

The Importance of Increasing Reading Motivation and Engagement in the Primary Grades to Develop Life-Long Readers

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Few would dispute the importance of a sound foundation in reading education. Controversy or confusion may arise in how to provide a sound literacy framework for students. In their study of first graders in an urban school in the Midwest, Krugler and Martin (2012) found educators concerned with how to put into place an effective reading program while still following the many district and federal policies that exist in regards to the reading curriculum. This is a concern of teachers everywhere as they must balance curriculum requirements and student needs. In other words, they juggle what to teach and how to teach it. The struggle to develop an effective reading program often begins with deciding on the best way to increase reading comprehension. Reading comprehension and becoming a life-long reader requires the mastery of decoding skills and then extended practice with texts. In order to get students to practice reading, reading needs to hold their attention and compel them to keep working and improving their skills. This paper will focus on the importance of increasing reading motivation and engagement in the primary grades in order to develop life-long readers.

Understanding the Role Motivation Plays in Reading

According to Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni (1996), educators have for a long time realized that among the many existing problems teachers face in the instruction of reading, addressing motivation is at the center of this task. They developed a publicly available instrument to measure and assess student reading motivation. This instrument, the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP), has both a survey and an interview component. The purpose in using it is to determine "students' self-

concept as readers and the value they place on reading" (p. 519). The first component is a reading survey that can be administered to a group and assesses student "self-concept as a reader and value of reading" (p. 519). The second part, the interview component, of the MRP is individually administered and provides understanding of the students' personal preferences in terms of reading. Knowing what motivates students to read can give educators insight as to the best path of instruction to sustain motivation. Children have to want to read in order to engage in reading. Understanding this motivation and engagement correlation is vital to facilitating the reading comprehension process.

Along the path to understanding reading motivation, it might be prudent to begin by looking at those students who appear to be motivated in comparison to less motivated students. There is not just one factor affecting reading motivation that can be singled out as the defining reason that causes all children to either choose to engage or disengage in reading. The cause of poor motivation or excellent reading motivation can differ from child to child. Reading skills such as decoding or fluency in relationship to reading self-concept, or the way students perceive themselves as readers, deficiencies in reading competency and the effect of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are just a few of the components that may play a part in reading motivation.

Students with higher reading fluency skills were found to have higher reading self-concepts in a study of second grade students by Quirk, Schwanenflugel, and Webb (2009). This indicated to these researchers the importance of early success in reading skills such as fluency on the advancement of a child's reading self-concept. They found that students with a higher self-concept are more motivated to read and that students

who began their second year with higher fluency skills tended to have higher self-concepts at the end of the year.

In contrast, Morgan, Fuchs, Compton, Cordray, and Fuchs (2008) found that remediated students did not show increased motivation even though their skill sets increased. They looked at first grade students they deemed likely to experience early declines in motivation. The students were tested to determine if early reading failure also decreased reading practice. Tutoring was provided to a control group of students. Students were tested throughout the process to determine changes in motivation. They did not find that an increase in reading skills meant an increase in practice or engagement. Their findings also indicated that the relationship between reading motivation and reading skills may emerge even before the primary school years. This seemed to suggest that reading motivation is somewhat set even before the child enters school. It is worth noting that the control group from the study received tutoring but in less than ideal conditions. The students were tutored in hallways where interruptions were bound to occur and the participants were first graders who are not always able to maintain focus with excessive distractions.

Various studies have been done to determine if and to what degree intrinsic and extrinsic rewards affect reading motivation. Children are not born motivated to read which means educators must strive to find ways to stimulate interest and attention. They may begin the process by determining if the student is motivated by internal or external factors. Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, and Perencevich (2006) studied student interest in informational and narrative books and the reasoning students gave for choosing favorite books (intrinsic or extrinsic). The researchers wanted to find out if increases in

situational reading would lead to increases in a child's intrinsic motivation to read. Situational interest in reading occurs when "students are captivated by a particular text, in a specific situation, with a host of environmental supports" (p. 93). They collected data from a Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) program that combines strategy instruction with motivational practices that are thought to increase intrinsic motivation. This was taught to third grade students over a period of 12 weeks. Their findings signified that a student's situational motivation for choosing informational texts does become more intrinsic with the passage of time. The motivation of students who preferred narrative books for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons in the beginning became less extrinsic over time. Changes in situational motivation were reflected by changes in the same direction for general motivation. This study seemed to indicate the need for educators to increase the opportunities and situations for students to engage in reading that ignites their interest and desire to read. Teachers can develop situational reading opportunities through activities like reader's theater, reading workshops, and the integration of other subjects across the curriculum.

Understanding the Role Engagement Plays in Reading

Guthrie (2004) describes reading engagement as including many outlooks on reading such as motivation, thinking strategies, understanding of concepts, and social interactions. He portrays engaged readers as being "typically higher achievers than less engaged readers" (p. 1) and attributes much more time spent reading to them verses disengaged readers. He concluded that instructors need to make reading engagement a teaching goal. It is his belief that teachers need to be empowered to develop instruction that maximizes student engagement. First grade is when children typically learn to read.

Beyond basic decoding skills, sustained engagement with texts is needed to increase reading comprehension and create authentic readers. Understanding engagement and how to increase the time spent reading in the primary grades can provide a framework for reading instruction.

