

Advanced Readers

By [Tamara Fisher](#) on August 13, 2008 12:04 PM | [17 Comments](#)

Greetings from a knoll in Iowa! I've been out of town for a bit, hence my absence from this place where we all gather together. The last week of July saw me in Boise, Idaho, for the 12th annual **Edufest** conference, "the Northwest's premier summer conference on gifted and talented education." It was my 7th summer of Edufest and I'm already looking forward to going back again next summer. Being able to get together with others in the field who do what I do and who love to discuss and debate issues in gifted education is such a blast. Being a Gifted Education Specialist is a rather solitary position to hold. Yes, my District has a great track record of supporting me and my students, for which I'm wholeheartedly grateful, but I'm still "alone" there in some sense in what I do. It is at places like Edufest where I can connect with others who do the same, swap ideas, and give and receive reinforcement about the importance of what we are doing for these kids who learn so differently. A special "hello" to everyone that I saw and met at Edufest this year!

All gifted ed conferences are exciting and informative, but a unique feature to Edufest (one borrowed from **Confratute**), is the intense and in-depth structure to the week's schedule. Four of the six days feature three "**strands**," which are essentially mini-classes. Monday through Thursday, for an hour and a half each day, you attend a presentation by the same presenter(s) on the same topic. You end up with six hours of time per strand, over the course of the week, to learn from that presenter and to delve more deeply into that topic. The days include three strands, special topics, plus a keynote at night. The other two days consist of keynotes only, one Sunday night and another Friday morning. They sure pack it all in!

This year's Friday morning keynote was given by **Sally Reis** of the **University of Connecticut** and the **National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented**. She spoke about **SEM-R**, or the Reading research connected with the **Schoolwide Enrichment Model**. (I encourage you to learn more details about SEM-R [here](#). You can see a PowerPoint of Sally's full presentation [here](#).) For a quick summary, SEM-R is essentially a process whereby each student progresses in reading by being given (or self-selecting) interest-based reading material within his or her zone of proximal development.

*Think about it: are the advanced readers in your classroom reading books that are **challenging their reading skills**, or are they mostly reading books that are at or even below grade level?*

Talented readers read two or more years above grade level. Many of them (although not all) begin reading early and some are more or less self-taught readers. Think of that little second grader in your classroom who is reading at a sixth grade level and figured out how to read on her own at the age of four – is she being taught to read with second grade materials or are you reaching her in her challenge zone, with reading material that is at and just beyond her ability level?

[One concern that often arises regarding young advanced readers is that the content of much of the reading material that is at their ability level isn't age-appropriate. Do you want your 8-year-old reading the content that most 14-year-olds are reading? Not yet. But there *are* many great reading options available for advanced young readers. Check out [Some of My Best Friends are Books](#) for suggestions, as well as [this link](#).]

Unfortunately, research shows that the vast majority of the time, including in reading instruction, these advanced learners are not receiving any curricular differentiation that meets or challenges their abilities. (See slides 30 and 31 [here](#).) On the whole, we tend to think "they're already where they need to be" because they've met or (more typically) exceeded the benchmarks and standards for their "grade level." If only we would **educate** them by reaching them where they are and stretching them to new levels, we would discover these kids are capable of so much more than we realize.

That's just what the teachers who were a part of the SEM-R study discovered. Check out these quotations from them as they reflected upon the process of reaching these advanced readers at an appropriately challenging level. (I've added the italics to highlight key phrases.)

"My average to above average readers *really surprised me*. They went really *beyond what I ever thought they could do* with advanced thinking skills and questioning skills. These readers were *able to go well beyond what I had thought they could do* and connect with their experiences and the challenge level really inspired them. *They could read much more advanced material than I had previously assigned.*" (5th grade teacher)

"In the beginning my kids looked at me as if I had two heads when I took the books away from them and told them that *they were reading a book that was too easy for them.*" (4th grade teacher)

"I did not realize *how much middle of the road reading instruction I did* and *how few of my kids I really challenged.*" (4th grade teacher)

When we actually make the effort to TEACH these students (i.e. reach them where they are and move them on from there), we discover that they are capable of so much more than we had realized!

that they are capable of so much more than we had realized.

