CHAPTER TWO – Characteristics and Needs of Verbally Gifted Children

Problems Defining Gifted

The history of the term gifted leads to a problem in defining it. Does it refer only to a demonstrated skill or talent, or does it refer to a potential skill or talent that must be nurtured in order for it to develop? Some, like Lohman and Korb (2004), do not even approve of the term gifted.” Other terms, like high ability, have been suggested to replace it and are already in widespread use. The National Association for Gifted Children, for example, says that its two quarterly publications, Gifted Child Quarterly and Parenting for High Potential, provide “developments, information, and resources in nurturing the potential of high-ability children.” However, the term high ability does not really remove the problems that exist with the term gifted, and may even create additional problems.

As the term implies, high-ability children are those with more ability than other children, but how are those children recognized? Is it a demonstrated talent or skill that marks these children as having high ability or is it the potential? The fact that the terms high ability and gifted are frequently used interchangeably seems to suggest that they refer to the same state or condition. The term high ability, however, seems to focus on ability alone; it does not account for the intense sensitivities that tend to accompany those children with high ability.

Lohman and Korb (2004) would probably not approve any more of the term high ability than they do of the term gifted. They dislike the term gifted because it leads educators to focus on a “fixed state” (p. 11), and they believe that educators should focus instead on superior achievement. Regardless of the term being used, no consensus exists as to whether potential or performance defines these children. While Lohman and Korb want educators to focus on achievement, Gagné (1989) believes a distinction should be made between potential and performance (p. 71). Focusing on achievement means focusing on performance rather than potential, and while some children will stand out because of their exceptional achievement, those who do not demonstrate superior achievement but have potential for such achievement will be missed, and these are the high potential children most in need of help (Gallagher, 1976, p. 123). This does not mean that these children have greater needs than children with less potential, but that they have the same right to an appropriate educational experience. As Glass (2004) notes, “All students should have the right to exercise their talents to the fullest potential” (p. 28 original emphasis).

The debate over potential versus performance as an indicator of giftedness illustrates the difficulty in arriving at a precise definition of giftedness. However, the fact that giftedness is difficult to define does not mean that it does not exist. Poetry is difficult to define as well, but no one would suggest that it does not exist. Most people can recognize a poem when they see one, but not everyone agrees on what characterizes a poem. Some people include rhyme as a defining characteristic of poetry while others, citing the rhymes in greeting cards, leave it off the list of characteristics. In addition, some poetry looks like prose, but is recognized as poetry, while some prose can be characterized as poetic, but is not recognized as poetry.

In the same way, characteristics of giftedness can be difficult to pinpoint, a problem that contributes to the difficulty of defining it. However, many experts (Silverman, 1989; Feldhusen; Johnson, 1989; Alvino, 1985; Baska, 1989) seem to agree on a number of characteristics, which
include the following:

- Acutely perceptive
- Perfectionist
- Energetic
- Sensitive
- Creative
- Altruistic and empathetic
- Concerned with moral issues
- Interested in applying concepts
- Interested in subtleties of words and their uses
- Concerned with justice and fair play
- Able to handle abstractions, see relationships, and synthesize
- Has keen sense of humor
- Interested in death and mortality
- Has long attention span and exceptional memory
- Learns quickly and retains learning easily
- Enjoys intellectual activity
- Has large and advanced vocabulary
- Reads avidly

Some of these characteristics, such as the concern with justice and fair play, the sensitivity, altruism, empathy, and interest in death and mortality reflect something more than mere high ability or even high potential.

In any case, while these characteristics typically appear on lists defining giftedness, others like Steiner and Carr (2003) and Renzulli (1986) add traits like motivation and task commitment to their list of characteristics. These characteristics lead once again to the debate over potential versus performance, ability versus achievement. Some argue that ability alone is insufficient, that the ability must be manifested by achievement, while others argue that it is the responsibility of the school to help those unmotivated, high-ability students achieve. Just as some people mistake anything that rhymes for poetry, some people see any highly motivated student as gifted while at the same time overlooking students with high ability because they are not motivated to achieve in school. Gagné (1989), for example, questions how one can deny that a child with an IQ of 130 or more is gifted simply because his or her aptitude is not confirmed by academic achievement. In addition, Redding (1989) notes that students with IQs of 130 and above can find academic tasks boring, and because they are often motivated by challenge, they can lose their motivation to achieve (p. 279).

In spite of the problems defining giftedness and the disagreement over the characteristics that represent giftedness, it is hard to deny that some children appear to be more advanced than their age mates. The child who teaches himself to read at age two is certainly more advanced than most two year olds. Winner (2000) believes that these exceptional abilities, since they appear before any intensive instruction and training, reflect an atypical, innate ability (p. 160). Some people will concede that a few children may be advanced as toddlers and even as young elementary age children, but claim that such precocity disappears by the time such children reach 4th grade, when they claim differences in intellectual ability among children “even out.” Shore (2000), however, argues that if giftedness is no more than precocity, it leaves adult giftedness unexplained (p. 168). Mozart, for example, was not merely a precocious musician as a child, but a very gifted one as an adult as well. The debate over the exact nature of giftedness is important because it determines the best educational strategy to use with gifted children. If it is nothing more than precocity, then acceleration is the best strategy. If, however, giftedness involves different ways of thinking, then more than a fast pace and increased level of difficulty is needed (Shore, 2002, p. 168).
Recent cognitive studies seem to support the view that giftedness is more than precocity. In fact, Shore (2000) believes that the thinking of gifted children is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from their non-gifted peers (p. 181). One difference between gifted and non-gifted children is the speed at which they are able to process information. Gifted children can process information more quickly than non-gifted children, which accounts for their ability to grasp information after only one or two repetitions, rather than the ten or twelve repetitions required by non-gifted students. This speed of processing is, as Steiner and Carr (2003) point out, one of the most noted characteristics of giftedness (p. 222) and it can be observed even in infants, suggesting that giftedness is an innate quality and not the result of training or instruction.

