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## An investigation of metacomprehension strategies for gifted adolescent readers

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## An investigation of metacomprehension strategies for gifted adolescent readers

### Abstract

The current information explosion brings two separate concerns to educators of the gifted. There is renewed interest in describing the gifted as readers and in designing appropriate curriculum for them. Many new ideas are being explored which define intelligence and thinking skills, and there is much research into the reading process. There has been little effort, however, to correlate these two areas to formulate a program suitable for the gifted reader. Since today's students find themselves living in a critical period, classroom skills must become more than a veneer to education. They must become functional by helping the student to develop the ability to be a critical reader, to correlate and integrate information, to read between and beyond the lines, and to use [to] the fullest extent the cognitive and affective domain. (Brazell, p. 61) A suitable program level for the gifted adolescent reader should reflect metacomprehension strategies which promote creative and critical reading. Their need for greater intellectual challenge can be met in a group of similar age and social development.

AN INVESTIGATION OF METACOMPREHENSION STRATEGIES  
FOR GIFTED ADOLESCENT READERS

A Research Paper

Submitted to

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Frances P. Mauldin

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AN INVESTIGATION OF METACOMPREHENSION STRATEGIES  
IN GIFTED ADOLESCENT READERS

The Problem

Introduction

The current information explosion brings two separate concerns to educators of the gifted. There is renewed interest in describing the gifted as readers and in designing appropriate curriculum for them. Many new ideas are being explored which define intelligence and thinking skills, and there is much research into the reading process. There has been little effort, however, to correlate these two areas to formulate a program suitable for the gifted reader.

Since today's students find themselves living in a critical period, classroom skills must become more than a veneer to education. They must become functional by helping the student to develop the ability to be a critical reader, to correlate and integrate information, to read between and beyond the lines, and to use [to] the fullest extent the cognitive and affective domain. (Brazell, p. 61)

A suitable program level for the gifted adolescent reader should reflect metacomprehension strategies which promote creative and critical reading. Their need for greater intellectual challenge can be met in a group of similar age and social development.

To date, reading instruction has been designed primarily to improve the efficiency of the reader and to increase comprehension. Gifted readers require metacomprehension strategies for the critical analysis of reading material, particularly with independently chosen material. Students who read well above grade level need exposure to challenging works and the skills to recognize meanings on several levels. A profile of the gifted reader can be examined relative to theories of critical and creative reading to provide a basis for planning appropriate curriculum.

#### Statement of the problem

Despite a resurgence of interest in gifted education since the Nation at Risk report, adolescents have been neglected in two ways. Much research has focused on the identification of young children and their learning styles for acquiring basic skills. Adolescent research has centered on their search for identity rather than their academic attributes (Buescher 1984). The gifted adolescent reader similarly has received little attention. Most studies have focused on the acquisition of reading skills by young children or in the reading remediation needs of the adolescent. The revival of interest in the development of thinking skills has diverted some attention from the topics of acquisition of basic skills and remediation. The gifted adolescent reader provides an

appropriate subject for exploring critical and creative reading processes compatible with this trend.

Although advanced level novels are provided for gifted readers, many able readers have not acquired the higher level thinking skills necessary to evaluate the author's message. They may well comprehend the content and vocabulary but lack the experience base to think beyond the surface story line. It is suggested that from an exploration of the process of metacomprehension, used as a basis for creative and critical reading, appropriate programs for the gifted adolescent reader can be developed. These readers require advanced critical thinking process instruction as a component of their reading program.

The purpose of this investigation is to relate metacomprehension strategies with the gifted reader profile, and to describe critical and creative reading skills as a basis for instruction. Curricular modifications are suggested for developing an appropriate program.

#### Procedures in Obtaining Research Literature

In order to obtain the necessary related literature, the researcher made extensive use of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) documents. A search using the Iowa Network for Obtaining Resource Material for Schools (INFORMS) through the facilities of Area Education Agency-Six, and a second ERIC computer search through the facilities of the University of



Northern Iowa Library provided document information. The sources listed were referenced in either Resources in Education (RIE) or the Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE). The materials were obtained at the Iowa State University Library, the University of Northern Iowa Library, and the Area Education Agency-Six Media Center.

Research studies reviewed by various authors provided references to original sources which the researcher then obtained. Information gathered from these sources was organized and synthesized to address the following major areas related to the problem: establishing a gifted reader profile in relation to metacomprehension, and describing an appropriate curriculum for the gifted adolescent reader based in critical and creative reading.

