

Reading Instruction for Talented Readers: Case Studies Documenting Few Opportunities for Continuous Progress

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ABSTRACT

In this study, a team of researchers conducted multiple observations in 12 third- and seventh-grade reading classrooms in both urban and suburban school districts over a 9-month period. These observations focused on whether talented readers received differentiated reading curriculum and/or instructional strategies. Talented readers were defined as students reading at least two grades above their chronological grade placement who also had advanced language skills and advanced processing capabilities in reading. Results indicated that talented readers received some differentiated reading instruction in 3 of the 12 classrooms. In the other nine classrooms, no challenging reading material or advanced instruction was provided for these students during regular classroom reading instruction. Appropriately challenging books were seldom made available for talented students in their classrooms, and they were rarely provided with more challenging work. Different patterns did emerge across districts. For example, the three classroom teachers who did provide some level of differentiation all taught in suburban schools.

How often are talented readers challenged or enabled to read either at their reading level or slightly above their level in reading classes? In this study, researchers investigated the ways in which regular reading instructional practices were modified or enriched for talented readers and whether talented readers were grouped for instruction. The use of different curricular materials, instructional strategies, or both was also studied with this group, as was the question of whether appropriately challenging reading books were available either in classrooms or the school library.

Current research suggests that children enter kindergarten with a wide range of skills and degrees of readiness (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000) and that read-

PUTTING THE RESEARCH TO USE

Some (most likely, many) talented readers have their academic needs ignored in their elementary and middle school classrooms. Despite so many advances in technology and increasing knowledge about differentiation of instruction and curriculum, the research in this article demonstrates how little some classroom teachers do to meet the needs of this group. When their needs are ignored, talented students' reading progress is stunted and their opportunities to learn how to react to challenge are diminished. Talented readers' abilities in reading will not develop if they are never asked to work to their full potential. Talented readers are left to develop and succeed on their own, as they need instructional support and curricular challenge that is different from strategies used with struggling students.

Many classroom teachers do not have the resources or knowledge to provide a variety of appropriately challenging reading material to students. Some students are not given an opportunity to read books that challenge them, and even if these opportunities exist, many classrooms and school libraries have few challenging books that are appropriate for students' chronological age and advanced reading profile. To meet the needs of academically talented readers, time, resources, and support must be made available to teachers who are encouraged to pursue this instructional goal.

ing achievement is the most important factor in school success (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). Related research has found that many academically talented students receive little differentiation of curriculum and instruction and spend a great deal of time in school doing work they have already mastered (Archambault et al., 1993; Reis et al., 1993; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993). The study described in this article was conducted to learn more about the reading instructional experiences of a group of students that is rarely studied and to examine practices that occur with this population in 12 diverse classrooms.

Little research has focused on challenging talented readers or using some of the pedagogy of gifted education (e.g., critical and creative problem solving and thinking, acceleration, curricular modification and differentiation, independent study, advanced content, self-selected interest-based opportunities) to encourage and develop advanced reading (Jackson & Roller, 1993; Reis & Renzulli, 1989). In one study of average and above-average readers, Taylor and Frye (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 better readers performed at 93% accuracy on the comprehension skills pretests. No recent study has examined the nature of reading instruction for talented readers, and no consensus exists on how to define this population, which makes research more challenging. This study reflected a need expressed by Guthrie, Schafer, Von Secker, and Alban (2000) for research in regular classrooms with teachers who provide reading instruction to students of all achievement levels.

Definitions and Characteristics of Talented Readers

Identifying the characteristics of and defining talented readers is challenging, as no consensus exists. Research indicates that not all academically gifted students are talented readers, and not all talented readers are identified as academically gifted (Durkin, 1966; Jackson, 1988), perhaps because of the variation of abilities in this population. As Passow (1981) explained, "Despite the tremendous variation which exists among a group of gifted and talented children, they do have many characteristics which differentiate them from other learners" (p. 3). Most current research suggests that gifted students'

general learning characteristics differ from average learners in several ways: they usually learn faster than others; have the capacity to find, solve, and act on problems more readily; have a developed use of thinking skills; and understand and make connections about abstract concepts ideas more easily (Feldhusen, 1989; Renzulli, 1978; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986).

Characteristics of talented readers have been described anecdotally, but little research has focused on these populations. They have been described as having exceptional reading ability and the capacity to understand textual information well above what would be expected of other students in their age group (Mason & Au, 1990). Dole and Adams (1983) defined talented readers as

reading approximately two or more years above grade level as measured by a standardized reading test, or children who may not have achieved two or more years above grade level on a standardized reading test, but who have been identified as intellectually gifted with potential for high reading performance. (p. 66)

Work in the last 2 decades has focused on identifying some of the characteristics of this group, although no common list of research-based characteristics exists. A review of recent work, based more often on anecdotal information than research, suggests that talented readers read earlier than their peers, read at least two grade levels above their chronological grade placement, and may be self-taught (Kaplan, 1999; Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991). It also suggests that these students are avid, enthusiastic, voracious readers who use reading differently for different purposes (Kaplan); spend more time reading than their peers; and read a greater variety of literature into adulthood (Collins & Kortner, 1995; Halsted, 1990). Halsted (1994) also found that talented readers understand language subtleties, use language for humor, write words and sentences early, and produce superior creative writing. Additionally, it has been suggested that they automatically integrate prior knowledge and experience into their reading; utilize higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; and communicate these ideas (Catron & Wingenbach, 1986). Several researchers have indicated that talented readers 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; Dooley, 1993;

Table 1

Characteristics of Talented Readers

Enjoyment in the reading process:	<p>Read avidly and with enjoyment</p> <p>Use reading differently for different reading purposes</p> <p>Demonstrate thirst for insight and knowledge satisfied through reading</p> <p>Pursue varied interests in and curiosity about texts</p> <p>View books and reading as a way to explore the richness of life</p> <p>Seek and enjoy depth and complexity in reading</p> <p>Develop a deeper understanding of particular topics through reading</p> <p>Demonstrate preferences for non-fiction</p> <p>Pursue interest-based reading opportunities</p>
Read early and above level:	<p>Read at least two grade levels above chronological grade placement</p> <p>Begin reading early and may be self-taught</p>
Advanced processing:	<p>Retain a large quantity of information for retrieval</p> <p>Automatically integrate prior knowledge and experience in reading</p> <p>Utilize higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis</p> <p>Process information and thoughts at an accelerated pace</p> <p>Synthesize ideas in a comprehensive way</p> <p>Perceive unusual relationships and integrate ideas</p> <p>Grasp complex ideas and nuances</p>
Advanced language skills:	<p>Enjoy the subtleties and complexities of language</p> <p>Demonstrate advanced understanding of language</p> <p>Use expansive vocabulary</p> <p>Use reading to acquire a large repertoire of language skills</p> <p>Use language for humor</p> <p>Display verbal ability in self-expression</p> <p>Use colorful and descriptive phrasing</p> <p>Demonstrate ease in use of language</p>

Note. Material for this table came from Anderson, Higgins, & Wurster, 1985; Baskin & Harris, 1980; Catron & Wingenbach, 1986; Dean, 1998; Dooley, 1993; Durkin, 1966; Halsted, 1994; Jackson, 1988; Kaplan, 1999; Renzulli & Reis, 1989; Savage, 1983; Southern & Jones, 1992; Stanley, 1989; Trezise, 1978; Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991; VanTassel-Baska, 1996.

Levande, 1993). A summary of the characteristics categorized across these recent studies is presented in Table 1.

