InitiaLit Extension
Research background

MultiLit

The need for differentiated materials for advanced learners

As primary school teachers tackle the critical task of ensuring every child in their classroom learns to read, they are faced with the challenge of catering to a range of abilities, requiring them to differentiate materials and teaching methods for different groups of children.

The goal of differentiation is to maximise learning, for students at *any level*, by providing them with tasks that represent a moderate (but not overwhelming) challenge. Research has shown that within-class differentiation is beneficial for all students (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016), but unsurprisingly, this approach is most successful when material and methods are suitably modified for different groups (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2007; Slavin, 1987). However, studies have also found that teachers in Australia and elsewhere are not well-equipped during their training to respond adequately to *advanced* learners' needs (Dixon et al., 2014; Fraser-Seeto, 2013; Gross, 1999). Often, only minor adjustments are made for this group (Tomlinson et al., 2003), such as giving them extra practice exercises.

How should materials be differentiated for advanced learners?

It is generally agreed that tasks for advanced learners should: (a) **accelerate**, (b) **enrich**, or (c) **extend** content covered (VanTassel-Baska, 1986).

Acceleration is best suited to the very small percentage of students across classrooms who are identified as highly gifted. These students can be moved on to higher grade level content and there is a large research base supporting this practice for these students (e.g., Munro, 2012; Rogers, 2007; Subotnik et al., 2011; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2009).

Enrichment and extension, on the other hand, can be used with a wider range of more able students. More research is still required, particularly in the primary years, to establish a firm evidence base for these techniques (Walsh et al., 2012). Yet, the few studies to date that meet criteria for providing efficacy data on such instructional techniques with young children do, on the whole, show that these teaching methods are effective. For example, providing five- to six-year-old gifted children with instruction in analogy construction significantly improves their creative thinking (Meador, 1995) and their interpretation of metaphor (Castillo, 1998).

The available studies also demonstrate that the benefits of enrichment and extension techniques are not limited to gifted children. Rather, they tend to result in improved outcomes for both gifted and able non-gifted students, both across learning areas (Subotnik et al., 2011), and when used specifically for reading instruction (Reis et al., 2011; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2009). In other words, enrichment and extension teaching techniques may be particularly suitable for a larger percentage of promising learners in regular classrooms.

How are the InitiaLit Extension resources designed?

The InitiaLit Extension resources respond to the research discussed above by providing suitable material for teachers to use with the top 15–20% of students in their class. Rather than accelerating learning, the books are designed to:

- **Enrich** – allowing children to explore a particular content area in greater depth
- **Extend** – encouraging children to use critical-thinking skills to see relationships and make connections between content areas.

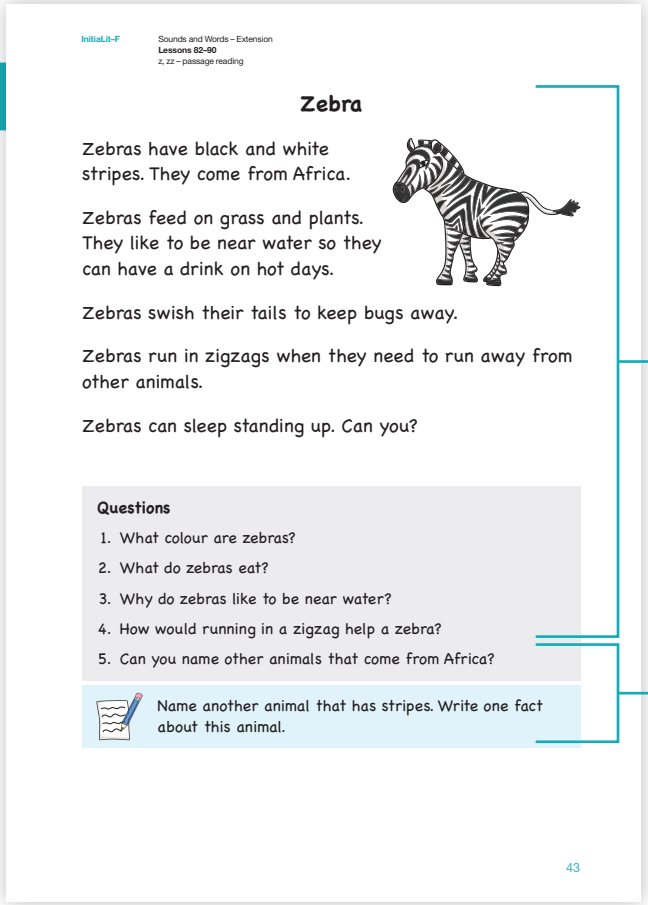
The books provide teachers with thoughtfully designed, interesting and challenging material to use during teacher-led small-group time (in place of the InitiaLit Sounds and Words Books or RAD Reading Book), so that work can be easily and appropriately differentiated for advanced learners. The books offer more complex and detailed texts for children to read, accompanied by comprehension questions that tap higher-order thinking skills. They also offer suggestions for linked writing and research activities.

