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The Neglected Readers: Differentiating Instruction for Academically Gifted and Talented Learners

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Abstract — The educational needs for academically gifted and talented learners (AGTLs) are often not met in public schools as much of schools' resources are directed towards meeting minimum performance standards. During reading instruction, AGTLs require differentiation with curriculum and instructional strategies that provide purpose and authentication of reading instruction to prevent boredom, deepen their love for reading and broaden their interests, and encourage them to move from avid reading to critical reading. The purpose of this article is to describe several research-based strategies within each of these areas to assist educators with differentiated reading instruction for AGTLs.

Public school classrooms are populated with a diverse range of learners, and each learner possesses unique learning abilities and needs. In order to meet all learners' needs, schools must provide differentiated curriculum and instruction. However, in a climate of high stakes standardized assessments, schools gear instruction towards minimum performance standards and focus their attention and resources upon the lowest achievers, thus leaving academically gifted and talented learners (AGTLs) to fend for themselves. Cramond (2004) asserted that AGTLs were "cited as the largest group of underachievers in this country" (p.34).

Although a universally accepted definition for giftedness does not exist (National Association for Gifted Learners, n.d.), the characteristics of AGTLs are outlined and described throughout much literature. Catron and Wingenbach (1986) suggested that the identification of AGTLs in reading should not rely solely upon Intelligent Quotient (IQ) scores.

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Identification procedures should include a variety of screening instruments and techniques (Passow, 1981), as well as analyses of several performance-based factors, such as reading levels and use of reading processes (Catron & Wingenback, 1986). Reis et al. (2004) pointed out that gifted learners differ from talented learners, and Gagné (1985) differentiated between the two with his proposed Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. According to Gagné:

> *Giftedness* corresponds to competence which is distinctly above average on one of more domains of ability.
>
> *Talent* refers to performance which is distinctly above average in one or more fields of human performance. (p. 108)

Both gifted learners and talented learners generally acquire knowledge faster; are able to detect, solve, and act on problems more quickly; have established the use of higher-level thinking skills; and understand and connect abstract ideas than their peers (Reis et al., 2004). With regard to reading, there are distinctions between these two types of advanced learners. Talented learners are avid readers who develop reading skills earlier and at a higher level than their peers do. They also tend to read in larger quantities and for purposes that are more diverse. Many talented learners are customarily self-taught readers, so they arrive at school already proficient with the decoding and process skills that are the focus of primary reading programs.

On the other hand, gifted learners possess advanced language skills, including extensive vocabularies; understandings about language subtleties; and effective use of humor, descriptive phrasing, and writing skills (Reis et al., 2004). Gifted learners also comprehend texts on a higher level and are skilled with automatic retrieval of background knowledge, understanding complex and/or unusual relationships among characters or ideas, grasping and processing complex ideas at an accelerated pace, and retaining substantial amounts of information. Gifted learners possess varied interests and curiosities with texts and view reading as a way to acquire knowledge, clarify ideas, spark imagination, and deepen their understanding. Although there are several distinct differences between AGTLs, these differences require differentiation with

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instruction to address "what they need to learn, how quickly they learn it, and the kind of teacher support needed to make this learning happen" (Weber & Hedrick, 2010, p. 57). With differentiated instruction, educators are no longer "dispensers of knowledge," but rather "organizers of learning opportunities" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 16).

In order to meet the needs of AGTLs during reading instruction, educators must incorporate strategies that (a) provide purpose and authenticate reading instruction for AGTLs in order to prevent boredom, (b) deepen AGTLs love for reading and broaden their interests, and (c) encourage AGTLs to move from avid reading to critical reading. The purpose of this article is to describe several research-based strategies within each of these areas to assist educators with differentiated reading instruction for AGTLs.

Strategies To Provide Purpose And Authenticate Reading Instruction For AGTLs

AGTLs are "reading to learn rather than learning to read" (Kenney, 2013, p. 30) and require appropriate reading material. Reading textbooks and basal readers will not provide AGTLs with a purpose for reading; therefore, educators should allow AGTLs to move through these materials quickly and supplement with more challenging reading materials (Catron & Wingenbach, 1986; Dooley, 1993). Since AGTLs are reading to learn, authentic reading instruction requires exposure to expository texts that foster exploration, curiosity, and wonderment with topics of interest (Dooley, 1993; Haslam-Odoardi, 2010). Authentic reading instruction for AGTLs must also include frequent interactions with literary texts that include strong characters, enriching language, complex and unpredictable plots with overlapping ideas and rich use of literary devices. Educators must also provide opportunities for AGTLs to select reading materials that encompass themes, topics, or genres that extend beyond the regular curriculum to encourage the development of understandings about self and others (Dooley, 1993).