Other anecdotal information suggests that talented readers possess an unusual capacity to process information, as well as an ability to process thoughts at an accelerated pace, synthesize ideas in a comprehensive way, perceive unusual relationships, and integrate ideas (Clark, 1997). They may display an advanced ability to understand a variety of texts (Bonds & Bonds, 1983; Halsted, 1994; Levande, 1999; Vacca et al., 1991) and have other language-related abilities, such as the ability to retain a large quantity of information, as well as advanced comprehension, varied interests and curiosity in texts, and

high-level language development and verbal ability (Clark). Talented readers understand books to be a way to acquire information, clarify ideas, stimulate the imagination, and deepen understanding (Carter, 1982; Halsted). McIntosh (1982) and Kaplan (2001) 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 reading as a complex process made up of many subskills that vary within the advanced-reader population, which is one reason why a common definition is difficult. It is also important to note that talented readers' skills are usually considered advanced only rela-

tive to their peers (Levande, 1999) and that a common definition is challenging because peer groups vary. Halsted identified a pattern for young talented readers that may change throughout their academic life, finding that 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, their reading level may drop off by the time they reach middle school as a result of increased participation in extracurricular activities or an absence of challenging reading in school (Renzulli & Reis, 1989).

Instructional Needs of Talented Readers

Allington (2002) has found that research supports the need for all students to interact with appropriately complex books. Talented readers need opportunities to challenge themselves and their abilities and to engage and think about complex texts. Renzulli and Reis (1989) found that many talented readers do not profit from conventional instruction in reading. Since most would agree that talented readers benefit from appropriate levels of challenge, it is unfortunate that current research indicates they seldom receive it (Archambault et al., 1993). In one in-depth observation study of 46 American classrooms, little differentiation in instructional and curricular practices was implemented by classroom teachers for gifted and talented students in the regular classroom. Across five subject areas and 92 observation days, gifted and talented or high-ability students experienced no instructional or curricular differentiation in 84% of the instructional activities in which they participated (Westberg et al., 1993).

Methods for differentiating curriculum and instruction for talented readers do exist, and some research supports the effectiveness of specific instructional and curricular strategies for use with talented readers. For example, the use of instructional level grouping has been successful with talented readers, resulting in increased understanding and enjoyment in literature (Gentry, 1999; Levande, 1999). In general, grouping academically talented students together for instruction has been found to produce positive achievement outcomes when the curriculum provided to students in different groups is appropriately differentiated (Gentry; Kulik & Kulik, 1991). In other words, it is the instruction that occurs within groups that makes grouping an appropriate instructional strategy (Kulik & Kulik; Rogers, 1991).

Another strategy found to be successful with talented readers is curriculum compacting (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). In this process, assessment procedures are used to learn what the student already knows, documenting that knowledge and replacing what is known with more challenging material, some of which is based on students' interests. In a national study (Reis et al., 1993), curriculum compacting was used to differentiate the curriculum to accommodate the specific strengths of academically talented students. When teachers eliminated 49% of regular reading curricular content for the 440 gifted and talented students identified in their classrooms, no differences were found in posttest achievement scores between treatment and control groups in reading comprehension. These teachers were able to assess the areas of the curriculum that could be compacted, but had difficulty replacing the curriculum they eliminated with high-quality work.

For teachers who can compact curriculum, differentiation of reading instruction will provide selections of high-quality literature that reflect the students' level, rather than age (Renzulli, 1977), gear instruction toward the students' strengths and interests (Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 1997), provide students with advanced content that enables them to interact with depth and complexity (Kaplan, 1999), and focus on developing higher level comprehension skills (Collins & Kortner, 1995). The use of higher level questioning and opportunities to incorporate prior knowledge into their reading experience enables talented readers to build upon previous strengths. Book discussion groups, for example, provide talented readers with the opportunity to interact with intellectual peers and to discuss their ideas in greater depth using materials such as those developed by the Great Books Foundation. Halsted (1990) suggested that these discussions should be facilitated by a teacher, librarian, or volunteer, rather than be student-led, and that they should focus on themes and ideas, rather than on facts and plot summaries.

The universal finding that has emerged from the limited research 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, Hébert, Díaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995; Reis & Renzulli, 1989; Shrenker, 1997). This finding is explained by Chall and Conard:

Another group not adequately served was those who read about two grades or more above the norm. Their reading textbooks, especially, provided little or no challenge, since they were

matched to students' grade placement, not their reading levels. Many students were aware of this and said, in their interviews, that they preferred harder books because they learned harder words and ideas from them. Since harder reading textbooks are readily available, one may ask why they were not used with the more able readers, as were the easier reading textbooks for the less able readers. (p. 111)

The appropriate match between a learner's abilities and the difficulty of the instructional work, called "the optimal match," occurs when instruction is slightly above the learner's current level of functioning and has been called the optimal match. Chall and Conard stated that, when the match is optimal, 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 halted development, as well as motivational problems for talented readers who regard reading as an effortless process. In a longitudinal study (Reis et al., 1995) of academically talented students who either achieved or underachieved in a large urban high school, 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. They consistently reported that their classes and academic tasks were "too easy"; they talked about "breezing" through elementary school, indicating that schoolwork required no effort.

Strategies to Differentiate Reading Instruction for Talented Readers

Differentiation attempts to address the variations among learners in the classroom through multiple approaches that enrich, modify, and adapt instruction and curricula to match students' individual needs (Renzulli, 1977, 1988; Tomlinson, 2000). Tomlinson (1995) emphasized that, in differentiating the curriculum, teachers are not dispensers of knowledge, but organizers of learning opportunities. Differentiation of instruction and curricula 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, 2000).

The most common strategy suggested in the literature to meet the needs of advanced readers is to accelerate their reading by providing them with material that is above their current grade level. Another suggested strategy is to enrich the reading curriculum with more challenging supplementary materials. Trezise (1978) found that grouping talented readers together to read and discuss books of different reading levels with a common theme worked better than simply having all students in a class read and discuss the same book. When this approach is used, talented readers are provided with opportunities to discuss challenging themes in relation to several different literary works. Advanced readers may also benefit from reading programs that stress the development of critical and creative thinking skills, such as the Junior Great Books program; the opportunity to discuss controversial issues; participation in less structured teaching activities; various types and levels of enrichment; or instructional or curricular differentiation, such as curriculum compacting.

In summary, the strategies suggested in Table 2 can be used to differentiate instruction and curricula for talented readers along the dimensions discussed by Renzulli (1988). These strategies are not mutually exclusive. For example, curriculum compacting uses assessment that may lead to advanced content and products for students, but this strategy requires personal efforts by teachers to find appropriately challenging resources and materials, and it will require some classroom changes, such as finding space for students to work together and for storing advanced materials.

All students should have opportunities to participate in appropriate learning experiences, and differentiated instruction can be used to ensure that all learners experience continuous progress and increase their performance 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.

Method

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How was regular reading instruction modified for talented readers in 12 third- and seventh-grade classrooms?

Table 2

Differentiated Instructional or Curricular Strategies to Challenge Talented Readers

Curriculum compacting	Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992; Reis & Renzulli, 1992; Reis et al., 1995
Acceleration	Dooley, 1993; Durkin, 1966; Jackson, 1988; Southern & Jones, 1992; Stanley, 1989
Substitution of regular reading material with more advanced trade books or basal material	Durkin, 1990; Renzulli, Smith, & Reis, 1982; Savage, 1983; VanTassel-Baska, 1996
Appropriate use of technology and the Web	Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Leu, 2001, 2000
More complex assigned reading	Baskin & Harris, 1980; Halsted, 1994; Hauser & Nelson, 1988
More complex assigned writing	Dean, 1998
Independent reading choices	Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Savage, 1983
Independent writing options	Davis & Johns, 1989
Independent study opportunities	Feldhusen, 1986; Renzulli, 1977; Treffinger & Barton, 1988
Grouping changes (within class or across classes)	Kulik & Kulik, 1991; Rogers, 1991; Sandby-Thomas, 1983
Thematic instructional changes for talented readers (tiered reading for thematic units)	Kaplan, 2001
Independent project choices based on student interests	McPhail, Pierson, Freeman, Goodman, & Ayappa, 2000; Renzulli, 1977; Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 1997
Substitution of regular reading instructional strategies with other options	Bates, 1984; Baum, 1985; Dean, 1998; Dooley, 1993; Levande, 1993; Mangieri & Madigan, 1984; McCormick & Swassing, 1982; Reis & Renzulli, 1989
Great Books or Literature Circles	Daniels, 1994
Readers' and/or Writers' Workshop	Graves, 1983, 1994
Time spent in the gifted program instead of regular reading class	Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992; Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 1997; Vaughn, Feldhusen, & Asher, 1991
Advanced questioning skills	Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956
Interest assessment and interest-based reading opportunities	Renzulli, 1977; Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 1997

