
**THE JUNIOR GREAT BOOKS PROGRAM:
CAN IMPACT BE MEASURED?**

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The Junior Great Books (JGB) Program developed by M. Adler and others for grades 2-high school provides a variety of selections from "great literature" which are to be discussed within a small group framework. The guidelines for discussion are carefully delineated and taught to discussion group leaders in workshops presented by JGB representatives. JGB is used in many gifted and talented programs in Virginia; yet, a review of the literature (CIJE, ERIC) revealed no research on JGB. The only study found on adult GB programs evaluated attitude, concomitant cultural knowledge, ability to discern quality of writing and reading habits. There were no significant differences found between adult GB and non GB participants. Apparently the JGB program has been evaluated largely through the use of anecdotal records - i.e., informal surveys of teachers', workshop leaders' and students' affective reactions.

To learn more about JGB, I took the JGB leadership training program and then ran a JGB program for group of fifth grade volunteers. It was while leading this group that I began to wonder about the program. It did not seem possible to stick to the prescribed guidelines and still conduct an effective lively discussion. It was also not clear if the program added to student's skills or simply allowed students to display skills they already possessed.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the JGB program and consider the development of an instrument for evaluating this program.

Questions on JGB

There are many facets of the JGB program which require examination. Thus, as each component of the program is described below, related issues will be raised.

Philosophy/Goals: The basic tenet of the program is that open active inquiry into great literature will improve comprehension and reading habits. Thus, the goals of JGB are 1) to improve comprehension - specifically interpreting author's meaning and 2) improve reading habits. The framework - namely that deeper reading requires examining author's meaning and examining one's views or interpretations in light of other-is not unique. I.A. Richards (1929) stressed that when one reads one should read to get in touch with the author's meaning. Dewey (1920) emphasized the importance of interaction stating, "left to himself the individual can do little or nothing, he is likely to become involved in his own self-spun web of misconceptions."

The long-term impact of a program with an early focus on critical reading is not clear. Would the much heralded child's tendency "to suspend disbelief" - to read without questioning be lost? Would children tend to learn more about literature and less from literature? Adler, in another context (Adler and Van Doren, 1972) emphasized the point that personal reaction is only valid after carefully considering a story's meaning. The JGB stress is less on reading oneself into a story and more on pulling out an author's meaning and questioning their truth.

Questions: The types of questions asked during JGB discussions and resultant interactions are considered the keys to the program. However, while reading selections vary, the question type suggested in workshops for each age group does not vary. Discussion leaders are not trained to vary the type of question with the age group. Yet developmental/cognitive psychologists suggest that ability to deal with abstract concepts, or high level questions does vary with age.

Process: Guidelines for conducting a JGB program are specific. Each child should contribute, children should generate as many possible answers to the questions as possible, children should verify their answers by looking at the text and children should reflect upon each others responses. Interaction or "shared inquiry" is promoted as the leader asks children if they agree or disagree with peer responses. When children compare/evaluate or seek to find answers different from those of their peers - it is possible that some may be challenged, but others may become threatened.

JGB Leaders: The program is conducted largely by volunteers, usually parents who have attended a two day workshop conducted by JGB program personnel. All who stay for the length of the program become leaders. There are no prerequisites for entering the training program other than paying the required fee. There is an attempt to have two leaders for each session to provide some peer control. However, no final test is given, no check of volunteers who set up a program is conducted by JGB personnel.

Sessions: The focus of the initial training workshop for leaders is the development of high level interpretive questions.

Suggested questions and instructional inserts are provided in the new JGB student (1984) materials but discussion leaders are expected to spend time planning and developing questions. There is no documentation of the *actual* questions asked during JGB programs or of leaders ability to generate these questions at appropriate times in the discussion.

Evaluating JGB

While each of the issues raised above should be addressed, initially the program must be considered in relation to stated goals.

