Research-Based Practices for Talented Readers

How can we challenge talented readers to increase their reading development and reach their full potential?

Little research has focused on identifying and teaching talented readers, or on using the pedagogy of gifted education (e.g., critical and creative problem solving and thinking; acceleration; curriculum modification and differentiation; independent study; advanced content; self-selected, interest-based opportunities) to encourage and develop advanced, continuous reading progress in talented readers (Jackson & Roller, 1993; Renzulli & Reis, 1989). Recently, Reis, et al. (2004) synthesized research in this area and suggested that talented readers can be defined by four characteristics:

• reading early and at advanced levels
• using advanced processing in reading
• reading with enthusiasm and enjoyment
• demonstrating advanced language skills (oral, reading, and written)

Talented readers need appropriately challenging instruction and curricular content that helps them make continuous progress in reading. They have differentiated talents and instructional needs that require advanced learning opportunities in order to challenge and extend their abilities; to enable them to read content above their current reading levels; to engage and think about complex texts; and to extend conventional basal reading instruction, which is usually below their chronological grade level. In one study, 40–50% of the regular reading curriculum was eliminated for academically talented students with strengths in reading, without any decline in reading achievement as measured by the Reading Comprehension Subtests of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Reis et al., 2005).

Questions

Questions Addressed in Research About Talented Readers

Research questions pertinent to talented readers relate to the level of differentiated instruction and instructional and curricular practices used to...


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meet their needs in regular classrooms, the perceptions that teachers have about whether they are meeting the needs of this population, the types of processing and self-regulated behaviors talented readers use when interpreting text, and, most importantly, the optimal strategies educators should use to maximize these students’ reading. Four essential questions emerge in a review of the related research and discourse in this area:

1. **Definitions**: How are talented readers defined, and what types of processes do these students use when reading at different stages of reading development and maturity?

2. **Current Practices**: Do teachers use differentiated teaching practices to challenge talented readers?

3. **Available Strategies**: What instructional or curriculum strategies or practices can ensure that talented readers make continuous progress in reading?

4. **Conclusions**: What ramifications occur when the academic needs of talented readers are not addressed?

**Definitions**

**Talented Readers: Definitions and Characteristics**

Defining talented readers and identifying their characteristics are challenging, as no consensus exists in the research or anecdotal case studies literature. Not all academically gifted students read at high levels, and not all talented readers will be identified as academically gifted because of the variation of abilities in this population (Durkin, 1990; Jackson, 1988). Characteristics of talented readers have been described anecdotally, but little empirical research has focused on this population. Dole and Adams (1983) defined talented readers as “reading approximately two or more years above grade level as measured by a standardized reading test and identified as intellectually gifted with potential for high reading performance” (p. 66). Kaplan (1999) described talented readers as avid, enthusiastic, voracious readers who use reading differently for different purposes. Others have described them as spending more time reading than their peers and reading a greater variety of literature (Collins & Aiex, 1995; Halsted, 1990). Stainthorp and Hughes (2004) found that talented readers often teach themselves to read prior to any instruction at home or in school. Halsted (1994) found that talented readers understand language subtleties, use language for humor, write words and sentences early, and produce superior creative writing. Additionally, some talented students automatically integrate prior knowledge and experience into their reading; utilize higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; and successfully communicate these ideas (Catron & Wingenbach, 1986). They may display verbal ability in self-expression, use colorful and descriptive phrasing, demonstrate advanced understanding of language, have an expansive vocabulary, perceive relationships between and among characters, and grasp complex ideas (Catron & Wingenbach, 1986; Dooley, 1993; Levande, 1993).

Anecdotal information suggests that talented readers display an advanced ability to understand a variety of texts (Bonds & Bonds, 1983; Halsted, 1994; Levande, 1993; Vacca, Vacca, & Grove, 1991) and have other language-related abilities, such as the ability to retain a large quantity of
information, advanced comprehension, varied interests and curiosity in texts, and high-level language development and verbal ability (Clark, 1997). Talented readers understand books to be a way to acquire information, clarify ideas, stimulate the imagination, and deepen understanding (Halsted, 1994). Kaplan (1999) reported that highly able readers often have preferences for science; history; biography; travel; poetry; and informational texts, such as atlases, encyclopedias, and how-to books. Jackson (1988) identified advanced readers as using complex processes made up of many sub-skills that vary in students. Halsted (1994) found a pattern that exists in some of these readers: they initially teach themselves how to read before they start school, are independent readers by second grade, know their favorite authors by third grade, and have well-established reading patterns by fifth grade. Unfortunately, current research also demonstrates that the reading levels of these students may decline by the time they reach upper elementary as a result of an absence of challenge in reading in school (Reis & Boeve, submitted). If these patterns are set (Halsted, 1994), negative outcomes may ensue.