## Review of Literature

### Gifted Reader Profile

However it may be defined or theorized, intellectual ability is not spread evenly over the population. The U.S. Commissioner of Education (1977) describes the indicators of superior ability or giftedness as those capable of high performance for whom differentiated educational programs are required. These indicators can be operationally described as applying to those students having consistently superior scores on standardized tests and who demonstrate advanced skills of imaginative insight and intense interest and involvement. E. Paul Torrence (1965) applies this

description to reading ability. He finds the creative reader to be one who is sensitive to problems and possibilities in whatever is read. The gifted reader is aware of the gaps in knowledge, the unsolved problems, the missing elements, and things that are incomplete or out of focus. To resolve resultant tension, so important in the creative thinking process, the creative reader sees new combinations, synthesizes relatively remote elements into a coherent whole, redefines or transforms certain pieces of information to discover new uses, and builds on what is known.

Intellectually gifted children most often, by definition, are good readers. Reading seems to represent the essence of intellectual superiority. Brown and Rogan (1983) conclude:

...the ability to manipulate internally learned symbol systems is perhaps the sine que non of giftedness. Since language is our primary symbol system, it would seem appropriate to begin with reading when developing differentiated educational programs for the gifted. (p.6)

Such a program requires that the able reader read more widely, read more creatively, and read more critically. Richard Smith (1985) makes a case for a differentiated reading curriculum for the early adolescent. Such students have a greater wealth of background experiences than elementary students and are not as inhibited with regard to divergent thinking as older students.

Most research about the gifted reader deals with very young children. The preponderance of research investigates the problems of the low ability student. High ability students, who have reached automacy, are too often left to their own devices. One problem is the low incidence of gifted readers available for research. Bates (1984) reviewed the current research in reading pertaining to the gifted. He profiles the gifted learner as having three attributes: (1) an independent learning style with fluency and a tolerance for ambiguity, (2) prefers a learning style of learning alone, (3) prefers flexible structure. Bates stated that most research about the gifted reader concentrates on vocabulary and the identification of major ideas.

One recent study addressed this question. Thompson (1984) reviewed the research about active readers. He described the gifted reader as one who reads avidly and widely, reads over two years above grade level, reads more difficult books, and has a greater depth of response.

Several other studies (McKeown 1985; Nicholson 1984; August, Falvell and Clift 1984; and Stevens 1980) examined a single aspect of the gifted reader profile. Again a limitation was that the gifted reader is not studied in isolation but treated as a comparison for the less able reader. Subjects were designated as high-ability when reading above the 83rd percentile. This severely limits the usefulness of these studies for the "gifted reader" who

by definition reads several years above grade level. However, they demonstrate that able readers use different reading processes and may need different programs.

McKeown (1985) studied the ability of students to derive the meaning of an unknown word from a sequence of contexts and to utilize the new word. Six words were created and students compared meanings. Comparisons were made of the errors in evaluation due to sentence evaluation and for sentence discrimination. It was noted that high ability students relied not on context clues, the premise of the study, but on their experiential background. A study by Nicholson (1984) investigated two junior high classes (number 60). Reading was examined within the curriculum for both experts and novices. Comparisons were made in terms of types of reading tasks, prior knowlege needed, and strategies used to cope with reading tasks. After the tasks were completed by the subjects, the interview method was used to collect the data. The emphasis was on the "novice" rather than the "expert." The study did confirm that a different strategy was used by the more able learner.

Making these connections was easy for some pupils. They knew that "this" went with "that." They knew what was important and what could be ignored. Unfortunately, because they already have this ability they often are unable to explain it. They would talk about "patterns" but were not able to

explain how they had learned these patterns. These patterns were usually quite complex, even though they might appear obvious to the expert. (p.443)

A third study by August, Flavell and Clift (1984) compared sixteen fifth-graders designated as skilled and less skilled readers with regard to comprehension self-monitoring. Students were given five stories, one with a page missing. After reading the stories, they were asked if a page was missing, and if they agreed then pages were provided to insert in the story. A significant correlation between the skilled reader and recognition of the missing page was not found. However, with prompting a significant relationship ( $r=.38$ ,  $p<.05$ ) in stating the correct explanation and correctly inserting the missing page was found. It was concluded there is a need to promote comprehension monitoring with gifted children.

