart wrote,

> A 5-year-old boy was referred to a psychologist for complete failure even to begin to learn to read. He just didn't seem to be interested. While he was being tested by the psychologist, the little boy was asked to give the names of some animals he knew. He promptly reeled off the Latin names of various extinct species. 'Where did you learn all those?' asked the startled psychologist. 'I read about them at home in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*' replied the five-year-old 'reading failure'. This highly gifted little boy, too polite to tell the teacher the books she offered him were too easy, had been labeled 'backward' for months before this test revealed his true ability level. (p. 3)

We must be concerned as educators to have procedures in place to identify such children, and to know how to put programs in place that will cater for their educational needs.

Teacher Identification

Some schools in New Zealand have a policy for gifted children. Usually included in that policy are identification procedures for children who have special abilities. Bethlehem College in Tauranga, New Zealand, has one such policy, which is comprehensive in scope.

> Methods of identification must be wide in scope, inclusive in emphases, and relate to definitions and ensuing programs. To be successful, any identification process must start early, but be continuous (an ongoing process), be aware of cultural differences, use multiple methods, and recognize that achievement is not the only measure of ability. Thus, we need a balance between subjective and objective procedures. A multifaceted approach will make it less likely for a gifted student to be unnoticed. (Sanders, 1994, p. 2)

Picking up on some of these points, a multifaceted identification procedure for gifted readers might include the following:

1. Talk to parents during enrollment about their child's language ability. Ask if the child can read, and if so, how he or she learned.
2. Be aware that certain methods of evaluation of students may be inappropriate for certain cultures.
3. Use assessment practices, such as:
   - Running records (Clay, 1985). These are ongoing and routinely done.
   - Record of skill mastery. Early school records that show the rapid mastery of phonic skills may be indicators of gifted reading.
   - Achievement test scores. Assessments for reading vocabulary, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension.
   - Self-made tests. These often concentrate on higher cognitive processing skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Clay, 1985).
   - Intelligence tests.
   - Title recognition test. In this test, the teacher constructs a list of book titles and asks the children to check all those that they know. (Dymock, 1995). This may indicate voracious reading.
   - Word recognition test..
4. Informal teacher observations:
   - Listen to the vocabulary the child uses. Does he or she choose interesting words, or express him or herself very clearly?
   - Look for evidence of critical thinking. This may arise during class discussion time or during specific problem-solving activities.
   - Look for evidence of thinking-outside-the box. This type of behavior may appear to be naughtiness, but it needs to be carefully considered and evaluated.
   - Listen for a sense of humor. Particularly humor that relies on puns.
   - Listen for unusual questions. These may betray deep thought processes and connections.
   - Language activities. Look for interest and attentiveness in involvement in these activities.
5. Input from others:
   - Talk to other teachers about their observations of the child. For young readers this may include comments from the pre-school teachers.
   - Peer nomination. This can be done directly or quite unobtrusively. It could be done using a teacher designed form that asks questions, such as, "Who is the best reader in the class?"
   - Self assessment. This can occur when children are asked to rate themselves as to their reading ability.

- Parents. These are a vital source of information on reading habits.

Classroom Programs

Identification is an important aspect of serving the gifted child, but is not an end in itself. To quote the Bethlehem policy, "The main purpose of identification is not so we can label children, but so we can effectively match children to appropriate learning tasks—both in the pace of learning and the level at which tasks are set" (as cited in Sanders, 1994, p. 2). The provision of special classroom programs is necessary if schools want to adequately serve children who have high-reading ability.

Enrichment vs. Acceleration

There are two main ways that gifted readers' needs are addressed in the classroom—enrichment or acceleration. Enrichment refers to "learning activities providing depth and breadth to regular teaching according to the child's abilities and needs" (Townsend, 1996, p. 362). Examples of enrichment activities involve children being given activities or resources that are more demanding than those given to their classmates. These could include "independent projects, mentors, learning centers, opportunities to use higher level thinking skills, and extension activities" (Townsend, p. 36.). Table 2 summarizes some of the advantages and disadvantages of enrichment.

As an alternative to enrichment, acceleration could be used. "Acceleration occurs when children are exposed to new content at an earlier age than other children or when they cover the same content in less time" (Townsend, 1996, p. 361). This can involve starting school early, skipping a class, starting university early, taking an advanced class, or compressing the curriculum (Townsend, p. 362). As with enrichment, acceleration also has advantages and disadvantages (see Table 3). Given the advantages and disadvantages of both acceleration and enrichment, Gaug (1984) suggested that both be used. "Enrichment and acceleration can complement each other and enable gifted readers to pursue their own interests in reading, develop higher level thinking skills, avoid boredom, and still master skills" (p. 375).

Table 2
Advantages and Disadvantages of Enrichment

Advantages of Enrichment	Disadvantages of Enrichment
• Avoids problems associated with overt labeling (Townsend, 1996). Children remain in their regular classes and have their individual needs met, just like all the other students. • "Avoids a fragmented learning experience by keeping gifted and talented students connected—albeit horizontally—to the general classroom activities and topics of study" (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 39). • "May curb problems associated with intellectual frustration and boredom" (Ministry of Education, p. 39.).	• "Often little more than busy work where children get more of the same" (Townsend, p. 367). • "Often assumed to have the same purpose for all children and usually pays little attention to the specific nature of the abilities of gifted children" (Townsend, p. 367). • "Often provided intermittently, or as a filler or one-off activity that provides relief from or contrast to regular classroom activities" (Townsend, p. 367).