Table 3
School Demographics

School Name	School Grade Level	Type of Community	SES	Population	% of Students at State Goal in Reading/Writing	No. of Books in Library
Betsy Ross Public School	Middle	Suburban	Medium	650	R72, W69	S = 14,000, C = 340
Center Public School	K-8	Urban	Low	836	R35, W38	S = 11,000, C1 = 0 C2 = 0
Connor Elementary	Elementary	Urban	Low	277	R20, W19	S = 8,808, C = 100,
Empire School	Elementary	Suburban	Medium	257	R52, W65	S = 6,810, C = 400
James Madison School	Elementary	Mixed	Low	330	R49, W49	S = 12,738, C = 300
North Corner School	Elementary	Urban	Low	520	R26, W 9	S = 5,989, C = 100
Nutmeg Center School	Middle	Urban	Low	564	R15, W8	S = 7,500, C = 0
Roosevelt Public School	Middle	Urban	Low	1040	R37, W26	S = 13,312, C = 100
Rosa Parks Middle School	Elementary	Urban	Low	511	R9, W20	S = 5,800, C = 120
Southside Elementary	Elementary	Suburban	High	471	R76, W74	S = 10,300, C = 50
Strong Porter School	Middle	Suburban	Medium	687	R63, W39	S = 9,274, C = 200

Note. R = Reading, W = Writing, S = School Library, C = Classroom Library

2. What resources were available and used with talented readers in either the classroom or the school?

Sample

Twelve different third- and seventh-grade classrooms from 11 urban and suburban schools in the northeastern part of the United States were included in this study, rep-

resenting a range of low to high socioeconomic districts in diverse areas as indicated by school demographic data and school library and classroom library information (see Tables 3 and 4). Schools were selected for both geographic convenience and diversity, and a representative sample of classrooms from a wide variety of districts were included.

Classroom teachers in the study represented a broad range of experience, from a beginning teacher who had

Table 4
Student and Classroom Demographics

School Name	Classroom Grade Level	No. of Students in Classroom	No. of Talented Readers in Classroom	No. of Reading Class Observations	% NE & ELL	% Student Diversity	% Students on Free or Red. Lunch
Center Public School (class 1)	3	25	2	12	NE 69 ELL 4	W 10 O 90	64
Southside Elementary	3	23	3	7	NE 8 ELL 5	W 85 O 15	10
Connor Elementary	3	24	2	9	NE 42 ELL 2	W 3 O 66	72
Empire School	3	18	5	8	NE 17 ELL 3	W 10 O 90	18
James Madison School	3	25	3	8	NE 26 ELL 1	W 45 O 55	33
North Corner School	3	24	3	14	NE 83 ELL 32	W 5 O 95	80
Nutmeg Center School	3	26	4	13	NE 38 ELL 12	W 13 O 87	47
Roosevelt Public School	7	25	5	8	NE 16 ELL 14	W 46 O 54	63
Rosa Parks School	7	24	6*	9	NE 17 ELL 5	W 1 O 99	46
Betsy Ross Middle School	7	21	4	13	NE 6 ELL 2	W 86 O 14	15
Center Public School (class 2)	7	23	3	12	NE 69 ELL	W 10 O 90	64
Strong Porter School	7	25	2	8	N 2 ELL 0	W 97 O 3	12

Note. NE = Non-English Home Language, ELL = English Language Learners, W = White, O = Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American

* (3 in reading class-3 in math class)

taught for just 2 years, to a teacher who had taught for 35 years. Eight of the teachers had between 8 and 15 years of experience. Numbers of years of teaching did not seem to

be associated with ability to differentiate, as the teachers who did the most in this regard had taught for 5, 10, and 12 years, respectively. Three teachers were male, and the

other nine were female. Advanced degrees (master's and beyond professional certificates) had been attained by 11 of the 12 classroom teachers observed. This is not surprising, as an advanced degree or 30 graduate credits is one of the requirements to maintain certification in the state in which the study took place.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative, comparative, cross-case study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994) of talented third and seventh graders examined the classroom practices used by 12 different classroom teachers in 11 different schools. Cross-case analysis was conducted at various times during the academic year using data from 135 days of observations in urban and suburban elementary and middle schools. Miles and Huberman indicated that "One aim of studying multiple cases is to increase generalizability. At a deeper level, the aim is to see processes and outcomes across many cases and thus to develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations" (p. 172). Miles and Huberman, Merriam (2001), and Yin suggested the use of qualitative, comparative case study for an in-depth study of a number of cases from which analytical generalizations can emerge.

Researchers used observations for the "systematic description of events, behaviors and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 79). During school visits, observations were guided by an established procedure to summarize reading instruction for all students, followed by observations to identify the differentiated reading practices that occurred for talented readers. This procedure involved time spent understanding the routine of regular reading instruction in each of 12 diverse classrooms and the subsequent identification of any differentiation strategies used for talented readers.

Erlandson et al. (1993) advocated gathering qualitative data from a variety of sources in a variety of ways, and in this study data were collected and analyzed in five phases. Phase 1 occurred as schools, classrooms, and talented reading students were identified for inclusion in the study. This phase included contacting superintendents and principals who agreed to participate and their subsequent nomination of a third- or seventh-grade classroom teacher acknowledged to be competent in teaching reading. An agreement was provided for teacher and school anonymity throughout the process of multiple classroom visits, interviews with principals, reading consultants, media specialists/librarians, classroom

teachers, and gifted program coordinators. Schools and classrooms were selected using various criteria, including diversity of reading programs used and type of school and district. A conscious attempt was made to include districts using different basal programs, as well as a blend of direct instruction and whole-language opportunities. An attempt was also made to include schools from urban, suburban, and rural sites and to study urban and suburban schools within close proximity to each other. For example, three pairs of urban and suburban elementary schools included in the study from three separate school districts were less than 5 miles apart. Each was at the geographic end of one district and the beginning of another, and in each pair one school was classified as urban and the other as suburban.

The use of assessment in the reading program was also carefully considered. Reading consultants and principals were interviewed by telephone before initial visits were scheduled, and careful consideration was given to issues related to assessment. These observations occurred in a state with a challenging state mastery test, and third- and seventh-grade classrooms were selected because these are the years in which multiple assessments take place to prepare students for the statewide assessments. In addition to preparation for state assessments in reading and writing, each selected district used a comprehensive assessment process in reading, including the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) given three to four times a year, writing rubrics administered multiple times each year, and a series of practice assessments. District reading consultants and teachers used additional assessment strategies that enabled them to readily identify students' reading levels and strengths and weaknesses in each selected classroom.

Phase 2 involved semistructured interviews with participating principals, reading consultants and teachers, librarians or media specialists, and gifted program coordinators using interview protocols developed for this study. In this phase, participating district personnel also provided appropriate documents, which included reading curriculum guides, reading textbooks or basal programs, district policies about reading, assessment information about reading, examples of students' reading logs, student writing portfolios, and any other documentation that could help provide a clearer understanding of the reading program. Interviews lasted 1–2 hours, during which time field notes were taken and, in some sessions, tape-recordings were made with permission and later transcribed. This protocol included questions about the reading program; access to classroom and school libraries; local, state,

and national testing results; perceptions of differentiation provided for all students, as well as opportunities for talented readers. During this phase of the study, selections of classrooms occurred.