Stevens (1980) studied the effect of topic interest on comprehension for 93 readers. Subjects rated their interest in 25 topics on a verbal inventory questionnaire together with a picture rating technique. Ability was determined using the McCall Crabbs Standard Test Lessons in Reading. Next, two passages of higher interest and two of lower were administered. Higher ability students performed better on the reading task; however, a test of simple main effects on the significant ability X interest interaction showed high ability students read significantly better

under high interest conditions. They were the only group for which interest was a significant factor. Stevens concluded:

Providing interesting materials for higher ability students may result in obtaining the maximum potential performance from them. The superior reader has been a rather neglected subset of the reading population. Educators have generally been content with the better-than-average performance of these students, even if this performance is below their potential. (p.367)

These studies underscore the need to approach the understanding of the gifted adolescent reader from a different perspective. Material selection and guidance based on challenge are essential to improve reading skills.

Whimbey (1985) traces the characteristics of the gifted reader.

A good reader moves along smoothly and efficiently until he senses that the track has been lost. He probes and analyses phrases and sentences for their exact meaning; he tries to visualize abstruse descriptors; and through a series of approximations, deductions, and corrections he translates the scientific and technical terms into concrete examples. (p. 91.)

A gifted reader is an early and avid reader with a large vocabulary and experience background. By adolescence this reader

has mastered skills and is developing a reading processes different in nature than the less gifted. The reader is sensitive to what the writing says as well as to its possibilities. Higher level thinking skills are incorporated into the reading process.

### Metacomprehension Strategies

According to Holbrook (1986), current methods of teaching reading emphasize the products and neglect the processes of comprehension. Metacomprehension is defined as readers' awareness and control over their own understanding. She lists two components of metacomprehension: comprehension monitoring and making predictions. According to Standiford (1984) and Collins and Smith (1980) comprehension monitoring and hypothesis formation and evaluation are two aspects of metacomprehension that can be taught. Standiford has developed the following metacomprehension grid.

Metacomprehension Grid

high	low	
Know and are aware they know 1	Do not know and realize they do not know 2	high
3 Know but think they don't	4 Do not know but think they do	low

Reading becomes an active construction. Under certain conditions numerous interpretations of a text are possible. Beyond the printed page are important internal and external factors that affect the reading of material. These include level of intelligence, motivation, knowledge base and propositional knowledge, together with the metacomprehension structure of the individual. The gifted student will bring a much different set of factors to the reading than the less able (Samuels, 1983).

The metacomprehension process is classified in two ways. (Witty 1985) The first is creative reading. This process moves from convergent thinking to divergent thinking where the reader considers hypothesis, implications, and usefulness. Teachers play a major role in providing the stimulus needed for the gifted to develop their creative reading talents. They must use methods to heighten the student's expectation and anticipation of the reading, and encourage the student to do something with that which has been read (Torrance, 1965). Smith (1969) believes creative reading is best taught using Bloom's (1956) levels of questioning, particularly those of synthesis.

Critical reading is the second process. Stauffer (1977) reviewed the research on critical reading and arrived at the following conclusion:

I have defined critical reading as a means of judgments based on values and a choice of the relevant. To make decisions



and deal with alternatives requires mental discipline. In essence the dimensions of critical, creative, and versatile reading are: ability to actualize concepts and intentions; ability to sift information and determine its relevancy to one's anticipations as well as to actively follow an author's intentions and fidelity; ability to deal with constraints and invariants in terms of goals being sought; ability to maintain in dynamic equilibrium the personal components of convictions and inclinations; ability to accept responsibilities involving choice and volition among different options and exercised on the basis of consequences; and ability to internalize the knowledge gained and use it in other situations. (p.52)

Viewed thusly, critical reading is an awesome task. To combine the skills of the critical reader with those of the creative reader requires exposure to reading instruction beyond structure and drill. The thinking skills necessary for gifted readers to attain these reading skills should be available to the gifted student. In fact, a single approach will not suffice. "Critical reading and creative reading are not always clearly differentiated. Critical reading is one aspect of creative reading; creative reading, is always critical in nature." (Witty p. 21) Appreciative and emotional responses to literature are examples of this mix. Although Dole and Adams (1983) did not find

a substantial difference between the goals for gifted and non-gifted readers, as perceived by teachers of reading or of the gifted, they did conclude that there must be a different approach based in metacomprehension strategies.

A need has been shown for differentiated instruction for the gifted reader (Anderson, Tollefson & Gilbert, 1985). A suitable curriculum is required for the gifted adolescent reader based on appropriate tasks, following a progression of developing thinking skills, building a repertoire of problem solving patterns, and tapping native creative abilities.