Instructional pacing is another strategy educators may use to differentiate reading instruction for AGTLs. Since AGTLs grasp reading skills quickly, Carr (1984) contended that drill exercises are ineffective and recommended that educators adjust the pace of instruction to their level. Tomlinson (2005) argued that instructional pace must be embedded "in the context of high-quality curriculum and instruction" so that AGTLs enjoy "more rapid learning" while also encountering "vital ideas and skills" (p. 163). Tomlinson also emphasized that when educators accelerate instructional pace, they must be attentive in making sure AGTLs develop understandings and are able to apply knowledge gained and are not merely completing more work. With this in mind, Tomlinson cautioned educators to watch for potential gaps in understandings that may result from an accelerated instructional pace and provide appropriate support when gaps are identified. Careful monitoring of an accelerated instructional pace is also important because AGTLs

may require adjustments, either faster or slower, depending on the topic and individual learner's needs.

Curriculum compacting is another strategy that provides purpose and authentic reading instruction for AGTLs. Dooley (1993) recommended that AGTLs complete a pretest to assess mastery of skills and content on upcoming units of reading instruction. For the skills and content for which AGTLs have demonstrated mastery on the pretest, they participate in alternative tasks as they are presented during the unit. For the skills and content for which AGTLs have not demonstrated mastery, they may participate in the reading instruction with the class, receive individual or small group instruction, or learn the material through discovery with structured materials. An important benefit of curriculum compacting for AGTLs is the amount of time it provides for differentiated instruction (Dooley, 1993), thus allowing all learners individualized learning experiences appropriate for their needs (Carr, 1984).

Strategies To Deepen AGTLs Love For Reading And Broaden Their Interests

AGTLs "read easily and voraciously" (Wood, 2008, p. 18) and differentiated reading instruction has the potential to deepen their passion for reading (Dooley, 1993). AGLTs possess advanced cognitive processes (Catron & Wingenbach, 1986), therefore, they require access to a wide variety of reading materials that contain fresh and thought-provoking information, a variety of content, topics of interest, and advanced language and concepts (Weber & Cavanaugh, 2006). Providing AGTLs access to these types of reading materials in the classroom is challenge, however, digital texts (also known as eBooks) have the potential to expand a classroom's available reading options. Many digital texts have interactive technological features (e.g., capability to change font size, options that use multiple modalities, and built-in dictionaries), which are appealing to AGTLs and provide any needed support or extensions while reading. In addition to reading digital texts, Siegel (2012) contended that AGTLs are more motivated when they have opportunities to create authentic digital texts with which to share with a real audience.

Much literature suggests that a correlation exists between gender and reading interests and preferences (e.g., Boltz, 2007; Brozo, 2002; Hébert & Pagnani, 2010; Kommer, 2006; Senn, 2012; Taylor, 2004; Wilhelm, 2001). Addressing text preferences among AGTLs has the potential to foster students' engagement with text (Harkrader & Moore, 1997). For example, Farris, Werderich, Nelson, & Fuhler (2009) studied reading preferences among struggling readers who were male and reported text preferences included (a) appearance of the cover of a text, as well as a precursory look at text features, such as font size and margin space; (b) books from a series penned by a favorite author; (c) books with characters that overcome challenges; and (d) informational texts that are supported with visually-enhanced expository text features, such as graphics, pictures, and cutaways. On the other hand, Harkrader and

moore reported that girls' text preferences included works of fiction (including historical fiction, mysteries, fairy tales, and animal stories. Thus, research indicates potential text preferences for each gender, however, AGTLs are best served when there is a balance of reading materials in the classroom. As AGTLs encounter texts they prefer, their love for reading is deepened. Likewise, it is equally important to expose AGTLs to reading materials that they may not be drawn to initially in order to broaden their interests.

Integrating literacy into the content areas has the potential to instill motivation and engagement among learners (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007). Motivation for learning is generated when teachers provide learners with choices, increase learners' autonomy with tasks, communicate a purpose for learning, scaffold instruction to increase learners' competence, and create a classroom environment that is encouraging and accepting. Once learners are motivated, they are primed for engagement with frequent and varied opportunities to practice knowledge and skills. Motivation and engagement are derived from learning experiences that are inquiry-based, the inclusion of hands-on experiences intended to foster learners' understanding through real-world applications, and demonstrating the "interconnectedness" of content areas (Bricker, Rogowski, Hedt, & Rolfe, 2010, p. 37).

Strategies To Foster Critical Literacy Among AGTLs

In the classroom, educators must move learners "beyond comprehension into thinking more critically about texts" (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012, p. 62). When working with AGTLs, critical literacy is fostered when reading instruction incorporates inferential and interpretive learning experiences aimed to create deeper understandings of texts (Wood, 2008). Critical literacy goes beyond critical thinking – critical literacy calls for "social action based upon the deeper understanding one receives through critical reading and thinking" (White, 2009, p. 55).