Identification of talented readers within the classrooms involved several steps. The state in which the study was conducted has a mandate to identify (but not necessarily to serve) academically talented students, and each district has an identification plan that includes multiple criteria. Talented readers were identified through interviews with reading consultants, previous classroom teachers and principals, and the use of multiple criteria, including achievement levels, reading levels, aptitude tests, teacher nominations, tests of reading achievement, and current reading levels. Each student identified read at least two grade levels ahead of his or her chronological peers, and some read as many as six grade levels ahead.

Part of this screening involved the provision of a list of characteristics similar to those outlined in Table 1. In one urban school of 1,040 students, only 11 of 350 seventh graders were identified as gifted and talented. Interviews with sixth-grade teachers, reading consultants, and the gifted program teacher and a review of other pertinent criteria resulted in the designation of 5 of these 11 seventh-grade students as talented readers. Once these students were nominated, the most recent school records were reviewed, including the state assessments in reading, and current teachers were provided with a checklist of characteristics of talented readers.

It is important to note that the talented readers identified for the study were not just students who were placed in the highest reading groups in their class, as a wide range of abilities and achievement levels in reading were found within these groups, with the widest range found in urban classrooms. The high reading groups were quite heterogeneous, encompassing spreads in reading achievement of up to six grade levels in some of the classes studied.

Phase 3 focused on data collection in the classrooms selected for observations with daily direct observations and interviews that addressed research questions (Yin, 1994). Open-ended and focused interviews were also conducted to explore and elaborate specific issues as they emerged (Yin). Direct observations were recorded in field notes, and teachers were interviewed to discuss relevant observations and probe participant responses more fully (Yin). Teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the site visits, then briefly after each observation for multiple observations during one academic year.

Principals, reading consultants, and librarians were interviewed at the beginning of the study and then again as needed throughout for clarification and additional information. These semistructured interviews included open-ended questions designed to explore a few general topics to gain information in "the subjects' own words" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 135) regarding the experiences of talented students in their reading classrooms. For example, teachers were asked about the ways they had tried to motivate students to read in the classroom as a broad-based question, and a more specific follow-up question was, "Do you encourage your most talented readers to read appropriately challenging books?"

The researchers' goals were to first describe the classroom reading experiences for all readers and then to focus on different reading curricular or instructional strategies provided for talented readers. After repeated observations, researchers wrote summaries of regular classroom reading and writing activities and the differentiation practices used by classroom teachers.

Phase 4 included the transcription of previously collected data and the collection of follow-up data designed to further elaborate, confirm, or explore issues that emerged during the previous phases. Field notes, a reflexive journal recording the researchers' reactions, and descriptions of events in the study were maintained as part of the audit trail to facilitate triangulation and cross-validation from the methods and sources (Erlandson et al., 1993). Data analysis continued with the review of field notes and summaries of regular reading instruction, as well as reading strategies used with talented readers. A thick descriptive case study of approximately 20 pages was constructed for each classroom in the study as data were analyzed across case studies culminating in a technical report (Reis et al., 2003). The total field study occurred across 1 academic year until data saturation was reached, that is, when information yielded became redundant and no longer offered useful reinforcement of previously learned information (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Research team members met weekly to review and code all data both independently and collectively and to question audit trails and discuss each others' codes.

Phase 5 included the corroboration of initial findings and continued data analysis during ongoing observations as students were observed in their classrooms over repeated visits. Data analysis was conducted using techniques designed by Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) that coincided with data collection, resulting in the collection of additional data. Coding and

analysis of case study data began with Phase 1 and continued until the conclusion of the observations and individual case study development.

Data analysis techniques included the use of a coding paradigm described by Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), as well as coding suggested by the same researchers that occurred at three levels: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involved unrestricted coding of all data included in field notes, interviews, and other pertinent documents. For example, in this study, open codes related to reading instruction for talented readers involved freedom of choice of book, grouping patterns, independent writing assignments, the opportunity to work with another student, or using the same or different materials during regular reading instruction.

As the researchers verified codes and determined relationships among and between codes, a determination was made about the relationship of a code to a category. After initial categories were established, axial coding enabled relationships to be identified in categories that emerged in open coding. For example, the various ways in which students were grouped for reading instruction, reading assignments, free choice reading, writing opportunities, homework, and basal reading activities resulted in an axial code relating to student groupings by interest, reading level, and method of differentiation. Ultimately, this process resulted in the conceptualization of one or more categories selected as "core," the category that accounted for most of the variation in a pattern of behavior (Strauss, 1987).

In the final stage, selective coding, the relationships among categories were examined to determine the saturation of categories in the identification of a core category, and in this study the core category that emerged was the limited differentiation provided for talented readers. Triangulation using a number of sources supported objective validity claims, clarified meaning, and verified perceptions for individual case studies and cross-case analyses (Erlandson et al., 1993; Yin, 1994). Individual case studies were compared and contrasted on a regular basis, and the axial and core categories were identified and verified during regular research team meetings.

Techniques discussed by Marshall and Rossman (1989) were used to establish the trustworthiness of this study. For example, other researchers from The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) played "devil's advocate" to question all researchers' analyses critically and to identify negative instances.

Researchers checked and rechecked the data, conducted purposeful testing of rival hypotheses, asked questions of the data, and conducted member checks and an audit of the data collection and analytic methods. Multiple researchers from the team visited each site to ensure accuracy of the observations, and the trustworthiness of this investigation was enhanced by the use of interviews and field notes. These enabled all researchers to examine and clarify information, triangulate across methods, check depth of detail, and continue to crosscheck with other research team members for accuracy. The methods, procedures, and strategies used to ensure accuracy included observations of informants in various settings; interviews with teachers, principals, librarians, and reading specialists; and document review.

Results

The findings across all classrooms related to general reading instruction for all students, as well as differentiated instruction provided for talented readers, were similar. The major finding and core category in this study was the absence of differentiated instruction for talented readers; talented readers received some challenge in three of the participating classrooms, but limited opportunities in the other nine. The differentiated reading practices that were provided for talented students in this study are indicated in Table 5. It should be noted that the strategies in which no use of differentiation was observed, or strategies such as grouping for students in which the same materials were used for students across all groups (grouping without differentiation), were not included in the table.

One fourth (3) of the classroom teachers implemented some of the differentiation strategies usually suggested for this population on some, but not all, of the days in which observations were conducted. The rest did little to differentiate instruction. Some used grouping practices for separating students into low to high groups, but the curriculum and instruction provided across reading groups was almost identical. Some groups were farther along in the basal, but no differences were noted in the use of any of the strategies mentioned above.

Most of the nine teachers who did not differentiate instruction reported that they had received no prior training, little support, and minimal professional development in how to provide these services. Most also said that the state assessment procedures (such as the focus on their state mastery tests) had forced them to concentrate

Table 5

Reading Instruction for Talented Readers

Methods of Instructional Differentiation	No. and % of Teachers Using the Strategy
Curriculum compacting to eliminate work that students had already mastered and replace with challenging options	3 (25)
Within class grouping for interest or for more challenging activities	3 (25)
Use of more advanced instruction for groups and individual students	3 (25)
Use of higher level questioning skills	3 (25)
Availability of advanced materials	3 (25)
Gifted pull-out program opportunities during reading or language arts	3 (25)
Use of classroom libraries with advanced, challenging books	3 (25)
Integrated enrichment opportunities	3 (25)
Use of talented readers as role models or group discussion leaders	2 (17)
Use of technology during reading class	1 (8)
Replacement of Success For All/ direct instruction with standard literature program	2 (17)

on students who were below grade level. Few believed they had readily available resources to make other accommodations for talented readers. Even in the case of the 3 teachers who provided differentiated instruction, some of the opportunities were minimal, such as asking one or two talented readers an advanced question or giving talented readers the opportunity to lead a discussion or expand upon a writing sample. Even the use of a pull-out program for talented students was only provided to three students on one occasion over multiple observations.

Technology was rarely used with this population despite the availability of computers, access to the Internet in every classroom, and the many Web sites that could have challenged advanced readers. In the one classroom in which talented readers had the option to use technology, they were not supervised or provided with suggestions about how to use this tool properly or in a way that would challenge them as readers.