#### Sample lessons

Bates (1984) underscores the need to use reading instructional strategies which reflect the gifted reader's more complex skill requirements and which are based in researched theory. Activities should be scrutinized as to their value in developing critical and creative readers. A 1984 study citing the dropping SAT scores as evidence of a reading problem, found that students actually did read well. The authors conclude:

We also believe it is important that students receive instruction and practice in a variety of strategies used to process texts. These strategies should focus on such skills as inferential comprehension and the synthesis and critical evaluation of what is read. (Farr, Courtland, and Beck, 1984)

The difference between the program needs of the gifted reader and the average learner relate to timing and pacing, depth and degree, teaching style, and materials. The gifted will move through materials more rapidly. With better cognitive abilities they will show greater interest in ideas, theories, and abstract concepts. They wish to go deeper into ideas and talk longer and in greater depth about what they are reading. (Trezise 1978)

Therefore, certain lessons which build on these attributes should be the foundation of the gifted reader program.

Two strategies which can be used as a starting place for such a program are "bootstrapping" and "scaffolding." (Smith, S. P., 1985) The first suggests assigning material in order to perform a particular task. The students are expected, on their own, to master the material well enough to perform the task. As they begin the reading they keep a log including the following information:

- a. How does what you already know help or hinder you in understanding the material?
- b. What are some specific instances of when you began to understand something that at first seemed unclear?
- c. What were your moods and attitudes during the learning process?

- d. What learning strategies do you use for understanding, organizing, and retaining the information? (p. 294)

Additional questions for consideration might be: Does the information modify your existing knowledge in any way? Does it fit your "belief system?" Will you use it in the future? Discuss it? Forget it?

"Scaffolding" requires the student to build a structure of meaning around the material. When material is successfully challenging and the reader does not feel satisfied with the mastery of it, the reader uses personal attack skills including seeking additional sources in media centers, interviewing experts, conducting experiments, or merely seeking discussions of the material. These are not assigned but discussion of experiences such as this are essential to developing a gifted reader.

Once one understands personal strategies, several activities can be used to add to the individual repertoire. Reading guides are an example. Although they are a technique appropriate for all readers, special adaptations can be made for the gifted. The guide is created by the student as a road map to highlight the purpose of the reading task. It consists of listing several questions one expects to answer from the reading. After reading there is written documentation of new questions raised and whether the reading met expectations. (Savage 1983) In fact, Swanton (1984) states that

the public library is more suited to the needs of the gifted for self-selecting reading material than the school library. The public libraries are based on reading rather than learning to read, reading choices are not monitored by a librarian, and the student may select from any level or subject matter.

Decision making skills are illustrated by various problem definition patterns. One approach asks the student to visualize how different specialists define problems. The reader uses the strategies of a specialist to understand a work. Thinking as a director, the reader determines the basic analytic components by visualizing such things as actors, props, action, scene, cause, and consequences. Thinking as a journalist the reader asks who is involved? What is involved? What, when, where, and why did it happen? How frequent, serious, and extensive is it? An analysis, synthesis, and evaluation triangle is built to answer questions about what actions should be taken. Analysis is identifying the problem, synthesis is creating options, and evaluation is the selection or rejection of the options. The reader becomes a decision maker in the role of a philosopher, scientist, designer, and builder (Whales, Nardi and Stager, 1986).

Several courses such as Arthus Whimbey's project SOAR (1985) are built on the relationship between thinking and reasoning. Vera B. Thurmond (1986) describes such a course entitled "Analytical Reading," an eight weeks summer course in the health sciences.

Modeling thinking processes by thinking or reading aloud was the major method of instruction. Small problem solving groups were formed where one member served as the problem solver. The problem solver talked through the problem. Problems from subject matter, brain teasers, and problems created by group members were used. Vocabulary was also explored by the think-aloud method. (Thurmond 1986) This method is reported to be an effective way to add to the reader's strategy repertoire.

There are several ways in which critical reading processes can lead to creative reading. Small group activities are effective because students receive high level challenges to their reading interpretations. Unfortunately the gifted reader is rarely grouped with other gifted students in regular classrooms. They rather tend to be placed with less able students to serve as guides. Gifted readers need interaction with other gifted readers for challenge. An activity for such a group might be graphic organizers.