A summary of the characteristics and descriptors of talented readers from the extant, primarily anecdotal, literature (Reis et al., 2004) identified the four characteristics mentioned earlier that have most often been applied to talented readers: reading early and at advanced levels, using advanced processing in reading, reading with enthusiasm and enjoyment, and demonstrating advanced language skills (oral, reading, and written). Using a random national sample of teachers, Reis (2003) validated the Scale for Rating the Superior Characteristics of Superior Students—Reading, a teacher’s rating scale for talented readers based on the analysis (an extension of the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students [SRBCSS]). The resulting stems, used in the scale (Table 1) for talented readers, yielded an alpha reliability of .96.

Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Talented Readers</th>
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<tr>
<td>The student . . .</td>
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<tr>
<td>• eagerly engages in reading-related activities</td>
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<td>• applies previously learned literary concepts to new reading experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>• focuses on reading for an extended period of time</td>
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<tr>
<td>• pursues advanced reading material</td>
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<tr>
<td>• demonstrates tenacity when posed with challenging reading</td>
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<td>• shows interest in reading other types of interest-based reading materials</td>
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(Reis, 2003)
Current Practices

Current Classroom Reading Experiences of Talented Readers

Over the last two decades, limited research has addressed the classroom reading skills and subsequent experiences of talented readers. Taylor and Fry (1988) found that 78% to 88% of fifth- and sixth-grade average and above-average readers could pass pretests on basal comprehension skills before the material was covered. The average readers performed at approximately 92% accuracy, while the advanced readers performed at 93% accuracy on the comprehension skills pretest, suggesting that both talented and average readers may be spending time in school doing work that they already know.

A series of studies using the Classroom Practices Survey identified a disturbing pattern of minimal challenge (Archambault et al., 1993). Classroom teachers reported making only minor modifications in the regular curriculum to meet the needs of gifted students. In a follow-up observation study, Westberg et al. (1993) observed gifted and average-achieving students in forty-six classrooms, finding that third- and fourth-grade classroom teachers used little differentiation in instructional and curricular practices for gifted and talented students. In particular, gifted and talented or high-ability students experienced no instructional or curricular differentiation in 80% of the observed instructional activities in reading. A decade later, Reis et al. (2004) confirmed findings from the Westberg study. In-depth qualitative comparative case studies were used to study twelve third- and seventh-grade reading classrooms in urban and suburban schools. Observations of daily practices in reading classrooms to determine frequency and type of various differentiation practices—such as curriculum compacting, interest or instructional-level grouping arrangements, acceleration opportunities, and the nature of independent reading or work completed by talented readers—indicated that talented readers received some minimal levels of differentiated reading instruction in only three of the twelve classrooms. In the other nine classrooms, no challenging reading material or advanced instruction was provided for talented readers during regular classroom reading instruction. Appropriately challenging books were seldom made available for talented students, and they were rarely provided with more challenging work. Different patterns did emerge across urban and suburban school districts: the three classroom teachers who provided some level of differentiation taught in suburban schools. Richards (2003) found a similar pattern in a national random sample of third- to seventh-grade teachers. Asked for their perceptions about whether they provided levels of challenge for talented readers, the majority of classroom teachers believed that additional challenge was unnecessary and/or that they were simply unable to provide challenging reading instruction for talented students.

Insufficient Challenge

A pervasive finding emerging from the limited research or discussions on instructional practices for talented readers is that regular reading instruction is often too easy for talented readers (Chall & Conard, 1991; Collins &
Aiex, 1995; Dole & Adams, 1983; Reis, Hebert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995; Renzulli & Reis, 1989; Shrenker, 1997). Chall and Conard (1991) also found that the talented readers they studied were not adequately served in school, explaining that “their reading textbooks, especially, provided little or no challenge, since they were matched to students’ grade placement, not their reading levels” (p. 111). Many students were aware of this, according to Chall and Conard, who said that in interviews, students commented that they preferred harder books because they learned harder words and ideas from them.