In most classrooms, talented readers were rarely encouraged to select more challenging books. Three of the classroom teachers had a variety of advanced books or resources available in their classrooms, but these materials were not used as part of their daily regular reading instruction with talented readers. All teachers had access to some challenging books appropriate for talented readers either in the school library or in the reading consultant's office, but in some schools, particularly in urban settings, these resources were scarce. However, hundreds of below-grade-level books were available for students reading well below grade level. For example, in two urban elementary schools, the reading consultants displayed a room with dozens of bins of books purchased to augment the reading program, the vast majority of which were for pre-primer to fifth-grade-level readers. The talented third graders in these schools were all reading well above the fifth- and sixth-grade levels, so availability of resources for them was a problem.

When questioned about whether they helped students to select appropriately challenging books, most classroom teachers said they tried to do this if they could find the time. Implied in this was the representative belief that teachers were morally obligated to spend more time with students who read below grade level. For example, one teacher explained, "I will pull books for less able readers, but I just cannot pick books out for everyone."

Data analysis indicated that the 3 classroom teachers who provided some challenge for talented readers used three or more differentiation strategies. Each of these classroom teachers worked in suburban schools in which gifted and talented programs were available, and 2 of these teachers worked with principals who had prior training and direct experience in addressing the needs of gifted and talented learners. These 2 teachers provided the most intensive and diverse strategies used to meet the needs of talented readers. The strategies included grouping for reading with the use of different trade books, curriculum compacting, opportunities for independent reading and writing choices, and book discussion groups. Some advanced instruction was provided for these groups, and some advanced materials were used. Other

differentiation strategies included the use of advanced questioning skills, pull-out programs for gifted students during reading time, the use of integrated independent work, and integrated enrichment. The combination of several strategies, such as instructional grouping, curriculum compacting, and the use of more challenging trade books for students at different reading levels, appeared to provide varied opportunities for talented readers to continue to increase their skills.

Reading Instructional Formats

Regular reading instruction for all third- and seventh-grade students involved a combination of teaching methods for the 90–120-minute reading instruction blocks used in all 12 classrooms. Several initial observations were required to document a format of regular reading instruction. Three of the urban classrooms used Success for All (SFA; Slavin & Madden, 1999, 2000; Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1992), the Johns Hopkins Model for direct instruction. In schools using SFA, 90 minutes of reading instruction were provided daily according to SFA guidelines. The SFA format rarely varied across multiple observations in each of the 3 classrooms using this approach. The format usually included 20 minutes of listening comprehension; 10 minutes of vocabulary; and a combination of strategies (e.g., silent reading/partner reading, comprehension questions, treasure hunt, 2-minute edit, or book club), or additional skills instruction for the last 10 minutes. In all other classrooms, the format of reading instruction varied across multiple visits, but included a combination of basal literature and trade books and a variety of independent spelling and writing programs. The instructional strategies included a varied combination of general language arts activities, such as group reading, buddy reading, embedded writing and spelling instruction, use of trade books, and time available for independent reading, group work, assigned writing, and games. Teachers were not observed teaching specific reading strategies, such as the use of phonics, methods for identifying main ideas, or the introduction of literary concepts, over the multiple visitations.

The use of technology was observed in only 1 third-grade classroom on two different observations by a group of talented readers who were searching for fan club Web sites of their favorite rock stars. Trade books were used in addition to basal programs in many classrooms by small groups of students, and these books were targeted for on-grade or slightly above- or below-grade-level reading instruction.

Brief summaries of 2 classrooms, developed after multiple visits, provide a brief overview of the lengthier summaries in the full-length research monograph (Reis et al., 2003). The first summary is of a heterogeneous seventh-grade classroom in a suburban middle school in which no differentiation was observed across multiple visits.

The stated goals of the seventh-grade reading program were to develop independent reading skills, comprehension, and the desire to read for pleasure. These whole-language-based goals were established with the understanding that phonemic awareness, phonics, and word analysis were the essential skills in students' abilities to decode and comprehend texts. Presently, instructional resources and the library provide teachers with choices from fiction, nonfiction, short stories, and poetry. The multiple books available within a particular theme or genre allow teachers the option of delving deeper into a unit of study. Currently, teachers have much autonomy in shaping their reading program from the available resources. Given the team structure of the middle school, most teachers who share subjects collaborate closely on their instruction. Seventh-grade literature teachers coordinate literature selections and activities and use the same timeline, finding it is easier for them and the students if they begin books at the same time and administer tests on the same day. Seventh-grade teachers integrate their reading choices with social studies units. When the students studied Greece and Rome, they read *Ulysses* by Bernard Evslin, based on Homer's *Odyssey*. Through reserve reading lists for each grade level and the available guidance of the reading consultants, teachers and students have a variety of texts available for instruction, read-alouds, and personal reading. Seventh-grade teachers require that students read for homework and usually set a time goal. Some seventh-grade teachers allow students to fulfill this assignment with books they are reading for another class or project; others want them to have a book, generally a novel, exclusively for that assignment. The goal is for students to have additional practice reading independently, to make reading a habit, and to promote reading for enjoyment.

Seventh-grade literature classes followed a similar schedule over 13 different observations for almost every class in Betsy Ross Middle School. Students begin each class with 10 minutes of journal writing in response to their reading the night before in a book of their choice. Then, students read from the book the class was reading as a whole-group read-aloud, with students assigned to read sections. Then, some form of student response occurs using teacher-created packets that correspond with the books, and students are assigned to take notes from the reading or complete skill activities in these packets. At other times, whole-class or small-group discussions followed the read-aloud.

The following is a summary of a third-grade classroom reading period in a suburban school in which differentiation was provided:

Reading instruction in this classroom is rich and diverse. The basal program is used regularly, but augmented with class novels and nonfiction books. Evidence of alternative assignments for different students was observed, and, during the course of the morning double-block of reading (approximately 2 hours), several different strategies were used with groups of readers at different levels of reading instruction. For example, a small group of children read from the basal reader with one teacher who was doing what might be called traditional reading instruction. In another corner of the room, an instructional aide worked with students on phonics-based instruction. In another section of the room, students read quietly to themselves from books bearing brightly colored circles on the spine corresponding to reading levels indicating if books were below, on, or above grade level.

Constant interaction with print is a clear and stated goal of teachers, as they have explained the program prior to, during, and after class visits. Working with one small group of readers who were not yet at grade level, the teacher cued the students on illustrations to help them prepare to read. She used a large Venn diagram and explained the characters, events, and main ideas of the story they were about to read.

In yet another corner of the room, pairs of readers read to each other from the same story.

The use of differentiated, alternative reading assignments was used with the students who were paired together, and careful planning was obvious in the way this seemingly easy strategy took place over multiple visits. Each pair of readers read from a trade book that was either above, at, or below grade level. As students began to read, they met with their partner, talked about the book, and then read a page to each other. Two instructional aides listened carefully and provided help as needed. Active reading was obvious throughout the classroom. Print resources were widely visible in the room, and adults moved carefully around the room during small-group breakout times to keep students on track with instruction in reading.

