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# THE EFFECT OF INTEREST ON THE READING COMPREHENSION OF GIFTED READERS

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All too often, little attention in our classrooms goes into "getting the most out of" superior students. This is particularly true in the field of reading. As long as their reading performance is consistently above average, superior students are often considered to be doing "well" in reading. However, this overlooks the fact that such readers may still be performing far below their potential. That is, gifted students should exhibit extremely superior reading ability—yet teachers are often content with less-than-minimum performance from these individuals.

Teachers owe it to these students, "the best and the brightest," to challenge them sufficiently. These students have the potential for excellence, and for educational leadership and scholarship. However, if teachers remain satisfied with less than maximum reading performance, they may be depriving their charges of the potential for greatness. Although gifted programs are a new trend in many states, the educational system largely focuses on work with poor readers. Thus, it may be up to the classroom teacher to provide the resources necessary to challenge the superior student in reading.

This report discloses research done with superior readers (having superior intelligence) regarding the effect of interest on their reading comprehension. It shall be shown that, when challenged with interesting material, superior students demonstrated "reserves" of reading comprehension power. This effect was not found for the average students in the sample.

*Subjects:* The subjects were ninety-three fifth and sixth grade students in a small city. Of these subjects, thirty-one were identified as "superior" students. These students, eighteen boys and thirteen girls, exceeded the 83rd percentile of reading ability on the *SRA Assessment Survey* comprehension subtest (1963). The average IQ of this group was 123.35 (s.d. = 9.02), as measured by the Otis-Lennon Mental Abilities tests. This "superior" group was compared with subjects of lesser ability in the same fifth and sixth grade classrooms.

*Materials:* Reading passages were taken from the *McCall-Crabbs Standard Test Lessons in Reading*, Books D and E. Interests of individual pupils were assessed by asking subjects to complete an interest inventory (seven steps ranging from "not at all interested" to "very interested"). The twenty-five entries on this inventory were factually

based, and were those for which reading passages were available from the *Standard Test Lessons*. To guard against passage effects, paragraphs were balanced across interest conditions.

*Procedures:* Interests of subjects were assessed on twenty-five topics. Two topics of higher interest and two topics of lower interest were identified for each subject. Reading passages corresponding to these four topics were given to all subjects in the samples. Thus, each subject read two passages as indicated of higher interest, and two passages of lower interest. Following the reading of each passage, multiple-choice questions were answered by the subjects concerning the passages. The grade level score accompanying the number of questions correct for that passage was the dependent variable.

*Design:* The data were analyzed using a 2x2x3 ANOVA design, with interest condition as the repeated measure. There were two levels of interest, two levels of sex, and three levels of ability. Of special interest was the high ability group. Grade level scores of the two higher interest and two lower interest passages were averaged for each subject in the study.

*Results:* Results are summarized in Table 1. Of the main effects, only ability was significant. This is natural, since ability is related to achievement in reading. Of greater interest is the significant ability and interest interaction. This means that the overall effect of interest was not the same at each ability level. A test of simple main effects was undertaken on this significant interaction. The results are presented in Table 2.

*Table 1*  
ANOVA SUMMARY TABLE

<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	
Ability (A)	2,87	35.22	*
Sex (B)	1,87	.6146	
Ability x Sex	2,87	.0923	
Interest (C)	1,87	1.57	
Sex x Interest	1,87	2.49	
Ability x Interest	2,87	4.75	*
Ability x Sex x Interest	2,87	2.61	

\* = significant at the .05 level

These results show that interest had an effect on reading comprehension only for the high ability group. That is, subjects in the high ability group read significantly better under the higher interest condition than under the lower condition. This higher ability group was the only ability group for which interest was a factor.

*Discussion:* The results of this research indicate that superior ability students can be motivated to perform better in reading comprehension. In this design, superior ability subjects were motivated to read

Table 2

## Summary for Simple Main Effects Test

<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	
Ability (A)	2,87	35.22	*
Ability x Interest	2,87	4.76	*
Interest at Hi Ability	1,87	6.0	*
Interest at Mid Ability	1,87	.914	
Interest at Low Ability	1,87	.043	
Ability at Low Interest	2,87	31.25	*
Ability at Hi Interest	2,87	20.15	*

\* = significant at the .05 level

significantly better when given material that was of interest to them. Interest did not have the same beneficial effect for middle or lower ability students. One possible explanation for the salutary effect on superior readers is that only these readers had not yet reached the “ceiling” in reading comprehension. That is, only superior readers had the “reserves” of reading comprehension ability necessary to significantly increase reading achievement. These results indicate that superior readers can exhibit greater reading power when given interesting material.

This result also suggests that superior students do not always employ their maximum reading comprehension power. In this experiment, gifted pupils were clearly reading substandardly (for them) on the lower interest passages. Only when given passages of a challenging nature (that is, of special, individual interest), did superior students demonstrate the higher levels of their reading ability. This effect was not found for other students.

These results have important implications for the education of gifted pupils. Apparently, the factor of interest is an important one for gifted students. This interest factor is perhaps a proxy for challenge for them. That is, when given interesting (and thus challenging, since the pupil has a desire to learn about the topic) material, superior students bring all their reading abilities to bear. When given uninteresting and non-challenging material, superior students are content with less than maximum success. Teachers given the responsibility of educating superior students should strive to challenge and interest them.

Individualized programs for gifted students should take the interest factor into account. Classroom teachers might adapt reading lessons and assignments so that gifted readers can develop their own areas of interest. For example, a reading group of superior students might be allowed to choose individual “research topics,” rather than read from a circumscribed “reading program” or basal reader. Reading assignments would be to read several books on the area of interest (book selection may be undertaken in conjunction with the librarian). Thus, one reader might read about spiders, and another might devour five books about rocketry. The group could reconvene for sharing of ideas gained, with

the possible side-effect of expanding other group members' interests. This "individualized reading" approach to the gifted group would challenge them far more than putting them through textbook paces evolved for the average learner. This reading program for superior students might be tied to the other language arts by having students write reports on their topics of interest, give class presentations, or work on units with less talented students, so as to share their insight and expertise.

Gifted programs now being developed in many states should take note of the factor of interest and its beneficial effect on reading comprehension. Gifted programs should allow for personal growth. By encouraging students to read widely in their areas of interest, this growth can be promoted. The gifted teacher's role as a facilitator of learning should include supplying children with a myriad of reading material on topics of interest to them. Rather than straightjacket our gifted students, we can use the lever of interest to challenge them to greater reading heights. Gifted programs should consider basing reading instruction on an "individualized reading" approach, rather than a skills approach.

There may be other as yet unexplored factors that also have bearing on the reading comprehension of gifted students. At any rate, educators must strive to develop each child's capacities to the maximum, especially in the field of reading, which is the key to so much knowledge and beauty. This research suggests that close attention to gifted pupils' interests may be one such key to developing their maximum reading abilities.

#### REFERENCES

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- SRA. *Assessment Survey*. Chicago: SRA Press, 1963.