But we don't put as much effort into teaching the advanced learners as we do into teaching the struggling learners. Check out slide two **here**. The spring WCPM (words correct per minute) fluency rates of kids at the 10th percentile show consistent growth from grades one through seven, then stagnate at grade eight. For kids at the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles, you can see consistent growth through all grades until middle school, where they stagnate. For kids at the 90th percentile, there is consistent WCPM growth until middle school, where they don't stagnate, they actually **regress**. Our most talented readers and they're *regressing*???

This is educational neglect, folks.

We have a nation-wide lack of adequate, ability-appropriate educational growth for a sizeable number of capable students and it seems no one is screaming about it!

Helen Schinske points out the absurdity in this quotation: "Closing the achievement gap by pushing down the top is like fostering fitness by outlawing marathons."

Little Scout in To Kill a Mockingbird experienced an outlawing of her marathon. She knew how to read before entering school. One day she is reprimanded when caught reading the newspaper in class (after breezing through the reading assignment the teacher had given everyone) and is told to stop reading at home and to stop reading the newspaper in class. Scout says, "I mumbled that I was sorry and retired, meditating upon my crime."

Her "crime" was already knowing how to read and "flaunting" that ability by - *gasp* - reading in school!

"Expecting all children the same age to learn from the same materials is like expecting all children the same age to wear the same size clothing."
(Madeline Hunter)

They differ. We need to find ways to help some educators understand and accept that fact. If we don't, they will continue to *be okay with* not putting effort into reaching, teaching, and stretching the advanced learners in their classrooms. One of the teachers in the SEM-R study had the guts to come clean with the researchers and admit he wasn't putting much effort into teaching his advanced students:

"I try to get to them (the talented readers) 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."

Now, that's understandable on some level (teachers are super busy people), but this is what that kind of thinking really boils down to:

If we don't have time to reach every child where he or she is and move them on from there – if we don't have time to challenge every kid at his or her learning readiness level – if we only focus on the kids who "need to get there," – then we are deciding that some kids will not get an education that year. We are deciding that some kids will get to learn, thanks to our efforts, and others will be *denied their potential degree of educational growth*, thanks to our lack of effort. We're deciding this based on proficiency of "grade level," not based on what is actually *appropriate academic growth* for a given learner. Individual student growth – actual LEARNING – is an irrelevant factor apparently. All that matters, it would seem, is that they reach the bar. And if they're already at (or beyond!) the bar, then it's okay to not put any effort into teaching them.

Yes, I am actually saying that when we say we don't have time to work with the advanced learners in our classes, we are in essence saying that we are choosing to not give those kids an education.

As one of my students said recently, "If learning isn't happening, then school isn't really a school."

Which students will get to learn to their capacity in your classroom this year?

17 Comments

Posted by: SwitchedOnMom | August 14, 2008 12:17 AM

Tamara,

Yes, Yes, Yes!

I started a comment, then realized it was a blog post.

<http://themorechild.wordpress.com/2008/08/13/tamara-heres-my-scream/>

Posted by: Dorothy | August 14, 2008 12:41 PM

Amen! Unfortunately not new news though. Time and again Tennessee value added scores show that the gifted have some of the smallest gains per year.

One thing I wonder is how this plays out with the movement to standards based grading? I sometimes read The Science Goddess (although often I get technical difficulties, a blank page instead of a post) and she speaks very well of standards based grading, says things that seem quite reasonable and aligned with good educational practices. However, she does not teach elementary students and as far as I can tell, has not addressed the student who enters her classroom already having mastered the standards. She has one post where she questions whether or not a 4 should exist at all. A good question. Maybe instead of a student receiving a 4 for exceeds expectations, the student should be assessed as far along in the standards as possible, their personal frontier. (Again, different discussion for high school.)

In an ideal world, there would exist good measurement tools to show where each student is on the entire standards continuum and teachers would have the time and resources to take it from there. I have never taught elementary school, so I don't know how this might be feasible. Are there even good measurement tools? My state (Washington) office of instruction said they were developing a full set of classroom based assessments for this, but I don't think it has gotten very far.