Evidence for speed of processing in infants comes from studies on habituation and preference for novelty (Steiner & Carr, 2003). In the former, some infants become habituated to a stimulus; that is, they look away from it more quickly than other infants. In the latter, some infants look more often at a new stimulus rather than at a stimulus to which they had already become habituated. Steiner and Carr (2003) note that a high correlation exists between high intelligence as indicated by tests children take when they are eight years old and quick habituation and preference for novelty these same children exhibit as infants.

Perhaps it is this speed of processing that allows gifted children to assimilate information quickly, a trait Scruggs (1983) describes as one of the distinguishing characteristics of gifted children (p. 171). It is undoubtedly this ability to quickly assimilate information that gives gifted children such a broad knowledge base, another distinctive trait of gifted children. This broad knowledge base is so distinctive that breadth and depth of knowledge are the two most obvious characteristics noted by both parents and teachers (Hagan, as cited in Steiner & Carr, 2003, p. 225). However, simply knowing information is not enough; one must also know which information is useful and when it should be applied (Glaser, 2000, p. 125).

While a collection of facts is certainly one type of knowledge, it is not the only type. Problem-solving strategies comprise another type of knowledge. Evidence suggests that gifted children not only have a larger repertoire of such strategies, but that they also have a better understanding of which strategies are appropriate for a given situation (Steiner & Carr, 2003; Shore, 2000). In addition, gifted children are able to focus more on critical parts of a problem while ignoring irrelevant parts, unlike their non-gifted counterparts (Siegler, 1989; Jaušovec, 2000). Glaser (2000) notes that this ability is found in competent adults, that is, experts. Experts will represent problems in a way that will facilitate problem solving, while novices represent problems in terms of surface features.

The focus on relevant parts of a problem is just one difference in the way the gifted approach problem solving from the way the non-gifted approach it. Shore and Lazar (as cited in Steiner & Carr, 2003) found that while gifted adolescents take less time overall to solve complex recognition problems than their non-gifted peers, they spend more of that time during the exploration and planning stages. Perhaps spending time on the initial stages of problem solving is what allows the gifted to represent problems in ways that make them easier to solve. This different approach to problem solving probably contributes to the observed superior cognitive abilities of gifted children, although it does not necessarily explain their ability to manipulate abstract symbol systems.

The Verbally Gifted

According to Winner (2000), some gifted children are “globally gifted”; that is, they demonstrate advanced abilities in math, language, and analytical thinking (p. 164). These are the
children most often recognized as “truly” gifted children. However, as Winner notes, most evidence indicates gifted children have an uneven distribution of abilities. In fact, evidence suggests that verbally gifted and mathematically gifted children have distinctly different cognitive profiles. According to Benbow and Minor (1990), mathematically gifted kids perform better on spatial, nonverbal reasoning, speed, memory, and mechanical comprehension tests, while verbally gifted kids perform better on verbal and general information tests and tests of English expression (p. 24). This finding could explain why some gifted children have so much trouble with the “mad math minute” in third or fourth grade, when they have to complete a hundred simple multiplication problems in one minute. These children could be verbally rather than globally or mathematically gifted.

In their study of mathematically and verbally gifted teenagers, Dark and Benbow (1991) found that the mathematically gifted teens were better able to handle digit stimuli and better able to manipulate information in working memory. The verbally gifted teens, on the other hand, were better able to handle word stimuli and had quicker access to verbal information in long-term memory (p. 58). This evidence of a distinct cognitive profile for verbally gifted children should make defining verbal giftedness an easy task, but as Tangherlini and Durden (1993) tell us, a precise definition is elusive, and this elusiveness is hard to understand given the fact that verbal giftedness is generally easy to recognize.

Bailey (1996) defines verbally gifted children as those who demonstrate at an early age, complex behaviors in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (p. 97). These children have a “true agility” in manipulating linguistic symbols as well as the codes necessary for turning thought into expression or in the case of reading, expression into thought (Bailey, 1996, p. 101). Van Tassel-Baska (2003) puts it another way: “Gifted children achieve language competency at an earlier age than their chronological age-mates” (p. 1). They have, according to Van Tassel-Baska, mastered the fundamental reading skills and excel in reading, literary analysis, creative writing, poetry, and prose. Tangherlini and Durden (1993) consider verbal giftedness from a practical, educational perspective and believe that verbal talent can be divided into five categories: “oral expression, reading, foreign language, creative writing, and general verbal reasoning” (p. 429). This is an interesting perspective as it can determine what special classes or subjects should be made available for verbally gifted children, an issue that will be considered later.