Reading Instruction for Talented Readers

As noted earlier, the major finding in this study was that talented readers received little differentiated instruction or curriculum in 9 of the 12 reading classrooms observed; instead, students who read well above grade level usually received instruction and curricular materials that were identical to that of students who read significantly below grade level. In one third-grade urban classroom in Connor Elementary School, talented readers (as well as the rest of the high-ability reading group of five students) received no formal reading instruction whatsoever in any of nine observations during the course of the year. One observation from Connor relating to these two talented readers is included below:

The two talented readers from the highest reading group search the Web in the corner of the room looking for Web sites related to Three Little Women, a rock group. The teacher has explained in a previous interview that they are able to do alternative assignments for reading. The students continue to look for information about female rock stars, while the other two students in the high-ability reading group read self-choice books that are easy picture-book reads for any third grader. Neither read chapter books. The talented readers using the Web seem happy, laughing as they find a Web site about Britney Spears. After 30 minutes, with the permission of their teacher, the two students leave the room to use the bathroom and then go to the library, where they sit and chat and look quietly at teen

magazines such as *YM*. There is no interaction with the librarian or any adult. They rarely read during the 55 minutes they spend in the library. Over nine visits, these two talented readers cause no behavioral or disciplinary problems, read no challenging material (and little of any other content), and appear to be happy in their classroom with the freedom they are given to choose activities. In this classroom, talented readers were observed searching for Web sites about their favorite rock stars (Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera); no instructions were provided by the classroom teacher about how to use the Web or about alternative work these advanced third graders might have pursued. Talented readers were left to work on their own during most of the 8 other days they were observed. During all observations, they engaged in the following activities repeatedly: They searched the Web, chatted with each other, went to the library to sit or wander around, and read easy books (such as *The Babysitter's Club* series) they selected with no guidance from their classroom teacher or librarian. They never selected material that provided them with a challenge in reading and were not assigned to read any chapter books that were at their reading level.

It is important to note that the reading consultant in this school had at least four bins of multiple copies of books that were at the sixth-grade level or above that would have provided challenge and opportunities for discussion if they had been used with this high-ability group of readers. When questioned about whether this reading group ever received any instruction at all, the teacher sighed and replied:

I try to get to them at least once a week, but I am not always able to do that. You see, so many of my other students read below grade level that it is hard to justify not working with them. Many of these lower readers will be retained in this grade if they do not improve. The top group already reads at grade level, so I rarely have any instructional time to give to them.

When questioned about the two talented readers in his class, the teacher indicated that he knew that they read several grade levels above their chronological age and that they had displayed many of the advanced characteristics

listed in Table 1. He discussed, on several occasions, feeling guilty about the minimal time or direction he provided to these students. Although this was not an intervention study, as the year progressed, the teacher began asking the researchers for help with these students, explaining that he did not have the training or time to provide them with even minimal levels of challenge. At the conclusion of the observations, this help was provided, as were additional materials targeted for these two talented readers. The teacher began to use the multiple copies of books available in the school to challenge some of his more able readers for the last 6 weeks of school. As a result of his participation in the study, the teacher attended a summer conference in which he learned multiple strategies for differentiating curricula for his talented students that could also be applied to enhance his instructional repertoire for other students. Other perceptions of classroom teachers related to their use of differentiated instruction and curricula are summarized in Table 6.

Instructional Grouping

Some instructional grouping was used in 10 of the 12 classrooms in this study, and, in most of these classrooms, students were grouped for instruction within their chronological grade-level classroom. In the 3 classrooms using the SFA program, students were grouped by instructional level, rather than by grade level. Therefore, some third graders who read below grade level were grouped with first- or second-grade students, while other third graders who read above grade level were grouped with fourth- or fifth-grade students. In the SFA program, student groupings were determined by new assessments using established SFA procedures every 8 weeks. The observations in SFA classrooms were complex and involved longer periods of time, as targeted talented readers were observed over various groupings, sometimes in their home reading class and sometimes in their new SFA classes with older students.

In 4 of the 10 classrooms in which instructional grouping was used, grouping patterns enabled some higher level reading students to be able to work together for part of the reading period. However, on-grade-level materials were used for instruction in all of these groups. For example, in two of the classrooms in which teachers attempted to make some provisions for talented readers, grouping enabled six or seven higher level readers to work together. The materials they used were the same basal readers as the rest of the classroom used, but a sepa-

Table 6

Representative Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Practices Benefiting Talented Readers

Betsy Ross Middle School—We use whole group heterogeneous teaching and we always strive to teach to the top with our seventh grade students. We use cooperative grouping in which the most talented students work with other students. We have many very challenging books available on our reading lists, but we do not encourage talented students to read these because we believe in choice, and to be honest, we have time constraints. This use of whole group reading has helped our lower achieving students. Our cooperative learning groups have built a sense of community in which our students feel safe to share new ideas and to stretch themselves as learners.

Center School—Everything in this school focuses on instruction and curriculum for lower achieving students. There is no curriculum, few books, and little attention paid to any of the talented students in this class. I do my best, but with no classroom library, few books available in the school library, little time, and no training, in reality, nothing is happening for these students.

Empire School*—I used to teach in an urban school and it is so different in this school. All of my students have made progress this year. Some have moved from 50 to 70 on the DRP and none of my students are below grade level. Assessment is an ongoing tool I use daily and my reading consultant works with me. I use high-level questioning skills directed at talented readers and take the time to find books that will challenge my highest readers. I also lobbied hard for the new reading program that has leveled books that spin off from the theme we are covering in the basal reader. Some of these are too easy for my talented readers, but it is a start. I have also worked with the town librarian to have more challenging books on reserve for all of my readers and that has taken a good bit of time, but it is worth it. Several of my students now go to the library regularly.

James Madison School*—I use more advanced books and supplemental novels to challenge my top readers. I use tiered instruction, compacting, and more depth and complexity for these groups. I use planned enrichment experiences based on exposure, training, and opportunities for in-depth, self-selected work as spin-offs from the regular curriculum. I also work closely with the gifted program pullout teacher to have some of my talented readers leave during language arts when they already know the content I am teaching.

North Corner—I use the direct instruction program specified by the district. There are few opportunities and I cannot modify it for my best readers. In fact, the top readers in this group are consistently held back by the other students who read at a similar level. Remember I am mixing my top third graders with the lowest achieving group of fifth graders.

Nutmeg Center—My SFA routine remains unchanged each day and the only modification that I can make for talented readers is that I have a collection of leveled novels from which students can choose. The novels are leveled, but all students in this level read the same novel, so I have to slow down instruction quite a bit for the older students in this multi-age class who are reading well below grade level.

Roosevelt Public Schools—I am not supposed to change any of the structure of our direct instruction program, but I deviate a bit for talented readers. For example, I try to give them feedback as soon as they finish an assignment and I skip some of the direct instruction that I am giving lower readers. Every once in awhile, I try to do a game because I know my highest readers are bored.

Southside School—I try to meet each child at his or her own level and go from there. I do pick out books for my lower readers, but I can't pick out books for everyone and I rarely take the time to help talented readers find books. Even though students may be reading at high levels, they may not yet be prepared to understand language and vocabulary and this inhibits reading comprehension. My goal for all my readers and especially for talented readers is the development of a larger reading vocabulary and a comfort level with big words.

Strong Porter School*—I use flexible grouping patterns to enable me to have students read trade books at different instructional levels based on similar themes. I vary my use of explicit instruction, omitting some from the work done by talented students, as they already know the skills, and I provide higher-level independent writing options. I also use enrichment opportunities jointly with the enrichment teacher to challenge my talented readers.

* One of the three classroom teachers identified as using differentiated content and instruction for identified talented readers.

rate novel was also used with these higher readers. The talented readers in the group were reading at a more advanced level than others, but received the same assignments as the rest of the group. They also usually received the same assignment as all other students, but they did that assignment using a separate novel that was an extension of the basal program. For example, a third-grade teacher in Empire School used the new Houghton Mifflin series and selected trade books to provide the same assignment with students who were reading different books paralleling the same theme. This series was selected with differentiation and wide ranges of reading achievement in mind, and most important to this teacher was the use of leveled trade books that could be purchased in small sets. These trade books were optional and involved an additional expense, but in this district funds were provided to purchase these leveled trade books. For example, for the third-grade theme of "Voyagers," four levels of trade books (very easy, easy, on-level, and challenging) were available to meet a wide range of reading achievement.