Note. Compiled from Townsend (1996) and the Ministry of Education (2000).

Practical Outcomes for the Classroom

Bearing in mind Gaug's comments about using enrichment and acceleration in combination, how can gifted readers be served in the classroom? In considering these options, it must be remembered that there are individual differences in the gifted population (Hartley, 1996). These strategies should be selected according to the needs of the individual student. If a first- or second-grade child who can already read enters school, allow him or her to bypass the learning of decoding skills that follow a lockstep approach through the early readers (Catron, 1986; Hartley, 1996). Rather, emphasize comprehension skills, which may include critical reading skills and creative reading, rather than mere decoding (Trezise, 1978).

There is a danger that young capable readers are held back from more advanced work due to poor writing ability (Trezise, 1978). If harder books have accompanying workbook exercises that the child cannot master because of lack of fine motor skill development, invent and prepare different activities that will extend them without requiring writing skills. Such activities might include:

- character analysis using mobiles;

Table 3
Advantages and Disadvantages of Acceleration

Advantages of Acceleration	Disadvantages of Acceleration
• Some research findings show greater academic achievement for gifted children who were accelerated, compared to those who were not (Gaug, 1984). • Provides mental stimulation and opportunities to interact with like minds (Ministry of Education, 2000).	• For the gifted reader, stories and activities at a higher class level could be inappropriate, "involving situations beyond students' emotional and social level" (Gaug, p. 374). • Younger students may feel isolated and different in a class with older peers (Ministry of Education).

Note. Compiled from Gaug (1984) and the Ministry of Education (2000).

- plot summarization of individual chapters in picture form;
- plot summarization of a number of chapters in picture form;
- character development through a series using a speech bubble and a decorated story character;
- character development through a single story using pictures; and
- nonfiction material to conduct basic research, producing, as an outcome, a poster.

Young, competent readers should be given chapter books to read (Halsted, 1988), and may benefit from being promoted to a higher class. As gifted readers mature, they will benefit from instruction in advanced comprehension and thinking skills. As a means of developing higher thinking skills in all learners, Bloom's taxonomy might be used as a guide. For most classroom programs, the majority of instruction being given is in the knowledge and comprehension areas. In all programs, the higher levels should be emphasized (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 49). The gifted program should focus mainly, therefore, on evaluation, synthesis, and analysis, rather than knowledge, comprehension, and application, which are less challenging for all learners.

In order to help students function at the higher levels of comprehension, high level tests should be used to uncover areas of deficient skill (Catron, 1986). Once the particular strengths and weaknesses of the pupils have been identified they can be addressed in day-to-day classroom work. Discussion about books is one way that higher comprehension skills can be enhanced. After students have read a passage, teachers can pose questions such as, "What inferences can be made on the basis of the reading you did? What were the main ideas and the subordinate ideas? What about the prevailing tone and mood of the selection? What can you say about the author's biases or his or her purposes? Can you speculate about the characters' motivations?" (Trezise, 1978, p. 745). Discussion groups could be selected from across the levels of the school. A teacher who is also interested in reading and higher cognitive skills could facilitate discussion about books that the students had read, deliberately aiming at the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Halsted, 1990; Halsted, 1988). Another idea is to choose books on a common theme (e.g., *Island of the Blue Dolphins* [O'Dell, 1966], *The Iceberg Hermit* [Roth, 1974], *Ice Trap!* [Hooper & Robertson, 2000], *Robinson Crusoe* [Defoe & Heller, 1998]) and have the students discuss these from the standpoint of qualities needed for survival and making appropriate linkages or correlations among the texts (Halsted).

Creative and inquiry reading are other ways of encouraging higher thinking skills. Creative reading involves "synthesis, integration, application, and extension of ideas. A story may be dramatized through the use of music, dance, or visual arts, or a character or theme may be developed in a new and different way" (Catron, 1986, p. 139). Inquiry reading involves students carefully formulating a question that will need to be researched for several weeks. After researching their questions, the students choose a creative way to present their findings (Cassidy, 1981).

Good literature is a must for gifted readers as they develop their higher cognitive skills. Gifted students will not necessarily choose high quality literature, so they need to be directed to it by discerning adults (Baskin & Harris, 1980; Hartley, 1996). There are many resources available that summarize the various lists of classical literature. Halsted (1988) provided a list of criteria for books that encourage intellectual stimulation, including a high level of language, pronunciation guides, good use of literary devices, and many more. Baskin and Harris, among others, identified a list of books that meet Halsted's (1990) criteria and included a short synopsis of plots. Good literature is also necessary for vocabulary development (Hartley). Boothby (1986) listed books that enhance the vocabulary of gifted children by studying connotations, figurative language, and etymology (p. 675).

Affective needs of the gifted reader also should be served in the school program. Bibliotherapy is the term given to the use of literature to help students deal

with emotional difficulties they might be facing (Halsted, 1988; Halsted, 1990). Halsted provides a list of books that might help the gifted child deal with problems related to establishing an identity, being alone, getting along with others, and using abilities.

Conclusion

Teachers who meet the needs of their students are also concerned in the need to identify gifted abilities so as to provide suitable programs. Ongoing, comprehensive identification procedures should help with the recognition of above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity in the area of reading. Using a combination of enrichment and acceleration, specialized programs can then be put in place to meet both the cognitive and the affective needs of high-ability readers. GCT

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