Chall and Conard (1991) stated that when there is a match between a learner’s abilities and the difficulty of the instructional work, learning is enhanced. If, however, “the match is not optimal, learning is less efficient and development may be halted” (p. 19). Using textbooks that are several years below students’ reading level may result in arrested development as well as motivational problems for talented readers. In a longitudinal study of academically talented students who either achieved or underachieved in a large urban high school (Reis et al., 1995), underachieving students consistently acknowledged that the easy curriculum they encountered in elementary and middle school failed to prepare them for the rigors of challenging classes in high school, and most mentioned a lack of challenge in reading. In a recent study of talented readers in an after-school program, Reis and Boeve (submitted) found that many had never been challenged in reading, and when asked to read even slightly above grade level, they encountered frustration and gave up trying after only minutes of effort. In summary, the research on classroom reading experiences of talented readers suggests that although they can benefit from appropriately challenging levels of reading, they seldom receive it.

Available Strategies

Instructional and Curricular Strategies That Work

Allington (2002) concluded that all students need to interact with appropriately complex books. Renzulli and Reis (1989) found that many talented readers reap no benefit from conventional instruction in readings and would benefit from appropriately challenging levels of reading but that they seldom receive it.

Methods for differentiating curriculum and instruction for talented readers exist, and some research supports the effectiveness of specific instructional and curricular strategies with talented readers. Some strategies, when implemented well, can modify reading instruction for talented readers. Reis et al. (1993) found that with only one to two hours of training, teachers could compact curriculum for talented students. When teachers eliminated 49% of regular reading curricular content for students identified as gifted and talented in their classrooms, no differences were found between treatment and control groups on posttest achievement scores in reading comprehension. However, teachers had difficulty replacing the compacted curriculum with high-quality, challenging work, as doing so requires increased levels of support.

The use of instructional-level grouping with talented readers has resulted in increased understanding and enjoyment of literature (Gentry, 1999; Levande, 1993). In general, grouping academically talented students together for instruction has been found to produce positive achievement outcomes when the
curriculum content and instruction provided to students in different groups is appropriately differentiated to be challenging (Gentry, 1999; Kulik & Kulik, 1991; Rogers, 1991). It is the challenging content and instruction that occur within groups that makes grouping an effective instructional strategy (Kulik & Kulik, 1991; Rogers, 1991). In one study of advanced literature use with academically talented students, Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, and Little (2002) found that curricular units that stressed the application of reasoning to reading and writing, creation of high-quality products, and organization of learning around a major concept or theme produced significant differences in favor of treatment groups compared to control groups. This treatment was effective with students from both low and high socioeconomic groups.

Although little specificity is found on the nature of reading comprehension strategy instruction that should be provided to talented readers, one study suggests that there are differences in the type of strategies that gifted readers use as compared to their non-gifted peers (Fehrenbach, 1991). The skills more often used by gifted readers were rereading, inferring, analyzing structure, watching or predicting, evaluating, and relating information to content area. Accordingly, educators suggest that a differentiated reading program should enable students to interact with advanced content that has both depth and complexity (Kaplan, 1999), develop students’ higher-level comprehension skills (Collins & Aiex, 1995), and engage students with advanced reading skills instruction (Reis et al., 2005). The use of higher-level questioning and opportunities can be incorporated into reading experiences to enable talented readers to apply advanced reading strategies to challenging reading. These reading strategies incorporate higher-order thinking skills that should be a foundational component in the instruction of talented readers (Brown & Rogan, 1983; Catron & Wingenbach, 1986; Dole & Adams, 1983; Renzulli & Reis, 1989; Reis et al., 2005).

In one data-based study, Lamb and Feldhusen (1993) identified reading instruction strategies reported by teachers for advanced first-grade readers: grouping in the classroom (90%); higher-level basal readers (70%); independent reading (95%); computers (89%); and, in descending order of use, content acceleration to a higher grade level for reading, independent research, and using teaching materials other than basals. In contrast, a decade later, Richards (2003) found teachers reporting fairly minimal curricular differentiation for talented readers in a study of reading classroom practices. In another recent study about differentiated classroom practices for talented readers, (Reis et al., 2004), researchers spent over 100 days in classrooms finding that only 25% of third- and seventh-grade teachers actually used any differentiation strategies on some occasions to challenge talented readers. The methods used by the minority of teachers who did implement a few of these strategies included compacting (25%), within-class grouping (25%), use of advanced instruction (25%), use of higher-level questioning skills (25%), use of challenging content (25%), and use of technology during reading class (18%). Conflicting research exists about strategies teachers report using and the practices they are actually observed implementing to differentiate instruction for talented readers in their classrooms.
The Schoolwide Enrichment Model—Reading