In the third- and seventh-grade heterogeneous classrooms in which teachers did not use any form of grouping, teachers attempted to teach a wide range of student reading levels in whole-group instruction, but were unsuccessful at differentiating the curriculum and instruction for talented readers. In the third-grade class, the range of students encompassed approximately six grade levels, from first- to sixth-grade reading levels. In the seventh-grade classroom, the instructional range was even wider, approximately eight grade levels, representing 4th- to 12th-grade instructional levels. In both of these classrooms, teachers tried to teach students at all instructional levels using whole-group lessons and strategies such as reading response journals and questioning skills.

In two seventh-grade classrooms in urban areas, on-grade and above-grade-level readers were homogeneously grouped together to provide higher levels of challenge because the majority of other seventh-grade students in the school were reading well below grade level. Teachers reported in interviews, however, that in these homogeneous classes, even though students were at or above grade level, major differences in interest levels and motivation to read resulted in multiple challenges to meeting the needs of all students. These teachers worked diligently to achieve this goal through the use of whole-group instruction. In one large urban middle school with a high percentage of remedial readers, the principal and reading consultant made an effort to pro-

vide something for above-grade-level readers. Of the 836 seventh-grade students, 691 were reading below grade level, 110 were reading at grade level, and 35 were reading above grade level (6 of whom were identified as talented readers). All of the 145 students who were reading at or above grade level were given the option of engaging in additional reading instruction or skipping reading instruction all together and taking prealgebra instead of attending reading class. Those who selected prealgebra received no reading instruction whatsoever, and those who selected reading were grouped together in an advanced class taught by an art teacher. Of the six talented readers, three selected prealgebra and the other three were scheduled into the advanced reading class with the art teacher. During several interviews after observations, the art teacher expressed frustration about trying to teach Shakespeare and poetry she had never read or studied in any depth. When asked why someone with a background in reading or language arts was not teaching the class for on-grade-level and advanced readers, administrators indicated that teachers with backgrounds in reading were needed for the large number of remedial seventh graders.

Resources and Materials

One of the most interesting findings in this study pertained to the availability of resources and materials that could be used to differentiate instruction and curricula for talented readers. As noted, classroom and school libraries were of uneven quality, and, in several cases, limited numbers of books were available that could have offered challenging reading. Differences were most obvious in urban classrooms and in middle school classrooms in which classroom libraries had considerably fewer books of high challenge levels. However, in 3 urban sites in which reading consultants had better and more available resources, the majority of the reading materials purchased was aimed at augmenting instruction for low-achieving readers. Some materials, however, would have been appropriate for targeting talented readers. The principals explained that they did not have the time or had not considered distributing these materials to classroom teachers to use with the students who were involved in this study or others in the highest reading groups. Materials and time for providing in-service or professional development on differentiation for classroom teachers were more prevalent in suburban districts than in urban districts and in elementary classrooms than in middle school classrooms.

Principals' Perceptions

During interviews, every principal realized and discussed the challenges he or she faced in trying to help all students continue to progress in reading. Urban principals believed that they faced greater challenges than suburban principals; they cited staffing issues, material shortages, socioeconomic status of families, large numbers of low-scoring students, pressure to achieve on state assessments, and continuing problems with budgetary cut-backs. All of the principals indicated that, while they were concerned about the continuous progress of talented readers, current issues related to testing and assessment and basic equity issues caused them to focus the majority of their attention on students who read below grade level. Two of the urban schools in this study had been identified as being among the lowest performing schools in their state. In one district, the superintendent had threatened principals with the loss of their positions if scores did not improve, and one principal interviewed for this study was removed the semester following data collection.

Three principals had received extensive professional development in gifted and talented education, and this influence seemed to contribute to the development of a wider repertoire of differentiation strategies by the teachers observed in 2 of these schools. For example, when asked to explain how teachers in the school addressed the needs of talented readers, one principal discussed several strategies that she encouraged staff to use:

We have implemented cluster grouping, although I can't really talk about it very much because the other three principals are so completely committed to using heterogeneous grouping all of the time. But, when I looked at our children and saw their wide range of ability, I knew we had to do something to make this process easier for classroom teachers. We use a grouping of five different categories: very high, high average, average, low average, and low. Our enrichment teacher worked with our teams of classroom teachers and identified students for placement in logical groups based on achievement and other issues, such as learning styles. We were able to keep the range minimal. Most classes have a range of average to high or average to low, and it works really well for our teachers because some are very good with high achievers and others with low achievers. We try to match

the areas where teachers have talents to the areas in which students have needs, and it seems to be working.

The other principal of one of the classrooms where differentiation occurred in reading explained:

For each child, we try to see what makes sense for his or her unique reading needs. Not every child reads in the same way or makes progress using the same strategies. We develop reading maps (with curriculum goals) and reading plans for each classroom. We provide many different strategies to try to support children who cannot read or learn in traditional ways. We also work hard to model reading throughout the day. Many of these children do not have models for reading regularly at home, and so we must provide that role-modeling opportunity for these students, as well.

The third principal who had received extensive training in differentiation was responsible for the middle school in which seventh-grade students were grouped together and could choose either math or advanced reading with the art teacher. While she was frustrated with the progress made to date, she believed that she had at least tried to do the right thing with minimal help, staffing, and materials.

Classroom Teachers' Perceptions

All classroom teachers said that they were concerned about the continued development and progress of their talented readers, but each expressed a sense of frustration about their lack of time, resources, administrative support, district priorities, and knowledge about how to use innovation and provide continuous progress for talented readers. The teachers also acknowledged an increasing emphasis on raising the achievement of low-performing readers because of state and local testing programs and the assessment of both students and teachers. Some teachers discussed ideas they had about what could be done to challenge talented readers, but indicated that they did not have the time or the resources to accomplish this goal. In some of the interviews, teachers made confusing statements that may have indicated their ambivalence about this task. For example, one middle school teacher reported that she held higher expectations for talented readers based on their ability, but that she assessed her

students using the same criteria for everyone. She also discussed her mission to provide challenging reading material for all students, while indicating that she rarely tried to challenge her most talented readers. In this class, four students were identified as talented readers, and each scored at the 99% on standardized achievement tests in reading and had been assessed to be reading at the post-high-school level. In addition, each had been identified for the gifted program and excelled in reading in elementary school. Each was an avid reader and displayed most of the characteristics of talented readers discussed earlier. Their teacher indicated that she provided multiple venues for challenge for talented readers, but that it was always done in whole-group settings. Indeed, the summary statement written after 11 observations of the four very talented students in this classroom was: "Instruction was characterized by whole-group teaching and activities, and no variation was found in content, products, or pace for the four talented readers."

Positive findings did emerge with other classroom teachers. For example, one of the three teachers who provided differentiation on a regular basis and was extremely proud of her work with the town librarian to identify advanced books to challenge talented readers that enhanced the themes in the literary anthology she was using in the class. Although she did not provide differentiated instruction, one of the teachers using the SFA program purchased books with her own funds to entice some of the students to read more often at home. In the two middle schools where teachers had developed a class for on-grade and above-grade-level readers, the teachers believed they had created options that provided talented readers with multiple opportunities for both enrichment and acceleration.

In one suburban third-grade classroom that provided diverse opportunities for talented readers, talented readers could select books from an in-class library bin. The books with green circles on their spines were higher level sections that had been brought into the classroom to challenge them. Talented readers were grouped together for instruction, and curriculum compacting was used in this classroom. Teachers used a compacted version of the basal reader, provided talented students with the ability to master basic skills, and provided interaction with the literature in the program. A talent pool of approximately 6% of students worked with an enrichment specialist for approximately 2–3 hours each week. The third-grade teacher explained that she tried to push students beyond the regular curriculum to a level that was appropriate for their ability level so they could delve more deeply into

the story. The third-grade teacher also explained that she encouraged her advanced readers to consider the author's intent and issues related to depth and complexity, and she encouraged them with her questioning skills to move beyond what they have previously achieved. She explained that she believed that the more advanced books and supplemental class sets and the use of grouping in the classroom enabled her to challenge her most talented readers in this class, but that this process took her 3 years to develop. She also explained that she used many different strategies and tiers and as a base, provided enrichment to all students, but provided differentiated enrichment opportunities for talented students.