How exactly does this verbal talent manifest itself? What does it look like? Bailey (1996) and Van Tassel-Baska (1987) have each created a list of characteristics of verbally gifted children.

**Bailey’s List of Characteristics (p. 108)**
- Fluid, descriptive oral language
- Early mastery of the phonetic code
- An advanced ability to use a linguistic symbol system
- Active engagement in reading or writing tasks for extended periods of time
- Playful doing of a skill coupled with seriousness of purpose
- Ability to express complex thoughts
- Craving of challenge

**Van Tassel-Baska’s (1987) List of Characteristics (p. 17)**
- Reads fluently and well
• Interested in words and word relationships
• Uses an advanced vocabulary
• Processes key ideas in what is read
• Enjoys talking about literature
• Writes descriptively and communicates a story
• Reads often inside and outside of class
• Enjoys verbal puzzles and games
• Plays with language in oral and/or written forms
• Exhibits an understanding of the structure of language in speaking and writing

Many of these characteristics show up in very young children. Bailey (1996), for example, describes a young gifted boy named David, who before he was even one year old, would stop and trace the letters on fire hydrants and stop signs. By the time he was eighteen months old, he was able to say the alphabet. At age 2 ½ he was reading books like Ten Apples on Top and at 5, he was reading Chronicles of Narnia. He developed this ability even though he had never had any formal reading instruction. His only reading instruction came from watching the Sesame Street video, “Getting Ready to Read” (p. 104).

This writer’s son followed a similar path, including the stopping and tracing letters and early self-taught reading at age 2. However, he preferred nonfiction to fiction books, reading about dinosaurs, black holes, and other elements of the universe, his favorite subject. By the time he was 4, he was able to explain the difference between a brontosaurus and a brachiosaurus to any interested party and would worry about the earth 2000 years in the future when Polaris would no longer be the North Star. He gained this information not through instruction, but through his own reading. The ability to gain knowledge through reading is unusual at this age. According to Bailey (1996, p. 101), it is not until fourth grade that children generally move from learning to read to reading to learn. The ability to read for knowledge at such young ages gives these verbally gifted children a head start in school. These early readers start school with a much broader knowledge base than average children, who spend their first years in school learning how to read.

It is interesting to note that many people believe that it is in third or fourth grade that “everything evens out,” by which they mean that any advantage “precocious” readers may have had is lost as the other children have “caught up” and have learned to read. However, as cognitive studies clearly demonstrate, while average children and adolescents may appear to have caught up with the gifted early readers, the qualitative differences in thinking between the two groups remain the same. In any case, unless verbally gifted children demonstrate some other exceptional talent or ability, they may not be recognized as being gifted.

One way that verbally gifted children can demonstrate exceptional talent is through creative writing. For many verbally gifted children, words “dance and sing” (Black, 1998). They are playthings and like a teddy bear, they can be “hugged, embraced, beat up, twisted, [and] spit out” (Bromfield, 1994). Through words, verbally gifted children can experience the way language makes them see and feel and they can express what they see and feel in language, as can be seen in the poem below.

You are alone
In your long exploration
Of the world of difference.
Yet, as the light consoles the desolate wick,  
So a friend brightens the darkness in your heart  
And makes life a joy.

Most people would agree that this tree-shaped poem reflects poetic talent. What makes the writer of this poem exceptional is that she was only 8 years old when she wrote it (Gross, 2004). Gardner (1983) considers linguistic intelligence to be one of 7 distinct intelligences and sees poetry as the ultimate reflection of that specific intelligence. He believes that poetry requires sensitivity to semantics, phonology, syntax, and even pragmatics since a poet needs to be aware of a variety of what he calls speech acts, for example, lyrics, epic descriptions, order, and pleas. Tanglherlini and Durden (1993) claim, however, that poetic talent is distinct from other types of linguistic talent (p. 429). Passow (1996) agrees: the potential for creating poetry may be one kind of talent seen in language arts, but it is not the only one. In fact, any kind of creative writing, or even writing in general, may be a type of language talent not all verbally gifted children have and certainly not all verbally gifted children enjoy. David, the early reader described by Bailey (1996), although able to read Chronicles of Narnia at age 5, hated to write.

Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002) define linguistic literacy as the “increased control over a larger and more flexible linguistic repertoire” along with a growing awareness of “one’s own spoken and written language system (p. 420). The 8-year-old writer of the tree-shaped poem seems to demonstrate linguistic literacy, and has demonstrated it quite early. How early does such literacy ordinarily develop? According to Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002), the linguistic proficiency of a five year old “hardly matches an adult or even a twelve-year-old” (p. 418, emphasis added). However, in her pioneer case study of the development of linguistic ability in a verbally gifted child, Hoh (2005) found that the development of linguistic literacy can be years ahead of that of non-gifted children.

Hoh (2005) notes that most studies on linguistic skills of gifted children focus on reception, rather than on production, that is on reading and listening rather than speaking and writing (p. 178). She found that the linguistic development of a verbally gifted child is advanced in the following areas: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic. For example, Bailey (1996) points out that most children are just beginning to generalize their knowledge of language at age three, which leads them to create sentences like “I goed to the store” (p. 99). Such a sentence indicates that the speaker has learned the rule for the creation of the simple past tense and has generalized that rule to all verbs, both regular and irregular. A typical three-year-old is also able to manage three word sentences, and by the time the typical child is 7 or 8, he or she is able to use longer compound and complex sentences with ease.