One reason given by a JGB leader for not evaluating the program was that no appropriate evaluation instrument could be found. While long-term studies are underway to consider the issues raised above, only the initial goal of developing an evaluation instrument will be discussed here.

Instruments: Specifically, the goal here was to determine if any type of item could clearly distinguish between JGB and non JGB participants. There are a variety of instruments available for evaluating appreciation and comprehension of literature. yet, most of these instruments are for high school students- and do not evaluate the specific goals of JGB: comprehension of author's meaning and deeper appreciation. However, Anderson (1969) developed an interesting instrument to measure profundity of appreciation of literature. This Literacy Profundity Test uses a set of short stories (apx. 100 words), each with five endings representing five levels of profundity. These levels represent a hierarchy - moving from a focus on the physical, mental, moral, psychological to the philosophical.

Anderson established content validity and reliability (split half r.76, K-R.84). This instrument was long, developed for high school students but the concept is excellent and the story topics would capture the interest of all age levels. The major shortcoming of this instrument was noted by Anderson himself. He stated "physical actions of one literary selection might be rightfully judged more profound than mental actions in another." Anderson was not able to demonstrate that training impacted upon awareness of the different levels of profundity.

For these reasons, his instrument was adapted in two ways: 1) passages were shortened and rewritten to accommodate the reading ability and attention span of the target population; 2) students were asked to directly state their rationale for selecting their ending.

This adapted form spoke to the issue of appreciation but did not assess the initial goal of JGB - deeper comprehension. The questions and instructional inserts in level 5 JGB focus upon identifying and answering interpretive questions and the process of open inquiry. This (higher interpretive) level of comprehension would seem to be more a function of reading or ability; therefore, it was decided to concentrate on the stated comprehension goal of JGB - understanding author's intent.

The final instrument included items directly related to the two stated goals of JGB (author's intent and appreciation) and to two components of the direct instructional program (awareness of question types and attitude toward open inquiry).

The final instruments consisted of five items:

ITEM	RATIONALE
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Population: the target population consisted of four intact groups of fifth graders. To evaluate the impact of reading level and general ability on responses groups varying in JGB experience (2 years versus no experience) reading level (level 5 and 6) and ability (gifted and average) level were included.

Group 1 was designated gifted, had two years in JGB and read on 6th grade and above, Group 2 was designated as gifted, had 2 years in JGB and read on a fifth grade level; Groups 3 and 4 had no JGB experience, Group 3 of average ability read on a grade 5 level, Group 4 was designated gifted and these students read on a 6th grade level.

Reading level was established by the SRA test, status of gifted and talented was established using two IQ tests and teacher designation.

RESULTS

The final "Adapted Literacy Scale" was administered to all children, Fall, 1984. All data is reported as raw score because of the unequal numbers in each group. Responses were evaluated to identify those items which seemed to have the greatest potential for discriminating between JGB and non JGB participants.

Preferred Ending: Students were given a stem story and asked to choose between two endings - one rated as less profound (physical/level) and one rated as more profound (philosophical level).

More of Group 3, the non JGB fifth grader average readers, selected the more profound ending (11 of 21). More students in Groups 1 and 2, the JGB sixth gifted fifth (4 of 6) and sixth grade readers (10 of 15) selected the less profound ending. This unexpected pattern can be understood when the rationale for the selected endings is analyzed.

Rationale for Ending: Rationales for student answers were categorized according to whether a) content or b) how the content was presented was mentioned as the reason for the preferred ending.

Rationale seemed to be a function on interaction between reading level, JGB and giftedness. That is, many of the gifted JGB sixth level readers (11 of 15) noted literary qualities - but only two of the gifted JGB students selected their ending because they liked *what* the character did or because they liked *what* happened.

Quantity differed but quality of responses on literary qualities of JGB and non JGB seemed equal:

JGB: "It sounds more realistic, also I think it was more actionous," "because it was more exciting. The way it exaggerates is also very good," "because it blends with the beginning, the other does not."