Students need to be meaningfully engaged in text in order to learn to love to read. One way to aid engagement in reading is to differentiate instruction during independent reading. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2010) described a process for determining what type of readers there are in the classroom and how to develop a plan to offer them the best possible instruction regarding independent reading. These authors looked at the different types of readers (from fake readers to bookworms) and offered tips to differentiate instruction and heighten independent reading. They began with a behavior observation checklist to record students during independent reading and supplied a series of tips to guide the instructor in determining the types of readers in the classroom and how to help them with successful independent reading. Facilitating engagement in independent reading comes from learning what type of reader the student is and differentiating instruction to match the student's needs. Increasing engagement in reading is similar to increasing time practicing the piano or practicing sports. The longer you practice the better your skill set becomes. Teachers who understand what interests their students are more likely to be able to keep them engaged in reading activities for longer periods of time.

Understanding the Role of Instructors in Increasing Reading Motivation and Engagement

Given the amount of information that exists concerning reading comprehension and the role reading motivation and engagement play in increasing comprehension, instructors face the daunting task of sifting through this information in order to develop a program to serve the needs of their students. Teachers must differentiate their instruction to match their student's particular needs if they hope to provide adequate instruction. Educators have long realized they can provide the best possible instruction but a child not motivated to learn is unlikely to succeed. This holds true for the teaching of reading as well as other subjects.

In their study of elementary school students, Applegate and Applegate (2011) attempted to determine if students using higher order thinking skills during reading activities would differ in terms of overall motivation to read verses students using recall skills but not showing thoughtful responses to text. The findings indicated that students strong in both higher order comprehension and text-based comprehension were substantially more motivated to read than students high in text-based comprehension only. A second finding from this study was that more boys than girls described themselves as good readers but they did not enjoy reading and reading activities. Students who responded thoughtfully to the text also placed a higher value on reading enjoyment and social aspects attributed to reading. Additionally, the study found that literacy educators value a student's ability to respond thoughtfully to text superior to the ability to reproduce factual information from text that is read. These findings seem to reinforce the idea that reading motivation and engagement go hand in hand. Instructors

need to facilitate the use of higher order thinking skills during reading and also find ways to increase the value that boys place on reading in order to increase student motivation to read. The students who are motivated to read will likely engage in reading tasks for longer periods of time.

Allowing students to decide what they would like to read when possible is one way to address the issue of reading motivation. Sustained involvement in any activity requires a certain amount of personal interest and reading is no exception. Johnson and Blair (2003) looked at reading engagement and the importance of allowing students to self-select literature. They offered guidance as to how teachers might put this process into practice. The implication in terms of reading motivation and engagement was that students need to be taught to choose reading material that is a good fit in order to be more engaged. Children will find greater enjoyment in books they selected and read longer. Self-selection increases engagement, positive feelings about reading, and reading proficiency.

Questions as to the possible differences between boys and girls in terms of their reading motivation levels and the impact on instruction have been studied by various researchers. One such study by Marinak and Gambrell (2010) looked at average reading third grade students. They focused on students' self-concept as a reader and the value they placed on reading tasks. They found that overall girls were more motivated to read than boys. The self-concept component of the study showed significant motivational differences between boys and girls. Boys were about equal to girls in terms of their self-confidence as readers but less motivated to read. This difference is thought to be due to the value the students placed on reading. Instructors

need to look at ways to close this gender gap in terms of reading motivation. One step towards narrowing this gap may be to examine classroom libraries ensuring that reading material is available that crosses all genres and interests more students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the importance of increasing reading motivation and engagement in the primary grades in order to develop life-long readers and to understand the role instruction plays in this process. Reading motivation and engagement are at the heart of a sound literacy program. Teachers may understand the mechanics of reading instruction but not develop life-long readers if they fail to understand the individual learner. Consider the old adage *you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink*. Instructors can offer all the reading material in the world but the student has to want to read. It makes sense to begin motivating and engaging students in the primary grades as they are just embarking on their reading journey.

Reflection

In researching reading motivation and engagement in the primary grades, I have come to the conclusion that this is a much more complex issue than I had originally thought. It is not simply a matter of identifying a problem and applying the one fix that solves the problem. There can be many underlying factors that affect a child's reading motivation and engagement. Knowing what motivates a person to do anything can be a complicated issue to comprehend and understand the motivations of young children can be further complicated by their inability to fully articulate their thought processes.

I have learned that getting to know your student as an individual and as a reader is a good place to begin understanding what motivates them to read or choose not to read. Knowing their likes and dislikes in terms of genres, authors, and even places to read, can give me an indication of what material I can offer that might spark their interest and get them excited about reading. I have downloaded a copy of the MRP that I discussed in this paper and plan to use it in my classroom as a part of my reading assessments. I think it will be a valuable tool in getting to know my students and their reading needs.

The impact on instruction is evident when you hear children say they don't like to read or reading is boring. Reading is an inevitable part of daily life. It is a necessary skill to lead a successful life and can be a very rewarding experience. For this to happen, we have to develop a love of reading at an early age. I have been passionate about reading for as long as I can remember. I have worked as a reading tutor and absolutely love working with first graders that are just beginning to read. I will always be a student of reading myself and am excited about the prospect of introducing the joy of books to my future students.

I know that I have to figure out how to get my students engaged in meaningful reading. I can start doing this by modeling how to find a good-fit book that is not too hard that the reader struggles and becomes frustrated or too easy and causes the student to lose interest. I have been fortunate enough to be in a first grade classroom where this kind of modeling was demonstrated and saw the students grasp the concept of choosing a book that fits them as a reader. I want to engage my students in quality independent reading but also help them to understand the social aspects of being a

reader. Reading engagement can be enhanced by using activities like reader's theater and reading workshops. Real readers don't just read they also talk about books to others.

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