The child in Hoh’s case study, however, was using sentences like “You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to” at age 2 years and 3 months. Exactly one year later, the child was using sentences like “Dad, even though you gave me a ginger, you’re pretty lucky because I still love you” (p. 180). Hoh notes that this use of although-type clauses is not common even in 11 year olds. At age 3, this child’s linguistic ability seems to be equal to, if not somewhat greater than, that of typical 11 year olds. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to believe that her ability at age 5 may have matched the linguistic literacy of a 12 year old, something Ravid and Tolchinsky thought was hardly the case.

Some advanced syntactic development reflects an early development of higher thinking skills. For example, the development of the different types of questions a child asks seems to follow the cognitive progression from lower thinking skills to higher thinking skills. This means
that the first types of questions a child is able to ask and answer are simple yes/no questions. These are followed by what and where questions, with how, why, and when questions developing last, these being the types of questions associated with higher level thinking skills. Typically, a child begins to ask yes/no questions at 18 months, often by simply raising the voice at the end of an utterance (i.e. “My cookie?”). It is not generally till a child is 4 or 5 that she asks and answers simple who, what, where, and why questions. Hoh’s subject, however, was asking simple why questions like “Why I no swim?” at 2 years and 2 months old (p. 181). At age 4, when most children are asking simple why questions, Hoh’s subject was asking questions like “How did the first person come about?” What is life about?” And “How did the first person talk?”

Hoh (2005) believes that the ability to ask such questions allows verbally gifted children to gain more world knowledge, which provides them with benefits beyond the language domain (p. 181). Perhaps one of the benefits of an advanced verbal ability is an advanced social competence. Hoh noted this advanced social competence in her subject, who was able to effectively strike up conversations with adults in diverse settings (p. 182). While effective social competence involves more than verbal ability, for instance, planning, monitoring, and outcome-checking skills (p. 182), it certainly involves an adequate level of language ability. Not only do verbally gifted children tend to speak earlier than non-gifted children, their advanced phonological development allows them to be more readily understood by adults, and because they are more easily understood, they are able to have more verbal interaction with adults than their non-verbally gifted age mates. In turn, this verbal interaction provides these verbally gifted children the opportunity to further advance their verbal abilities.

In spite of the difficulties in defining verbal giftedness, it should be clear that it is a distinct type of advanced ability, one that should give these children an academic advantage over non-verbally gifted children in school. Unfortunately, in many instances, the opposite is true. Verbally gifted children are at a disadvantage in school. For one thing, verbally gifted children are “easy to respond to” (Gross, 2004). This means that if a teacher feels that a verbally gifted child needs advanced work, he or she can simply have the child read ahead in a book or may even assign a more advanced book for the child to read. A mathematically gifted child, however, offers a more difficult problem. The teacher cannot simply assign more and more difficult problems or tell the student to work ahead. A mathematically gifted child gives the teacher more to worry about and is therefore more likely than the verbally gifted child to be grade skipped or given advanced instruction in math.

Need for Gifted Programming

Whether a child is mathematically or verbally gifted, the fact remains that gifted children differ from non-gifted children in the way they think, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This difference in ways of thinking means that gifted children have different educational needs than non-gifted children and those needs cannot be met through classes and curricula designed for their non-gifted peers. It is critical, therefore, to identify gifted children and provide them with appropriate academic experiences. Doing so will help them develop their innate abilities. Failure to do so, as Glass (2004) notes, will “stifle their opportunity and negate their potential both personally and as contributors to society” (p. 29).

Several obstacles must be overcome, particularly in the elementary school years, in order to provide appropriate educational experiences for gifted children. One obstacle is the lack of focus on identifying gifted children. The first years of schooling focus on making sure all students are
functioning on the same basic level of achievement (Dean, 1998). The No Child Left Behind Act is an example of this kind of focus. All children in third grade must be reading at the third grade level. Legal mandates to bring children to such basic levels of achievement leave little time, money, or energy for educators to worry about what to do with a child who is in the third grade and reading at a seventh grade level. They simply have no incentive to do so.

Even when teachers may be willing to find and support gifted children, they may miss some of them. These children do not always willingly and cheerfully conform to regular classroom routines, displaying instead a disinterest in activities. This disinterest may result from a lack of challenge (Gallagher, 1976), and this lack of challenge is a problem because gifted children tend to be intrinsically motivated, which means that they are motivated to learn for the sake of learning, not for extrinsic rewards such as grades (Redding, 1989, pp. 277-278).

Another reason gifted children do not receive appropriate academic experiences, even though the classroom teacher is willing to help, is that teachers at higher grades often complain that they will not have anything to teach if children are taught content and skills in previous classrooms (Feldhusen & Baska, 1989). That means that if a third grade child has already mastered third grade reading skills, math skills, or both, the third grade teacher may be reluctant to offer any special instruction because the fourth grade teacher might complain that he or she will have nothing left to teach that child. This is true even if the third grade child has already mastered material well beyond the fourth grade level. The cycle will repeat in fourth grade with the fourth grade teacher unwilling to teach a gifted child skills beyond the fourth grade level, even though the child came to fourth grade working at a fifth grade level or above.