Posted by: Rich Morrow | August 14, 2008 1:56 PM

I would like to echo your comments in mathematics. In my experience, it is a lot easier to recognize who is advanced in math and to know what they need to learn. There is also no problem with content that is age-related.

At our school (k-8), we place students according to what they are ready to learn. Age, grade and gender are generally given no consideration. The students respond by doing their work and enjoying school.

(Note that students are not placed by ability, but by readiness to learn. In fact, after fifty years of involvement with advanced learners, I am not sure I can define what high ability is. It is like Justice Stewart's comment about pornography in *Jacobellis v Ohio*, to the effect that he couldn't define it but he says that, "I know it when I see it." But I think I can recognize most of the time.)

We had a teacher complain one year about putting sixth graders into algebra because they would be "extremely advanced" in high school and would suffer the consequences. But our tracking of such students indicates that they thrive and get accepted at whatever colleges they desire. It is common for the students who were placed in algebra in sixth grade to earn the top grade in their ninth grade precalculus classes.

In spite of the differences in content, I think that there are strong analogies between math and reading regarding how to move the best students along. As you pointed out in your previous post, these students NEED intellectual stimulation.

Rich Morrow

Posted by: Deb | August 15, 2008 11:23 PM

Tamara,

Wow, I am so excited since I have found your blog. I totally agree w/your views on teaching and challenging gifted student. Unfortunately, I worked in Washington state, where they do not require a specialized teacher for GT, however, they do host the WAETAG conference each year, so many GT educators out there. I remember a presentors words... "If we only gave the hearing impaired child batteries for their hearing aides on Tuesdays and Thursdays for one hour, or if we only gave a wheelchair to the student who needed it once a week, there would be a huge public outcry, and rightly so. But this is just what we do to gifted students, we deny them what they need. They sit bored out of their minds in a classroom where the teacher is too busy w/below grade level students (heaven forbid we leave a child behind), or the teacher will not or cannot differentiate curriculum to meet the needs of the high level learners, or they are just unsure what to do with this smart kid in their class...and of course the student can pass all the state mandated testing, so no worries. Teachers are busy and don't always have the time, but is this not what a teachers job is??? To educate ALL their students. Every child deserves an equal opportunity, but not every opportunity is equal. When Johnny outgrows his shoes and needs new ones, do you buy every child in the home new shoes? No, you buy or give what is needed to the person in need. If Johnny can't read, then by all means, get him some help, find out what he needs to become a real reader. But don't ignore the kids who have mastered the materials, they need to read something that will challenge them to learn and grow, something that will stimulate their thinking and keep them engaged and moving forward in their education.

Districts/schools, etc. need to get away from grade/age level placement and start assessing kids as to what they know and let them work from there. I like what Rich M said about his school..."that students are not placed by ability, but by readiness to learn."

People will argue it w/not be fair, as kids w/get their feelings hurt. Time to toughen up folks...kids all know who are the smart ones and who are not so bright in every class. Teachers often complain it w/not be fair to put all the GT kids in one class for a multitude of reasons. But fair has nothing to do with it...

Fair is not about same and equal fair is about meeting needs!

Get me a soapbox...onward to better education for our GT and all students as we continue to educate others about how children learn.

Deb (:

Posted by: Dorothy | August 14, 2008 12:41 PM

Posted by: koyisma | August 16, 2008 11:44 AM

Having raised two gifted students and watching the multitudes of gifted students' needs glazed over, I can attest to their ESE status. Giftedness is not an award, it is a statement of need in specific areas, some academic, some social, some emotional. Each student as different as those in basic ed. Why do we cluster them in grade levels when their needs vary so drastically across the curriculum?

K Bylsma

Posted by: Kevin | August 16, 2008 5:50 PM

While I agree with the basic idea that gifted (indeed all) kids should be taught at the level they are at, and that the current system does a poor job of this, I'm not sure that the "smallest gains on the test" argument holds water.

If you give a test with a low ceiling, then those near the top will be unable to show progress, even if they have learned a lot. The problem may be inappropriate testing rather than inappropriate teaching. (Actually, I think that there are problems with both.)