A more optimistic view, however, extends to how teachers can learn to provide appropriate levels of challenge for all students, including those who are academically talented. Current research on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model—Reading (SEM-R) (Reis et al., 2005), using a randomized, control-group design, found that participating students improved their attitudes toward reading and increased reading comprehension and oral fluency. The goals of the SEM-R are to increase reading achievement and self-regulation strategies through increased interest and motivation. In phase 1, teachers stimulate interest in reading by engaging students through book talks and interesting read-alouds of a variety of genres, followed by scaffolding of higher-level questions. During phase 2, also called supported independent reading, students read silently from self-selected materials at appropriate levels of challenge and teachers conduct individualized, differentiated reading conferences with students. During this time, teachers assess students’ comprehension using higher-order questions and ensure that students are reading books that are adequately challenging. Phase 3 enables students to choose a pleasurable reading activity or project based on their interests from a menu of choices, such as independent study, creativity training activities, books on tape or CD, reading alone or with a friend, using technology, or doing interesting self-selected short-term projects.

The SEM-R has been implemented in three studies (Reis et al., 2005), two of which included the use of a cluster-randomized design. In the first study, randomly assigned urban elementary classrooms participated in direct instruction in reading. Experimental classrooms then participated in the SEM-R program, while the control group continued to participate in the traditional remedial reading and test preparation program. Significant differences favoring the treatment group were found in attitudes toward reading, reading comprehension, and reading fluency (Reis et al., 2005). During the second study, the SEM-R was implemented in two additional schools, one urban and one suburban, and in another school as an after-school enrichment reading program (Reis & Boeve, submitted). Researchers found significant differences favoring the treatment group in reading fluency and/or comprehension, as well as increases in students’ self-regulation to read for extended periods of time.

In summary, talented readers will benefit from challenging materials in reading based on their interests and from meeting together for a block of time on a daily basis (Kulik & Kulik, 1991; Rogers, 1991). They can be assigned appropriately challenging substitute books that offer depth and complexity (Kaplan, 1999) and challenge their comprehension and fluency. Talented readers can also be given opportunities to complete different creative products and participate in alternative writing assignments (Renzulli & Reis, 1989) and can be encouraged to bring prior knowledge and insight into their interpretations of challenging text (Reis et al., 2005). They can use technology to access Web sites of authors, read challenging books online, and interact with talented readers from other schools using literature circle discussion strategies. Technology can also be used

“It is the challenging content and instruction that occur within groups that makes grouping an effective instructional strategy.”
to access advanced content; to create concept maps and other technological products; and to write and revise stories, chapters, and even books (Reis et al., 2005).

**Results of Differentiation for Talented Readers**

Differentiation attempts to address the variations among learners in the classroom through multiple approaches that enrich, modify, and adapt instruction and curriculum to match students' individual needs (Renzulli, 1977, 1988; Tomlinson, 1995). Differentiation of instruction and curriculum suggests that students can be provided with materials and work of varied levels of difficulty through scaffolding, enrichment, acceleration, diverse kinds of grouping, and different time schedules (Tomlinson, 1995). For talented readers, differentiation has met with varied results. In a current research study, Reis and Boeve (submitted) found that with only twelve after-school sessions using challenging self-selected reading materials with talented readers, culturally diverse academically talented readers in third and fourth grades could achieve as much fluency growth as most readers make in a year. In this study, however, researchers found that these students did have difficulties participating in above-grade-level reading, due to an elementary school reading program that was consistently too easy. These talented urban readers were accustomed to expending minimal effort and had few self-regulation strategies to employ and few advanced-reading strategies that they could use when they were asked to read material that was slightly above their grade levels.

The strategies suggested in Table 2 are research-supported methods for differentiating instruction and curriculum for talented readers that can be used in combination to provide an enriching, advanced reading program. For example, curriculum compacting uses assessment that may lead to advanced content and products for students. This strategy, however, requires teachers to find appropriately challenging resources and materials and may also require classroom changes, such as the creation of a space for students to work together and for providing advanced content materials.