This writer encountered this problem when her son was in the third grade. Neither the classroom teacher nor the principal was willing to provide any kind of differentiated instruction even though the child’s general reading ability had been measured at the seventh grade level and his reading comprehension had been measured at the twelfth grade plus level. The psychologist who tested the writer’s son remarked that the child was capable of reading virtually anything put in front of him, yet the principal insisted that the child needed to “practice” his third grade reading skills. The principal insisted on this even after admitting that the child had already mastered third grade reading skills. He commented that if the teacher were to teach the boy fourth grade reading skills, the fourth grade teacher would have nothing to teach him. The fact that the child had already mastered fourth grade reading skills as well was not even considered.

Regardless of the reason, the lack of appropriate enrichment experiences can have serious detrimental effects on gifted children. Glass (2004) believes that without such experiences, these children may “fall short of their potential, or worse, lose interest in school altogether (p. 28).

Appropriate Programming for Gifted Children

Because gifted children have different academic needs, instruction for them should be differentiated. That is, it should be based on the recognition that individual differences among students exist and should make use of strategies to accommodate those differences (Dean, 1998, p. 22). This principle is understood and taken seriously when the children concerned are those unable keep up with the regular school curriculum without the help of special support services, but Dean (1998) suggests that schools must also consider the needs of gifted children, who require more than the regular school curriculum provides (p.19).

According to Van Tassel-Baska (2003), gifted learners need advancement, depth, complexity, challenge and creativity, and any curriculum designed for them should accommodate those needs (p. 1). A gifted curriculum should include “more elaborate, complex,
and in-depth study of major ideas, problems and themes within and across systems of thought” (Van Tassel-Baska, 1989, p. 185). Unlike the curricula for non-gifted students, curricula for gifted students should concentrate on higher-level thinking skills (p. 187), which according to Bloom’s Taxonomy, include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The amount of time that should be spent on these skills as well as the lower-level skills, such as knowledge and understanding, in both the gifted and the non-gifted classroom are represented by the pyramids below.

Non-gifted students need to spend much more time with the lower levels than do gifted students. Because gifted children are able to process information quickly, to understand and remember it, they can move more quickly through the thinking skill levels and because they need more depth and complexity in their studies, they need to spend more time with the higher-level skills than with the lower-level skills. To give gifted students the opportunity to work with higher-level thinking skills, the basics of any gifted program should include elements of critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, research, and decision making (Van Tassel-Baska, 1989, p. 181).

The benefits of special programming for gifted students should be both clear and obvious. As Tuttle, Becker, and Sousa (1988) point out, these children quite often have mastered the skills and concepts that form the basis of instruction in the regular classroom, and therefore, have little incentive to go through the motions of learning what they may already know. Consequently, they may not complete required work, which can result in their receiving average or even low grades. These poor grades can affect their academic future, but even worse, their learning can be slowed down or held back (p. 12).

The lack of appropriately challenging schoolwork may not only slow down or hold back a gifted child’s learning, it can also cause him or her to develop sloppy or poor study habits (Tuttle, Becker, & Sousa, 1988, p. 12). In addition to causing a child to get low marks on homework, these poor study habits make it difficult for the gifted child to excel when he or she finally meets an academic challenge. Quite often we hear of gifted students who have gotten through elementary, middle, and high school by doing homework at the last minute and waiting to write papers until the night before they are due. In spite of this apparent procrastination, these students get A’s and B’s on their work. However, when same students go to college and use the same strategies, they are mystified when the strategies do not work. Time and again we hear of highly gifted students flunking or dropping out of college. They do not know how to plan their
time nor do they know how to study. Children with less ability bypass them easily because they have developed a strong work ethic and good study habits.

Need for Specialized Programming for Verbally Gifted Children

Redding (1989) maintains that it is the learning style and temperament of verbally gifted children that puts them at a disadvantage in school because these qualities are negatively related to academic success (p. 276-277). According to Redding, the learning style of verbally gifted children is a holistic one; they are highly motivated to seek meaning and will try to understand the big picture, concentrating on details later (p. 181). They prefer to understand concepts and their implications, neglecting, as a result, to memorize information or pay attention to what might be on a test. This global learning style is directly at odds with the school environment, which requires children to memorize details first, saving any discussion of the significance of those details until some point in the future.

Requiring these verbally gifted children to focus on concrete details rather than abstract concepts can cause them to lose their motivation to learn. As noted earlier, many gifted children are intrinsically motivated; the prospect of getting an A or any other external reward does not motivate them. Instead, they excel when they find the work to be relevant to their lives, interesting, and challenging. It is the challenge that motivates them and it is meeting the challenge they find rewarding, and memorizing details disconnected to any meaning is neither challenging nor rewarding. Intrinsically motivated children tend to choose more difficult tasks (Redding, 1989, p. 286) and will sacrifice external rewards, like grades, for opportunities to pursue intrinsically appealing, independent learning activities (p.276). At times, these children will set higher standards or stricter requirements on work they are given in order to make it more challenging. They will do this even though they run the risk of making mistakes or doing the assignment incorrectly because it is inherently more rewarding to them than getting a good mark through no effort.