NON JGB: "It told how the ending was and it didn't leave you hanging in the air like ending A did. Besides it was more exciting," "because ending A fits the story better than ending B."

Most non JGB responses were more direct (Groups 3 and 4) - "Because the baby lions got something to eat and didn't get shot," It shows the mother lion is very brave to get them the food they wanted."

Student Questions: Whether all JGB students are considered separately or as a group, they (Groups 1 and 2) generated twice as many high level inference questions as the non JGB program students. Even the quality of interpretation questions varied:

GBP: "If you were one of the lions which ending would you want us to pick?" "There were bones laying in the dried up water holes. Why?"

NON GBP: "Was the mother killed?" "Why were the babies hungry?" "Why was it dry?"

Questions Answered: The single fact question was not answered differently by JGB and non JGB students. Moreover, the single question to draw out interpretation of author's language appeared too difficult for all students.

However, questions three and four were somewhat more viable. Question three, on interpreting character, again seemed to differentiate more between gifted JGB sixth level readers and the other groups. Few children in the other groups answered correctly while seven of the fifteen JGB students answered correctly.

The fourth question on author's intent in relation to setting, was the single question in this category separating students solely on the basis of JGB participation. Again, combining both fifth and sixth level gifted JGB students (13 or the 21 were able to answer correctly compared to one-third non JGB students). However, children in the JGB and NON JGB gave equally high level responses: "so you can really picture it like it was real," "because they want you to know how life can change and how much it did change," "to let you get the picture or the setting of the story."

Attitude Toward Teacher: To determine if JGB results in a different perception of teacher behavior, children were asked why a teacher would question a response from a student.

Neither JGB reading level nor giftedness seemed to be a factor here - that is, more JGB students regardless of reading/general ability stated that the teacher wants to check a child's reasons - not test or caution the child. More NON JGB students regardless of reading/general/ability view the teacher as a tester.

Attitude Toward Peers: To determine if JGB results in a different attitude toward peers, students were asked why a student would question a peer's response. Almost all fifth graders assumed the peer had positive reasons for this.

DISCUSSION

The three items which most clearly distinguished between JGB and NON JGB participants were 1) level of questions students write, 2) attitude toward teachers, and 3) interpretation of author's meaning in relation to setting.

The first two items are dealt with through direct instruction in the fifth level JGB. That is, the rationale for questions and responses is very clearly explained within instructional segments printed in the test.

Two items seemed to be due to an interaction between reading level or giftedness and JGB participation: rationale and author's intent.

The item on rationale needs to be explored further. Guthrie (1980) in analyzing Purves results of high school students, stated that the rationale for literary preferences indicated that

students tend to consider all aspects of a text (form, content, personal reaction) when examining literature in the abstract, but the focus varied when an individual story was considered. In fact, those high school students who were high in reading achievement tended to note content and affect more when an individual story was considered. The results are opposite here. JGB high achieving (in reading) gifted fifth graders do comment more on form than their JGB gifted but average (reading) peers.

Few student seemed to delve into or understand the implications behind the author's choice of words. This single item may not have been appropriate or sufficient for checking this ability.

Use of multiple items would help clarify the types of language (descriptive, idioms, etc.) children can respond to within the "author's intent" framework.

Interpretive questions which focus on character's intent predominate in the JGB book 5. The new JGB edition also stresses questions on the "Truth" of text and author's messages. These types of question should be explored further.

SUMMARY

This initial exploration for item types which would tap the goals of JGB provides some insight into items for a JGB evaluation instrument. there can be no firm conclusions. It is apparent that some program effects of JGB can be tapped through both open and direct questions. It is also apparent that some program effects will vary depending on the reading and general ability of students. Three items best distinguish JGB participation: attitude, question development and question on author's intent/setting. However, two other item types seem worthy of further exploration: responses to author's intent on all aspects of text and rationally.

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