

Examining Joyful Reading for Underachieving and Twice-Exceptional Students

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Although the “reading wars” have been going on for centuries, most of the focus has been on how to teach beginning reading to children and emphasis has been on differences between phonics and various whole language approaches (Castles et al., 2018). This important line of research will continue; however, the focus of this short article is on questions about an issue that needs to be addressed *after* students have mastered basic reading skills. Simply stated, what makes reading joyful for young people, something they want to do willingly and enthusiastically? And how can we provide the opportunities, resources, and encouragement that supports efforts to promote joyous reading among underachieving students and high ability students experiencing various forms of learning disabilities?

Underachievement generally defines students who are not working up to their ability as indicated by standardized test scores or teachers’ judgments. Twice exceptional students (often abbreviated as 2E) are those who show potential for high achievement or creative productivity in one or more areas, but who manifest one or more difficulties in neurological areas such as specific learning disabilities (SLD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and attention-deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD). Twice exceptionality is a term that special and gifted education experts use to better define and identify these students so that they can properly differentiate instruction and focus on student interests and strengths. Dual possession of giftedness and disabilities might seem implausible, but some have suggested scientists like Isaac Newton and Leonardo da Vinci may have had disabilities. Animal scientist Temple Grandin attributes her invention of advances in bovine management to the unique ways she sees the world that resulted from by her autism. Yet, she also notes that her disability caused difficulty in school and when interacting with others, and leaves her with a low tolerance for sounds, smells, and touches that are sometimes overpowering to her but normal to others (Grandon, 2013).

Questions often from teachers and parents of 2E students about reading difficulties have focuses on how our Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) and its adaptation to reading (SEM-R; <https://gifted.uconn.edu/semr-about/>) accommodates these students. Most suggestions offered here focus on reading among elementary grade underachieving and 2E students and are the result of a widely cited research study (Reis et al., 2011) conducted with advanced ability and general education students. The study investigated the effects of an enrichment and differentiated approach to reading instruction on elementary students’ reading fluency and comprehension in several elementary schools across the country. It investigated whether the use of engagement and differentiation strategies and the elimination of up

to 5 hours of whole group instruction using basal reading instruction each week produced higher, similar, or lower reading scores for students who participated in the intervention as compared to those who did not. The schools represented different geographic regions and served students of varying backgrounds and achievement levels, including rural, urban, and suburban schools.

Results showed that the use of both differentiated instruction and enrichment teaching methods, including high-interest, self-selected books that are slightly above students' current independent reading levels, resulted in higher reading fluency and comprehension in some students. Teachers were able to replace whole and small group instruction with differentiated instruction without detriment to achievement scores. In other words, scores were higher or similar to the comparison groups in every school. In the SEM-R, teachers eliminated whole group, primarily basal reading instruction, for an hour each day, and replaced it with individually selected independent reading selections accompanied by 5-minute differentiated teacher conferences, which resulted in the same or higher reading fluency and comprehension scores for the students in the SEM-R group as compared to the control group.

The use of the SEM-R in one low socio-economic urban school in this study resulted in reading fluency and comprehension scores that were statistically significantly higher from those of the control group, a result that has been noted in smaller scale studies using the SEM-R in urban schools. It is also important to note that none of the control classrooms in any of the schools significantly outperformed the SEM-R classrooms, suggesting that differentiated instruction and content works as well or better than regular curricular instruction and content. These combined results suggest that potentially up to 4 to 5 hours of weekly grouped reading instruction could be successfully replaced by brief, differentiated, targeted reading instruction delivered in weekly independent reading conferences with individual students conducted during 35 to 45 minutes of daily independent self-selected reading of content that is above students' current level of reading. These results also suggest that the SEM-R approach works as well as or better than the more traditional reading instruction used in these schools, reflecting the usefulness of theoretical principles regarding differentiated learning and individualized support.

The reading fluency and comprehension results for students in the urban, lower socio-economic school were significantly higher than their control group peers. Each of the components of the SEM-R framework focuses on engagement, and the SEM-R students at this school may have outperformed their control group peers because of the increased engagement and interest they experienced when given an opportunity to choose to read books of appropriate challenge in areas of personal interest (Guthrie & Alao, 1997; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Renzulli, 2008; Renzulli & Reis, 1997, 2014). This type of opportunity may be less available in the homes and schools of these urban students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The increased reading achievement at this school may also have been because of the SEM-R focus on engagement (Guthrie & Alao, 1997; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Renzulli, 2008; Renzulli & Reis, 1997) and differentiation as well as scaffolding of advanced thinking skills and higher order

questioning as opposed to the direct instruction, test preparation, and remedial focus of the control group instruction. In this urban school, the control classrooms were largely dominated by skills practice, test preparation instruction, and whole group reading instruction with minimal time spent reading. In addition, the environment created by the SEM-R approach to reading may have enhanced children's desire to read and maintain their engagement in reading, as compared to the environment in control classes, as suggested by the qualitative findings discussed (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008).

Practical Resources for Interested Teachers and Parents

Reading Interest-A-Lyzer

An essential first step in helping underachieving and 2E readers is to examine their major areas of interest. Reis and her colleagues have developed the following Reading Interest-A-Lyzer. All educators are free to adapt, modify, or translate this instrument in any way that suits your purpose.

<https://gifted.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/961/2022/08/Reading-Interest-A-Lyzer.pdf>

Two other reproducible instruments that can help in personalizing learning are listed at the end of this article.

The SEM-R Website

<https://gifted.uconn.edu/semr-about/>

Many resources and downloadable materials are also available free on the SEM-R website.

The Joyful Reading Learning Kit

The second resource is a comprehensive series of practical suggestions for teachers and parents called *The Joyful Reading Resource Kit* (Reis et al., 2009), which can be obtained from the reference below.

The Kit includes:

- Reproducible "bookmarks" for scaffolding students in critical thinking and comprehension activities
- Extensive lists of recommended books
- Tips for supporting students in selection of appropriately challenging books
- Materials for managing independent reading in the classroom, including log sheets, five-minute conference tips, writing prompts, assessment rubrics, and a reading growth chart

- Exciting enrichment resources to develop students' reading interests, including a survey form, online books, Web-based activities, and Renzulli Learning resources
- Hands-On Creativity activities that help students elaborate ideas, develop fluency, brainstorm, and much more
- Reproducible exploration projects on varied topics that students can pursue independently at their own pace

The Joyful Reading Resource Kit is a vital compendium not only for classroom teachers but also for parents and after-school educators who wish to support students in discovering the rich rewards and delights of reading.

Learning Styles and Expression Styles Instruments

Learning Styles Inventory:

<https://gifted.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/961/2022/08/Learning-Styles-Inventory.pdf>

My Way, An Expression Style Inventory:

<https://gifted.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/961/2022/02/My-Way-Accessible.pdf>

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