Several researchers (Redding, 1989; Dean, 1998; Glass, 2004; Alvino, 1985) note that lack of challenge can lead to lack of motivation, and Seeley (1989) found that underachieving gifted students were at risk for dropping out of school. In addition, Redding asserts that insufficient challenge, along with characteristics of impulsivity and anxiety can lead to underachievement among the verbally gifted (p. 277). According to Redding (1989), verbally gifted underachievers tend to be high-strung, anxious, and impulsive (p. 280). Their impulsivity prevents them from paying attention to detail, a requirement for academic excellence, because they lack the patience for it. This lack of patience stems from the gifted child’s preference for novelty, a preference that can be seen in children as early as infancy. These children are unable to continue working on a tedious task, and tasks that are too easy for them are tedious. In general, children find tasks easy when they are already familiar with the concepts and familiar tasks quickly lose their intrinsic appeal (p. 281). This response to the familiar should not be surprising since gifted children show a preference for novelty even in infancy (Steiner & Carr, 2003).

While some gifted children may be able to complete easy, unchallenging work, the increased anxiety of verbally gifted children makes it even more difficult to complete work that provides no intrinsic motivation. In fact, the anxiety these children feel when compelled to complete such work is great enough to cause them to avoid the work altogether. Unfortunately, many, if not most, teachers interpret this avoidance of homework to mean that the child is incapable of completing the assignments, either because he or she does not understand the material or is too lazy and disorganized to do it.
Redding (1989), however, believes that these children, if given appropriately challenging and interesting tasks, will be able to achieve (p. 279). McGinn, Viernstein, and Hogan (1980) found that the verbally gifted “crave intellectual stimulation and respond quickly when they get it (p. 498). Although they are referring to adolescents, we should expect the same response from younger children as well. Teachers can begin helping gifted underachievers pay attention to those concrete, detailed – and as gifted children see them, unpleasant – tasks by allowing them to pursue intrinsically satisfying interests that can hold their attention (Redding, 1989, p. 285). If teachers provide their verbally gifted students with tasks that hold their attention, they can help the students learn how to persist with a task from conception to completion, a feat often quite difficult for gifted children, but necessary for success.

Dean (1998) agrees that children recognized as having exceptional verbal ability are not being appropriately challenged (p. 2). However, he also believes that part of the reason these children are not challenged is that schools often fail to recognize them. Children with “notable performance” in music, math, or sports are more often recognized and are more likely to find support for their abilities both in and out of the school environment (p. 1), yet when schools miss the verbally gifted and fail to provide them with challenges that will allow them to develop, they “fail the pupils, the parents, and the community as a whole” (p. viii). Schools that pride themselves on providing services for students who lag behind their age mates in literacy skills pay little attention to those who surpass their age mates in those skills (Dean, 1998, p. 2). Dean believes that when schools focus on the needs of verbally gifted children and do all they can to help these students reach their potential, they will be helping the rest of the students reach their potential as well (p. viii).

Lehr (1986), like Dean, believes that failing to provide appropriate challenges for verbally gifted children can affect more than the children themselves; he asserts that developing and enhancing the verbal talent of gifted children is essential to society. This assertion is justifiable since it is through our verbal skills that we communicate with others. Biersdorf (1979) adds that as part of a larger communication process, all language usage – reading, writing, and language learning – are related to the verbally gifted child’s experience as a “communicator and language user and thinker…” (p. 20). Reading, writing and language learning, according to Biersdorf, are relevant and engaging at many levels, and both of these qualities are significant for verbally gifted children because academic task motivation seems to increase for many of them as the relevance of the task increases (Redding, 1989).

Current Language Arts Curriculum

According to Gallagher (1985), verbally gifted children enjoy language arts (p. 205). Beuscher (1979), on the other hand, says that it is not surprising to find bright students dreading language arts. Although gifted programs are often criticized for being oriented to verbally gifted children and for overemphasizing language arts (Feldhusen & Van Tassel-Baska, 1989), little evidence exists on specific effective strategies for challenging verbally gifted children, with the exception of data in literary analysis and expository writing (Van Tassel-Baska, Johnson, Hughes, & Boyce, 1996). For example, Van Tassel-Baska (2003, p. 1) says that teaching in the language arts has emphasized reading skills and low-level questions, which don’t challenge the gifted, rather than active learning and inquiry, which do. She adds that they need to apply high level thinking skills to critical reading, expository writing, oral communication, linguistic and vocabulary development, and foreign language.
Although Van Tassel-Baska includes linguistic development in her list of language arts areas needing to make use of high level thinking skills, formal language study often receives little or no attention (Thompson, 1994). Like Van Tassel-Baska, Thompson (1994) stresses the importance of a strong language study element in a sound language arts program, and this language study element must “allow students to understand the English language from a variety of perspectives” (as cited in Thompson, 1994, p. 2).

This situation is rarely found in gifted language arts programs. Lehr (1983) describes various programs available to verbally gifted children and few of them offer much in the way of language study. The Johns Hopkins program is one that does offer something, but the stress on the study of language itself is still lacking. Their program for verbally gifted children consists of seven courses: two in writing, two in German, two in Latin, and one in etymologies. Once again, the focus is on writing and foreign language. Only one of the seven courses, etymologies, deals exclusively with English language learning and it undoubtedly focuses on Latin and Greek roots, prefixes and suffixes.

