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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FACTORS INFLUENCING NATIONAL MERIT
FINALISTS' READING INTERESTS AND ATTITUDES

The University of Texas at Austin

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The purpose of this study was to determine what factors influenced National Merit Finalists as developing readers during childhood (from birth to age 12) and during adolescence (from age 13 to 18). To obtain this information, the researcher mailed questionnaires containing open-ended questions and Likert scales to the 570 National Merit Finalists enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin during the spring of 1985. In all, 227 questionnaires were returned. Because the students wrote quite lengthy responses to the open-ended questions, the sample was limited to 100 subjects (62 males, 38 females) by means of stratified-random sampling.

To analyze the Finalists' responses to the open-ended questions, the researcher used Glaser and Strauss' "constant-comparative" method to establish categories for the students' myriad comments.

She analyzed the Likert-scale responses using (1) descriptive statistics to establish rankings among different factors at four age levels, (2) a t-test to check for possible sex differences, and (3) an ANOVA test to look for possible main effects of subjects' academic majors on responses. Because the study was exploratory, the level of probability was set low: $p \leq .10$.

Results of the analysis show that the factors that influenced the Finalists during childhood and their junior-high years were slightly different from those important during their senior-high years. The subjects considered "parents," "books already read," and "teachers" to have been the most influential factors from birth to age 14. Finalists viewed "instructional methods" and "required-reading materials" as having been somewhat influential during this period; "siblings," "librarians," and "friends/peers" were fairly weak influences.

During the senior-high years, Finalists believed that "books already read," "required-reading materials," and "teachers" were the most important influences. They considered "instructional methods," "friends/peers," and "parents" to have been somewhat influential. The subjects ranked "siblings" and "librarians" as fairly weak influences during late adolescence. Results of the t-test show that during the elementary, junior-high, and senior-high years, female Finalists were more inclined to be positively influenced by "parents," "siblings," and "librarians" than males were. Academic majors appear to have had no significant main effects on Finalists' Likert-scale responses.

Chapter One

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

To date, no researcher has investigated the reading interests and attitudes toward reading of National Merit Finalists. As academically superior students, these young people could provide valuable insights into gifted teenagers' development as readers. Many reading specialists (e.g., Cooter and Alexander, 1984; Mangieri and Isaacs, 1983; Stevens, 1980; Swanton, 1984) have urged educators to learn more about the affective component of gifted students' reading (i.e., their interests and attitudes). Such knowledge, the researchers maintain, could not only provide the basis for more humane reading programs, but could actually increase the bright students' achievement as well. As Stevens (1980) explains:

The superior reader has been a rather neglected subset of the reading population. Educators have generally been content with better-than-average performance of these students, even if this performance is below their potential. . . . Providing interesting materials for higher ability students may result in obtaining maximum potential performance from them (p. 367).

Obviously, much more research needs to be done to discover the specific factors (e.g., types of experiences, parent and teacher behaviors, reading materials, instructional methods, activities, programs) which have influenced very bright teenagers' reading interests and attitudes. The purpose of this exploratory study, therefore, is to begin to discern by means of a questionnaire the various factors which influenced the reading attitudes and interests of 100 National Merit Finalists enrolled as undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin in the spring of 1985. Specifically, this dissertation focuses on two research questions:

- 1) Which factors emerge as important to the development of the students' interest in and attitude toward reading during childhood (i.e., birth to age 12)?
- 2) Which factors emerge as significant to the students' interest in and attitude toward reading during adolescence (i.e., age 13 to 18)?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I will analyze and discuss the students' responses to open-ended questions and Likert-scale items on the reading-interest/attitude questionnaire. Ultimately, I hope that the explicit (i.e., stated) and implicit (i.e., inferred) factors which emerge will prove valuable to persons

interested in helping gifted students fulfill their reading potential (e.g., parents, teachers, counselors, librarians, textbook publishers, curriculum developers, legislators).

Background of the Problem

National Merit Finalists can be considered highly gifted teenagers in (at the very least) two academic areas: reading comprehension and mathematics. The scores the students earn on two standardized tests (i.e., the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test and the Scholastic Aptitude Test) usually given during their sophomore and junior years in high school typically place these young people academically in the top one-half of one percent of their state's graduating high school seniors (Guide to the National Merit Scholarship Program, 1982, 7). In addition, a Finalist must exhibit academic excellence throughout secondary school (e.g., rank-in-class, course work and difficulty level, grades earned) and have a school official's recommendation attesting to his or her extracurricular activities, achievements, and good character (p. 17).

Obviously, Finalists constitute a most special group of young people: extremely intelligent, motivated, well rounded. Unfortunately, researchers have virtually ignored this select group as a rich source of information on the development of not merely gifted, but indeed highly gifted individuals as readers. Consequently, one must look to