In another third-grade urban classroom described earlier, a different scenario existed. No in-class library was provided where students could select challenging books, and no books of appropriate levels of challenge for these students were noted in the classroom. The major accommodation used was that talented readers were grouped together for instruction according to their teacher and a compacted version of the basal reader was used for students to master basic skills. However, over many different observations, no use of the basal program was observed and no reading skills or instruction was provided; rather, students were reading novels that seemed to be too easy for them. Talented readers in this urban school rarely had any formal reading instruction. Instead of having more challenging books assigned to them or having the opportunity for book chats or literature circles with their classroom teacher, they spent time on their own. As this third-grade teacher explained, "What choice do I have? With this kind of a spread, perhaps 8 or 9 years, my moral obligation is to spend more time with the kids who read on first-grade level or lower."

Reading Consultants' Perceptions

Each reading consultant echoed the concern of classroom teachers about the continuous progress of talented readers. They each articulated a sense of frustration about their lack of knowledge, time, and resources for this population. Four of the reading consultants also expressed anger over the emphasis on increasing the achievement of the lowest performing readers in the state and district. One reading consultant from an urban district who was interviewed several times summarized her feelings in the following way:

I feel so frustrated and guilty that I cannot do more for our talented readers. In the 20 years I

have worked in this district, I have seen countless kids in second grade who read at the fifth-grade level, and when they leave fifth grade, they are still reading on the fifth-grade level. We owe them better reading instruction than they receive. We do have talented readers in this school, and they need much more than we provide to progress in reading.

Summary of Results

Reading instruction in these classes generally included a combination of the use of basal readers with some trade books; limited reading strategy instruction was observed in any classroom. In 3 classrooms, regular curriculum reading practices were enriched and modified for talented readers some of the time, with the use of a combination of strategies listed in Table 2. In the other classrooms, no evidence was found of the use of any differentiated instruction for talented readers during any observations. Multiple resources were available, and differentiation strategies were familiar to some classroom teachers, but few were used on any regular basis to meet the needs of talented readers. For example, instructional grouping was used in several classrooms, but was employed without differentiation of content or choice, resulting in little meaningful change or challenge for talented readers. In other words, if talented readers were grouped together, but looked for Web sites of their favorite rock stars or read unchallenging books during that time, they were seldom challenged as readers.

Discussion

Most of the talented students observed in this study spent a great deal of school time engaged in reading activities and skills they had already mastered, and few appeared to have systematic opportunities to continue to progress in reading. While some had access to advanced resources, even the availability of advanced resources in classrooms and some choice of reading materials in school and classroom libraries did not guarantee that talented readers interacted with materials that were either at or slightly above their current level of reading. Differentiation of reading instruction for talented readers was limited, and even when teachers had some knowledge about strategies that could be used to differentiate instruction and curricula, most had difficulty translating this knowledge into effective classroom teaching strate-

gies or the use of a variety of instructional strategies based on differentiation practices. If these practices are to be successful, professional development should be provided to classroom teachers, and coaching and support must be available from district personnel. It is important to note that this type of targeted professional development addresses a variety of strategies that can be used by classroom teachers to benefit students of all achievement levels. Classroom teachers should be able to understand how to implement a reasonable number of differentiated reading strategies within various classroom organizational patterns. Teachers can be provided with opportunities to learn how to identify students' interests, target books that will challenge students' current reading levels, integrate the use of technology into classroom reading activities, and provide multiple opportunities for creative modes of expression.

Talented readers should have opportunities to work together and engage in critical reading and analysis, advanced vocabulary development, challenges such as comparing themes across fiction and nonfiction, and consistent exposure to advanced reading opportunities. The use of available materials such as Great Books or strategies such as literature circles can help to make these opportunities easier to implement. Indeed, in 3 classrooms observed in this study, some differentiation occurred regularly. Two of these classrooms were in schools in which principals actively supported the use of differentiation and in which professional development in these strategies had been made available to teachers.

Each classroom teacher discussed the pressure he or she felt district and state administrators applied to "bring up the scores" of the lowest reading students and perceived that this resulted in lost opportunities for middle-range and high-achieving readers. Most teachers believed that this pressure resulted in the use of less creative and innovative methods in a misguided attempt by administrators to improve the scores. As teachers continued to experience pressure to improve test scores, fewer opportunities for creative challenges in reading were provided to all students and may have resulted in fewer talented readers. These pressures were more obvious in urban districts serving large numbers of low-achieving readers.

Talented readers in most classrooms in this study used the same basal reading programs as all other students, and many were unchallenged in school reading programs. With some time and effort, classroom teachers could learn how to provide options to challenge these students. For example, a group of students that has already mastered basic skills in spelling or writing can

have the curriculum compacted and use alternative challenging materials in reading based on interests. They can meet together for a block of time on a daily basis (Kulik & Kulik, 1991; Rogers, 1991) and be assigned appropriately challenging substitute books that offer depth and complexity (Kaplan, 2001) and are based on similar themes as the books being read by readers at or below grade level to facilitate the opportunity for whole-class discussion of similar themes across books. This type of opportunity could have easily been assigned in the classroom in which talented readers surfed the Internet for rock stars. The books were available in the school.

Talented readers could also be given opportunities to complete different creative products and participate in alternative writing assignments. Teachers can spend some time with them on a daily basis, checking to make sure their reading time in class is spent with appropriately challenging materials and assignments. Independent studies of sufficient depth and challenge can be used to encourage students to work in areas of personal interest and challenge. They could be given the opportunity to bring prior knowledge and insight into their interpretations of challenging text. They can use technology to access Web sites of authors, to read challenging books online, and to interact with talented readers from other schools using literature circle discussion strategies. Technology can also be used to access advanced content, to create concept maps and other technological products, and to write and revise stories, chapters, and even books. Minimally, talented students would benefit from diagnostically based instruction to ensure a consistent improvement in their reading skills.

It is possible to differentiate reading instruction for talented readers without using a different reading program and provide high levels of challenge for all students. Classroom teachers can challenge talented readers with higher level questioning that extends the depth of students' contact with good literature. Rich, complex reading provides the possibility of multiple interpretations of literature that can challenge students at all levels. Talented readers will benefit from considering more than one interpretation of a text. Having multiple interpretations encourages students to examine how they develop their own beliefs and provides challenges that talented readers rarely encounter in their classrooms. Interviews with teachers in this study showed that they knew they should be doing more for their talented readers, but all believed that they had "a moral obligation" to focus most of their effort and time on students who were reading below grade level.

This study provided some insights about the experiences of some talented readers who did not receive appropriately challenging instruction in reading in 12 diverse elementary and middle school classrooms. Underachievement may occur if academically talented students do not receive appropriate levels of challenge in core curricular areas like reading. Too little research exists on talented readers and whether they have the opportunity to interact regularly with challenging reading content, and it is our hope that this article will stimulate more research on a variety of questions, for example, on the use of challenging versus "comfort" reading materials with talented readers.

Most teachers in this study understood that they were not providing challenging reading instruction for their talented readers, but they thought that these readers would benefit from, or at the very least not be negatively affected by, spending considerable time with reading materials that they could handle with ease. Other research indicates that this is not the case, at least for some talented students (Reis et al., 1995). The question raised by a third-grade teacher was echoed in discussions with many others: "What choice do I have?" With a large spread of achievement levels, he believed his moral obligation was to spend more time with students who read well below grade level.

But, another moral obligation exists to provide rich learning opportunities that challenge all students. Without specialized reading instruction that meets their needs, talented readers may regress toward the mean, rather than continue to develop their reading skills (Brown & Rogan, 1983). Perhaps some talented reading students are not hurt by reading materials that are consistently easy for them, but this practice may obstruct continuous progress in reading, and it most certainly denies them the opportunity to interact with appropriately complex texts. It is hoped that this research will serve as a catalyst for future research in an area that has been largely ignored.

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