Emphasis on writing and foreign language study is not surprising since these are two of the typical areas suggested as ways to enrich the language learning of verbally gifted children. Tangherlini and Durden (1993) provide a summary of strategies and programs available for nurturing verbal talent, which they say attempts to connect “current understandings of language and literacy acquisition, developmental psychology, classical works in psycholinguistics, and the human condition” (p. 428). Although they do add that their summary should not be considered exhaustive, it makes no mention of the study of language itself, except foreign language study, focusing instead on the other aspects of language arts teaching: oral expression, reading, and creative writing.

Passow (1996) also neglects to mention grammar study or any higher level linguistic analysis in a list of areas that can lead to the nurturing of verbal ability. His list includes creative writing, acting, and foreign language acquisition. What he adds, though, is that free exploration of these areas is what helps nurture specific abilities. Buescher (1979), like Passow, believes that it is important to allow gifted children opportunities to freely explore verbal domains. Buescher does, however, go beyond the usual creative writing and foreign language. He states that children need to play with language and that such playful learning, which essentially consists of the free investigation of both verbal and non-verbal language symbols, leads to better learning and higher interest than the typical language arts programs generate. Unlike language arts, science not only allows, but encourages, the investigation of its subject matter and this difference in the opportunity to explore the subject, according to Buescher, is what causes gifted students to dread language arts, but love science.

Rather than allowing students to investigate language, most language arts programs emphasize prescriptive grammar. Even when a language arts curriculum includes a linguistic element, such as the one developed by Van Tassel-Baska (1996), the focus is on linguistic competency, the ability to use appropriate grammar, rather than a true investigation of language. Andrews (1997) believes this emphasis is excessive, “premature and entirely out of balance with most learners’ needs and sense of what’s really important” (p. 21). With the verbally gifted child’s need for relevance in his or her studies, it is hardly surprising that so many of them fail to excel in the area of their greatest cognitive strength.

The holistic learning style of verbally gifted children must also contribute to their dislike of language arts. As Van Tassel-Baska (1989) notes, grammar is generally presented in small sections, making it difficult for these children to see the whole linguistic picture (p. 179). Not
only is grammar presented in small sections, but grammar instruction is also dragged out unnecessarily for twelve years. Basically the same lessons are repeated year after year (Andrews, 1997), undoubtedly because English teachers see language teaching as recursive rather than linear (Dean, 1998, p. 4). Students learn the basic parts of speech in the first year and they learn them again the next year. Little depth is added to the lessons. This repetition and lack of depth is especially unpleasant for verbally gifted children, who learn more quickly than their age mates. This ability to learn quickly means that a gifted child can “master all the principals of English grammar and syntax in less than four weeks of instruction in any given year” (Van Tassel-Baska, 1989, p. 179), and even though these children are also apt to retain the information from one year to the next, they must, like the other students, “learn” it over and over and over.

Andrews (1997) points out that language teaching has focused on grammar for the last one hundred years in spite of the fact that this approach has failed to make an appreciable difference in students’ ability to read, write or speak (p. 3). Worse, Andrews claims that grammar texts have changed little in the last one hundred years even though our concepts of language have changed. This claim is born out by the following definitions found in a grammar textbook published in 1866 (first printing in 1851): “An Interrogative Sentence is a sentence so arranged as to ask a question” and “An Imperative Sentence is a sentence used to command, exhort or entreat” (Clark, pp. 47-48). However, we know that a sentence such as “Would you please pass the salt?” -- while certainly arranged to ask a question -- is used to entreat. What other discipline uses textbooks that do not reflect the changes that have taken place in knowledge for 150 years? If geography were taught as though nothing had changed in the last hundred years, we would be using, according to Andrews, “maps with the warning, ‘Here there be beasties’ emblazoned on the outer reaches of the oceans” (p. 20).

Feldhusen and Van Tassel-Baska (1989) say that verbally gifted children need enriched and accelerated learning experiences in language arts (p. 213), but such experiences will not likely be provided through the study of outdated language instruction. Dean (1998) asserts that verbally gifted children have a deeper interest in language usage, beyond simple grammar, than their non-gifted peers and take pleasure in expressing their insights as well as “the patterns, rhythms and delights” they discover long before their classmates discover them (p. 10). Consequently, Dean believes they should be allowed to focus on style and syntax from the moment they start school. Tangherlini and Durden (1993) also believe that verbally gifted children should be able to do more than memorize the traditional parts of speech. They maintain that these children can benefit from experiences that strengthen the development of abstract systems of thought and that the specific forms and techniques of various disciplines could be used to provide these experiences (p. 430). Forms used could include literary and rhetorical modes as well as linguistic devices, while techniques would include scientific method of enquiry as well as research and data gathering methodologies.

The scientific method of enquiry is not generally associated with a language arts curriculum. As Gallagher (1985) notes, language arts more closely resembles a skill-development area, like mathematics than it does a content field, like chemistry (p. 205). This view of language arts explains why grammar is taught primarily as a way to improve a student’s achievement in other areas, as Andrews (1997) maintains it is. However, adding a linguistic component to the language arts curriculum that allows students the opportunity to study language in depth can provide them with the intellectual stimulation they crave in an area that interests them. The in-depth study of language would also allow these students to learn methods of scientific enquiry. Perhaps then verbally gifted children would no longer prefer science over language arts.
Need for Language Learning in Programming for the Verbally Gifted

Thompson (1996) tells us that little has been written about formal language study for young students (p. 150), even though one can find support for it as far back as 1961 when Ward (cited in Van Tassel-Baska, 1987) argued that "the nature of language, its structures and functions, its integral relationship to thought and behavior should be part of the education of the intellectually superior child and youth" (p. 159). In spite of that early support, Thompson (1996) says that formal language study rarely gets mentioned even in the context of language arts curriculum for gifted children (p. 150). In his paper "The state of the art issues in language study for high ability learners: Thinking about language with gifted children" (1994), he eloquently justifies the study of language. It is, he says, both a medium for and a manifestation of the mind (p. 2). For Thompson, to be ignorant of language is to be ignorant of "the very medium we inhabit." It is through language that "we may know ourselves, and…the selves of others, both living and dead" (p. 2).