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) described several principles associated with critical literacy. In critical literacy, the reader considers the author's motivation for topic selection, as well as the perspective from which the topic is addressed throughout the text. This leads the reader to question and reflect as to what other perspectives are not addressed (e.g., perspectives from marginalized or oppressed groups), identify issues of power, and empower them to engage in transformative action. In critical literacy, the reader's use of questioning develops deeper understanding of the intricacies associated with a problem. Through "problematizing" (p. 54), the reader actively seeks alternate explanations instead of subscribing to the essentialist view. McLaughlin and DeVoogd stressed that critical literacy is dynamic and should be adapted based upon context; critical literacy pedagogy is not a replicable instructional approach. During critical literacy instruction, teachers must frequently assess AGTLs' engagement and expose them to a variety of diverse perspectives in order to enrich their understandings and challenge their thinking.

When designing critical literacy activities with AGTLs, teachers must ensure to incorporate texts that are culturally relevant and reflect learners' diverse backgrounds (Wood & Jocius, 2013). These texts may serve as springboards for collaborative experiences and critical conversations to take place. Through collaborative experiences, such as a book club, the classroom becomes a safe space for AGTLs to share struggles and provide encouragement for each other. A safe and supportive environment is essential for critical conversations, which work towards developing critical literacy among AGTLs. During critical conversations, AGTLs analyze a text by asking questions, formulating hypotheses, casting judgment, proposing solutions (Wood, 2008) and discuss how they see themselves in the text (Wood & Jocius, 2013).

Gainer (2013) advocated that teachers use digital and media literacies as texts to foster critical literacy among learners. Gainer compared this concept to the common classroom practice of mentor text usage. With the 21st century in mind, digital and media literacies are easily accessible and present information through multiple modes and perspectives. Moreover, information from the digital environment is meaningful because it focuses upon authentic and real world issues. Digital and media literacies may also mediums through which AGTLs develop critical literacy skills (Parker, 2013). Parker described a high school media production project intended to develop learners' understanding of immigration through the creation of a documentary film. Learners selected an immigrant to interview and created a narrated film that captured his or her personal experiences. During the filmmaking process, learners were faced with "the complex interaction between media production and critical literacy" (pp. 674-675), such as through acknowledging the importance of a filmmaker-interviewee relationship, deciding how to represent the interviewee's personal information, and considering the impact that the documentary will have on viewers.

Final Thoughts

Many AGTLs do not receive challenging instruction or enriching learning experiences in reading (Berman, Schultz, & Weber, 2012; Carr, 1984; Catron & Wingenbach, 1986; Cramond, 2004; Dooley, 1993; Passow, 1981; Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Boeve, 2009; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Weber & Hedrick, 2010; Wood, 2008). AGTLs require differentiated reading instruction that provides purpose and authenticity to avoid boredom, inspiring learning experiences that fosters their love for reading and broaden their interests, and literacy pedagogy intended to move them from avid reading to critical reading. While this article outlines several effective instructional strategies for AGTLs that are rooted in research-based best practices, the authors contend that a more conscious effort towards gifted and talented literacy pedagogy is needed when preparing preservice educators and planning professional development experiences for practicing teachers.

Chamberlin and Chamberlin (2010) reported that preservice teachers receive little pedagogical training in gifted and talented

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education; gifted and talented pedagogy has traditionally been addressed during graduate coursework (Bangel, Enersen, Capobianco, & Moon, 2006). Unfortunately, this lack of awareness among preservice teachers leads to practicing teachers being unable to identify or address the learning needs of AGTLs (Berman et al., 2012). Troxclair (2013) asserted the importance of fostering an "appropriate attitude" (p. 58) among preservice teachers by including learning experiences that inform them about the needs of AGTLs. Otherwise, preservice teachers' "feelings and behaviors" towards these learners "may be biased or skewed" (p. 58). Bangel et al. (2006) contended that the mainstreamed environments of today's classrooms call for the inclusion of gifted and talented pedagogy during preservice teachers' preparation.

Much literature advocates for preservice teachers to engage with AGTLs during authentic experiences in real classrooms (e.g., Bangel et al., 2006; Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2010). In addition, preservice teachers should be exposed to curriculum that provides training with differentiated instruction (Tomlinson et al., 1994), enrichment activities (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Brown, 2007), as well as how to identify AGTLs (Siegle, Moore, Mann, & Wilson, 2010). Johnsen (2012) emphasized that professional competence is correlated to the application of knowledge and skills outlined in professional standards for gifted and talented education. Since practicing teachers already experience limited access to literacy pedagogy professional development experiences, Little and Housand (2010) recommended the use of technology tools as a medium for attending and sustaining professional learning experiences with gifted and talented education. Technology tools provide practicing educators who work with AGTLS access to websites and online resources, opportunities to attend live online training sessions, access to asynchronous online discussions, video conferencing capabilities, and ongoing online communities.

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