Posted by: adso of melk | August 16, 2008 9:44 PM

Tamara, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your post. Although I'm a full-time teacher with certification to teach gifted, I homeschool our child because it was clear right away that the school for which she was zoned had no intention of doing anything except sticking her into a corner and essentially letting her fend for herself...which was just how I was treated when I was in school.

To be honest, if gifted students leave for private schools or homeschools because public school systems decide, for whatever bizarre and unconscionable reason, that one child is worth more than another child, that one child deserves an education and another does not, that one child will be stretched to reach her full potential and the other will languish, then they DESERVE to have what effectively amounts to a "brain drain" from the school system. I only wish there were more educators like you so that there could genuinely have been a choice for us and our family.

Posted by: Michelle | August 17, 2008 10:32 AM

Right on! My son was a talented reader, entering kindergarten as a self taught reader. In first grade his teacher used basal readers, he completely tuned out. He never learned skills to tackle advanced reading materials and now as a high schooler actually struggles with comprehension and inferences.

Young talented readers don't all do fine on their own. They still deserve to be taught to read.

Posted by: Barbara Kerr | August 17, 2008 11:52 PM

Tamara, your blog will change many hearts and minds. Keep up the good work. We're looking forward to seeing you in Kansas!

Posted by: Susan Grispino | August 18, 2008 9:58 PM

Thank you all for this post. We have no gifted program whatsoever in my area.

However, my son goes to a private school and they allow me to select reading for him that is at his level (4th grader, reads HS level). Do you have any resources for learning activities based on specific books or even some general formats I could use for the books he reads? I've used book lists such as the ones linked here and on other posts to find books. I read them also to check content due to his age and I will do learning activities with him at home. He gets to read on his own at school so I need a way to follow through with what he has read so I can check his comprehension and work on critical thinking skills. Anything he can work on independently at school would also help. Thanks!

Posted by: Crimson Wife | August 20, 2008 10:13 PM

Excellent post. I do have a practical question- how do you motivate a gifted reader to choose books that will "stretch" him/her rather than ones that are below his/her ability. I'm struggling with this issue in homeschooling my daughter, who is almost 6. When she chooses to, she can read long chapter books like those by C.S. Lewis, Laura Ingalls Wilder, J.K. Rowling, etc. But most of the time she insists on picking ones that are way too easy for her. She loves to read and I don't want to put a damper on that, but at the same time, I want her to grow in her reading skills. Any suggestions?

Posted by: Cheryl - Radar Engineer, Math Teacher, Proud Parent | September 10, 2008 2:06 PM

"At our school (k-8), we place students according to what they are ready to learn. Age, grade and gender are generally given no consideration. ...Note that students are not placed by ability, but by readiness to learn."

Rich Morrow, I want to enroll my kids in your school. Where is it?

Unfortunately the law that makes age discrimination illegal has an explicit exemption for schools. Why can't more schools figure out what Rich Morrow's school did?

Posted by: Allison | **September 14, 2008 8:34 AM**

Thank you so much!!!!

My oldest is one of those early, talented readers, and he has been discouraged from reading at his level by most of his teachers. One of them actively discouraged any reading he did above grade level and took away his library access, among other things, and that's not even addressing the curricular difficulties. They don't even do out-of-grade level testing and do not group students by ability for reading in our district. As a result, he consistently picks books that are way too easy for him when he's at school. The books he chooses at home are easily three grade levels above what he reads during DEAR. I suspect that even at home he's not stretching himself much. Further, as he's hit the point where his reading level is firmly in the "young adult" area, as far as I can tell, I worry about content that's inappropriate for my barely eight year old.

Not only do these students not progress as quickly as they could or should in their reading, but I have found that this attitude has dramatically lessened my son's enthusiasm for reading. By spring he often stops reading for pleasure entirely and it takes me about half of the summer to get him back to his love of good books. This is a child who used to love to read so much that I would have to separate him from his books in order to ensure that he dressed himself in the morning. Otherwise I would find him on his bed in his underwear with his nose in a book. Taking a child like this to the point where he will not read is a real tragedy.