Thompson also believes that "grammar serves meaning," by which he means that grammatical rules can be modified to accommodate the needs of a particular piece of communication (p. 3). Understanding the rules of grammar enables students to break them when necessary to create an effective speech or piece of writing. For example, students learn that fragments are grammatical errors, yet a well-placed fragment can be rhetorically effective. To be a successful writer, though, one needs to understand what a fragment is and know how to avoid them. In other words, fragments should be conscious and intentional. By using and bending the rules of grammar, students are able to apply divergence, aesthetics, intuition and emotion (Thompson, p. 3). As Thompson puts it, grammar is "an exceptional tool for making logical, structural, and aesthetic decisions in writing and speaking one's own ideas" (p. 3). Gallagher (1985) has a similar view of grammar. He believes that students can apply their mastery of language arts skills in their own “creative products” (p. 211). What, however, will such an emphasis do for verbally gifted children like David, mentioned earlier in this chapter, who love to read, but hate to write? What good is such a "tool" for these children when they are neither interested nor especially talented in writing?

Grammar instruction, however, has benefits beyond that of helping students become more creative. It is, according to Thompson (1994), a "way of thinking about language...[a]... superb form of higher-order thinking" (p. 2) and he considers it as rigorous a method as logic, mathematics, and creative problem solving (p. 3). Gallagher (1985) agrees, arguing that mastery of grammatical skills will help students understand “the complexities of other subject areas” (p. 211). Dean (1998), too, believes that when gifted children are able to develop their linguistics skills, they will also develop their learning and thinking abilities, which will benefit them beyond their language learning (p. ix). In other words, it will benefit them in their other courses.

McCaig (1993) suggests another benefit. He found evidence to suggest that children whose abilities are nurtured tend to do better than those children whose abilities are left alone; and they do better, not just in their area of strength, but in all areas. This finding suggests that when the linguistic abilities of verbally gifted children are nurtured, their abilities will improve not only in the language domain, but also in areas in which they may be weak, mathematics, for example.

In any case, whether the teaching of grammar is justified in terms of benefits to creativity or to higher-level thinking, both views confirm what Andrews (1997) says: “...language is seldom studied in its own right” [p. 5, original emphasis], and as Widdowson (1989) notes, "The study and teaching of language is about a lot more than [grammar]..." (p. 136). Van Tassel-Baska, a strong proponent of formal language study for all gifted children, especially for the verbally
gifted, seems to agree. She believes that formal language study should include not only an emphasis on grammar, but on vocabulary development, etymology, semantics, linguistics, and the history of language (Van Tassel-Baska, 2003, p. 2). Unfortunately, few schools include much beyond grammar study in their gifted curriculum. One notable exception is the Indiana Academy of Math, Science, and Humanities, which offers its students a full course in linguistics. It is also the only school for the gifted that includes a focus on the humanities rather than limiting itself to math and science.

Winner (2000) believes that schools should increase their offerings of advanced coursework (p. 163) and a linguistics course would make an ideal addition for verbally gifted children. Verbally gifted children appreciate and process language at more advanced levels just as mathematically gifted children appreciate and process math at more advanced levels than their non-gifted age mates (Gross, 2004). They need a challenging English curriculum and Glass (2004) maintains that if a school fails to provide one, it can contribute to problems (p. 28). These problems, as Redding (1987) notes, can include loss of motivation and underachievement.

Winner (2000) also believes that the additional opportunities for advanced coursework should be offered not just in the upper grades, but in the elementary grades as well (p. 163). Even young verbally gifted children should have the opportunity to study language. Like all gifted children, the verbally gifted children have a “rage to master” their domain of high ability (Winner, 2000, p. 162-163) and for the verbally gifted, this domain is language. Ravid and Tolchinski (2002) believe that even young verbally gifted children can see language as a separate domain to analyze and explore and can differentiate between the parts of it, paying attention to some while disregarding others (p. 431).

Passow (1996) tells us that to nurture potential in a specific domain, opportunities should be provided for students to experience the methodologies and processes used by practitioners in that domain (p. 31). These methodologies and processes include modes of problem definition, problem solving, and ways to exercise creativity, innovation, and originality. Opportunities for such experience need not be delayed until high school or even junior high school. Tangherlini and Durden (1993) believe that verbally gifted children as young as 11 [11-14] can manage advanced curricular material and can benefit from experiences with forms and methods of various disciplines (p. 430). Although we do not know which specific learning experiences will nurture a particular giftedness, we do know that the lack of certain kinds of experiences can either slow down the realization of talent or stop it altogether (Passow, 1996, p. 31).