One major tenet of schema theory is that when students have adequate prior knowledge of a topic this knowledge can provide the foundation for making predictions about oncoming information in the text. (Bean 1986, p. 740)

Cause-effect patterns are generally more remembered than linear lists. A key word is selected which ties together particular events. Events are placed in a visual pattern in relation to the key word. Options guides associated with a

possible outcome are then made. Options become the key words and outcomes are graphically arranged so predictions can be made.

Adolescent literature stimulates creative reading. Kohlberg's theory of moral development can be used as a guide for studying moral reasoning through literature. (Readence, Moore & Moore, 1982; Stahl-Gemake and Wielan 1984) After a discussion of Kohlberg's stages of moral development, characters in literature are analyzed to examine such things as level of maturity and consistency of portrayal. This technique is especially suited to the adolescent reader because novels dealing with personal problems are of great interest at this age. The technique also can be used with a variety of recognized psychological stages such as grief or development of identity.

Bibliotherapy (Frasier & McCannon, 1981) uses books to help the gifted discuss and develop alternative approaches for meeting challenges and personal problems. It promotes mental health and helps relieve pressures. A suitable list of books is provided with appealing subject matter and which represents a challenging level of difficulty. Opportunities for feedback may be journal entries, informal discussions, or peer group interaction.

Robert E. Probst in Adolescent Literature: Response and Analysis provides many activities suitable for the gifted reader based on critical and creative reading. He describes the literature reading act. First the readers respond to a work on a

personal level within the perspective of their accumulated knowledge. They create their own meaning for the work. This first reflection requires that readers be alert both to the details of the text and to personal reactions. Second, readers may see themselves in the reading. It requires personal acknowledgment of attitudes, feelings and beliefs. Third, because readers are changed, not merely receptive, it is necessary to be an active and responsive participant with the text. Responses are more important than interpretation. The emphasis on response fosters student dialogue about personal experiences. The experience evokes reactions to problems and tangents on which one is led by the literature.

A great number of teaching techniques are suitable for the gifted reader. Lehr (1983) provides an extensive list of ERIC research describing strategies which meet the criteria of a research-based approach to reading for the gifted.

#### Summary and Conclusions

Researchers profile the gifted reader attributes as including greater ability to perform mental tasks, a large experience and knowledge base, a problem solving strategy repertoire, and skills of critical and creative thought. Early gifted readers report prolific reading activity, junior and senior high gifted readers report a downward trend in reading activity (Anderson, Tollefson & Gilbert, 1985). Without a comprehensive reading program which



challenges, the adolescent gifted reader turns to other pursuits. Often these pursuits are passive experiences which neglect to foster the development of critical thinking, imagination, creativity, or social awareness.

Research to develop a suitable curriculum has been characterized by several problems. First, reading research has been interested primarily in remediation. The student with above average ability serves as a comparison to discover what skills the low ability lack and how the better readers acquired these skills. A second problem is one of numbers. In most studies any student reading at or above grade level is classified as high ability. One reason is the small incidence of gifted readers, those reading several years above grade level, in the population (Thompson, 1984). These problems mean that research has focused more on acquisition and comprehension skills which are not relative to the gifted reader. The needs of gifted readers involve critically evaluating materials, tapping the depth of emotional resources, creating new insights and responses to the work, and finding a framework for discussion of their findings and insights. Current interest in thinking skills has highlighted the need for these reading abilities.

Curriculum planning for the gifted reader should be based on sound research. A first step is studying the gifted reader in isolation from other groups to verify the gifted reader profile.

Second, metacognitive theories should be explored in relation to the gifted reader and a differentiated curriculum designed. Those teachers working with gifted readers must accept that activities should be more than reading advanced materials or serving as group leaders for less able students. Evaluation of activities, in view of the gifted reader profile, means identifying the intellectual needs of the gifted reader and finding appropriate stimuli.

These activities must involve interaction with other gifted readers as often as possible. Such a program promotes intrinsic motivation and self-direction. It means exploring, questioning, risking and experimenting.

The gifted reader is a valuable resource in an information age. The proliferation of reading material challenges the ability to select, interpret and expand ideas. The curriculum for the gifted adolescent should include critical and creative reading. Students use reading as a means of expanding the experience base available for problem solving. Complex future problems will require a search for relevant information and the ability to analyze possible solutions. Gifted readers move beyond automacy to involvement through response. A program which provides this development through metacomprehension strategies serves both individuals and their wider realms of influence.

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