At the Foundation and Year 1 levels, the focus is two-fold. Children practise their letter–sound correspondences and decoding skills with a selection of harder words and sentences. They also work on applying these skills to progressively more connected texts. At the Year 2 level, for students whose decoding is well established, the focus moves to an exploration of four major themes through a range of reading, writing and discussion tasks. At all year levels, the tasks have been selected to promote inquiry and nurture *critical* and *creative* thinking. Practitioners agree that these are important skills to develop in all students, particularly those of high ability (Chandra Handa, 2015; Hines et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2021; Thompson, 2017). To help teachers and children explore the material together, downloadable teacher lesson notes are provided. It is important that open learning tasks, such as these, still be guided and structured by a teacher (Eysink et al., 2015).

Providing suitably challenging work for able children in heterogenous classrooms is part of a comprehensive approach to catering for more able children generally. By doing so, schools will also be establishing the necessary context for the discovery and development of exceptional talent in select children (Gentry, 2009; Renzulli, 1996).

An example of the activities at each year level is given below.

FOUNDATION



InitiaLit-F

Sounds and Words – Extension
Lessons 82–90
z, zz – passage reading

Zebra

Zebras have black and white stripes. They come from Africa.

Zebras feed on grass and plants. They like to be near water so they can have a drink on hot days.

Zebras swish their tails to keep bugs away.

Zebras run in zigzags when they need to run away from other animals.

Zebras can sleep standing up. Can you?

Questions

1. What colour are zebras?
2. What do zebras eat?
3. Why do zebras like to be near water?
4. How would running in a zigzag help a zebra?
5. Can you name other animals that come from Africa?

Name another animal that has stripes. Write one fact about this animal.

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YEAR 1

It's Snowing

On a crisp winter morning, Dad coaxes the children from their slumber. It is the first snow of the season. Dad throws on his thick overcoat and snow boots. Trish and Dev put on their hats, woolly socks, boots and winter jackets.

They are ready to explore their new white world. Snowflakes tickle their eyelashes. The road seems to have vanished. Melting ice drips from the branches of snow gums.

Everything is still. The animals are snug in their burrows and tree hollows. They do not hear the children giggling and squealing as they throw snowballs at each other.

Dad calls, "It's time for hot buttered toast. Then we will build a snowman."

The children run inside, hoping it will snow again tomorrow.

Questions

1. Find the word in the first paragraph that means sleep.
2. What do Dad and the children wear outside? What do you wear on very cold days?
3. Did the snowflakes really tickle their eyelashes? What do you think snowflakes look and feel like?
4. Has the road really vanished? Why can't they see it?
5. How do Trish and Dev have fun in the snow?
6. Have the children had breakfast? How do you know?
7. Have you seen snow? Where was it? What games did you play in the snow?

How are people like animals during the winter?

Write about how people and animals stay warm on cold days and nights.

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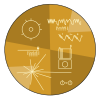
YEAR 2

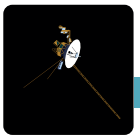
Voyager Golden Records

In 1977, two gold records were sent into space on the *Voyager 1* and *Voyager 2* spacecrafts. They contained music, sounds and pictures from Earth. People wanted to show our life on Earth to any intelligent life forms that may exist on distant planets. The sounds made by birds, frogs, whales, elephants and other animals were included. There were sounds of thunder and waves, as well as laughter and the human heartbeat. There were greetings in 55 languages.



The pictures showed Earth from space as well as places of natural beauty, city life, people and animals. There were scientific and mathematical diagrams.

The music included some of the great composers, such as Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. There was also traditional music from different countries, including Australia. The Australian Indigenous songs 'Morning star' and 'Moikoi' were part of the record.



The Voyager Golden Records are still moving through space right now. How long do you think they might travel through space? Will they travel in space forever?

Voyager 2 spacecraft.

Let's discuss

1. Why were the Voyager Golden Records sent into space?
2. What sounds were included?

Find out more . . .

about the Voyager Golden Records and the sounds, music and pictures that were sent into space.

Stop and write

If you could send a time capsule into outer space, what would you include? Work with your partner to choose the things you would like to send from the categories below. Share these lists with the group.

1. Five pictures from Earth
2. Five sounds of Earth and its people
3. Some songs or music

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