All students should have opportunities to participate in appropriately challenging learning experiences, and differentiated instruction can be used to ensure that all learners experience continuous progress in reading. Teaching reading with materials that the majority of students in a heterogeneous classroom can read may create boredom for talented readers (Renzulli & Reis, 1989) and contribute to diminished achievement in reading, particularly in urban areas or low socioeconomic areas, where remedial and direct instruction are often used.
Table 2

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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum compacting</td>
<td>Reis, Burns, &amp; Renzulli, 1992; Reis et al., 2005</td>
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<td>Acceleration</td>
<td>Southern &amp; Jones, 1992</td>
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<td>Substitution of regular reading material with more advanced</td>
<td>Van Tassel-Baska, 1996; Reis et al., 2005</td>
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<td>trade books</td>
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<td>Appropriate use of technology for talented readers</td>
<td>Alvermann, Moon, &amp; Hagood, 1999; Reis et al., 2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>More complex reading and writing</td>
<td>Reis et al., 2004; Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, &amp; Little, 2002</td>
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<td>Independent reading choices</td>
<td>Renzulli &amp; Reis, 1989; Reis et al., 2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent writing options</td>
<td>Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, &amp; Little, 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent study and project opportunities</td>
<td>Renzulli &amp; Reis, 1985; 1997; Reis et al., 2005; Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, &amp; Little, 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grouping changes (within or across classes)</td>
<td>Kulik &amp; Kulik, 1991; Rogers, 1991; Reis et al., 2005</td>
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<td>Thematic instructional changes for talented readers (tiered reading for</td>
<td>Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, &amp; Little, 2002</td>
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<td>thematic units)</td>
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<td>Substitution of regular instructional strategies with other options</td>
<td>Reis &amp; Renzulli, 1989; Reis et al., 2005; Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, &amp; Little, 2002</td>
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<td>Advanced questioning skills and literary skills</td>
<td>Reis et al., 2005</td>
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<td>Interest assessment and interest-based reading opportunities</td>
<td>Reis et al., 2005</td>
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Conclusions

Research-Based Conclusions About Talented Readers

Talented readers are placed at risk in many schools. Many are not challenged, and, therefore, their reading development can be delayed or even halted. If reading instructional and independent materials are not above the students’ level of knowledge or understanding, learning is less efficient and reading development may be delayed or stopped. It is, for example, not surprising to find that an academically talented first grader in an urban school who reads on a fifth-grade level is still reading at that level when he or she enters fifth grade. Some talented readers never learn to exert effort in reading and consequently acquire poor work habits. The following five conclusions emerged in this review of research.
1. Four characteristics are most often used to describe talented readers: reading early and at advanced levels, using advanced processing in reading, reading with enthusiasm and enjoyment, and demonstrating advanced language skills (oral, reading, and written).

2. A summary of information on the current classroom reading experiences of talented readers suggests that although they can benefit from appropriately challenging levels of reading, they seldom receive it.

3. Methods for differentiating curriculum and instruction for talented readers exist, and teachers can learn to differentiate. Some research supports the effectiveness of specific instructional and curricular strategies with talented readers, particularly curriculum compacting, grouping, acceleration, use of advanced literature and challenging reading, and use of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model—Reading.

4. Some talented readers grow accustomed by third or fourth grade to expending minimal effort and learn few self-regulation strategies and few advanced-reading strategies that they can use when they have to read more challenging content that is only slightly above grade level.

5. Important research on talented readers remains to be done, and this research should include implementation of various forms of programming, including what would happen if accelerated and in-depth reading programs were offered to talented readers from first grade and throughout the rest of elementary and middle school. Also, research on talented readers who receive differentiated reading programs based on interest, as opposed to replacement of advanced content selected for them, should be conducted.

**Practical Implications of the Extant Research**

If talented readers are going to be challenged, it will require high levels of professional development, new curricular and instructional options, and the use of materials that eliminate or extend basal reading programs and provide high levels of challenge. Unfortunately, current standards as well as some of the regulations and practices that are inherent or imagined in the federal legislation No Child Left Behind have led to the adoption of more remedial or direct instruction programs in reading, which may hold back talented readers even more than the research reviewed in this article suggests. To challenge talented readers, we must compact their regular reading instruction, provide challenging alternate materials, give opportunities for acceleration, and find other ways to stimulate their potential. Promising strategies, such as the research reported on SEM-R, suggests that there are ways that this can be accomplished in public school classrooms.
REFERENCES