Luckily, this year we have a sympathetic teacher. I'm fighting the district so that I can get him a DRA and we can at least have some idea as to what his "just right" level is, potentially giving him the opportunity to get access to more appropriate direct instruction as well.

Posted by: Cheyenne | **October 17, 2008 5:32 PM**

My name is Cheyenne and I am 12 years old and I completely agree with this article. I mean I learned how to read in kindergarten like everyone else but unlike my friends I started reading for fun unlike when I just have to. I have read To Kill A Mockingbird even though I am in Seventh grade apparently I wasn't supposed to because we are going to read it next year in my Literature class but it was in the library so I read it. People often think it's too much for kids my age but to be honest I feel certain teachers underestimate the abilities of my classmates. My friend can teach math better than the math teacher and yet he is not being acknowledged. In English I may be bad at grammar but my writing is superb because I've been reading all my life. One time I finished my work fast and read Black Beauty while the teacher taught other kids to spell. I just really feel like teachers beat around the bush. I mean it's only now in seventh grade that we can take freely about elections or about economy like all those other years didn't matter because we are naive. It really makes us feel smarter than the teachers sometimes. Not to say adults are stupid I'm saying being more open can help a child learn better. I recently got my little sister to pick up Charlotte's Web and just read now I must mention she's in second grade and really is enjoying it. In conclusion I feel being open and acknowledging that a kid has a talent for something is better than keeping them at that level.

Posted by: Mandy Adcock | **July 26, 2009 1:36 AM**

What do I do then? Where do I start? I have a four and a half year old who has been reading since before he turned three--encouraged but not formally taught--I am a teacher--I am an education specialist for a homeschool charter--I would have never thought I would be contemplating homeschooling myself but now I don't think I have a choice..but even as a credentialed experienced teacher I now feel paralyzed without any idea of where to go from here with my son --I don't want to just go to the next grade level material I want to know how to really excite him and challenge him where he is at--he easily reads fifth grade but again the content is a little much usually--so how do I work on critical thinking and higher level skills in a challenging reading level while still keeping in mind he is four when I look at content and writing ability that is not at the same advanced levels that the reading is? He is an October birthday so I am considering doing kinder two years in a row because emotionally he is VERY four but academically I feel weird doing two years of kinder---thus the homeschool thought enters again..???

Posted by: Elsie | **September 22, 2009 6:58 AM**

Responding to Mandy Adcock's post from July 26, 2009:

I feel for your position. We watched year after year as our avid and talented reader was graded as "on-level". We asked and asked that he be more challenged, but only received the proverbial pat on the head. Last year in fifth grade my son continually questioned his teachers explanation of chapters they were reading in various books...he had a different viewpoint. This led to the teacher informing us that he wasn't comprehending what he read? I checked the book out of the library that he supposedly didn't understand. Not only did my son understand the book; He was critically analyzing aspects of it and he was correct in his thinking! Throughout the year he was given B's in reading, even though he discusses books with an adult book club at my husband's place of employment. He needs to be challenged and he needs a teacher who will recognize his critical thinking as a great asset!

I highly suggest that if you feel the school will not challenge your child, just go ahead and home-school. The US Dept of Ed put out a report in 2009 that states that online and blended learning produce better learning outcomes : <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf> If you are lucky enough to live in one of the 28 or so states that offer virtual schools, take advantage of it.

Above all, do not let your child's gift be taken away by a school system not equipped to handle high achievers. I wish I'd listened to my instincts 6 years ago!

When I was in the 5th grade, our math class was setup so that kids who could handle it, were in the "on your own" group. All the kids in the class who needed instruction were listening to the teacher, but the on-your-own group sat in the back, did not have to listen to the teacher, and quietly just did the work from the book. I remember there was one girl who was into the next grade of math because she finished her book early.

As far as English though, my son is an early advanced reader. So far, his school is getting him books that challenge him. But I find when someone has strengths, there are usually weaknesses. So my son is academically strong, but gym and social situations are difficult for him. I wish there were options in his school that would give him more time to practice gym skills and social situations in school (gym club or social skills group). He already has such a long day, trying to do this after school, along with the homework is tiring. It would be nice if he were being pushed to be well rounded, but most school only care about academics.

Comments are now closed for this post.
