Engagement and Motivation in Reading Instruction

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Studies show that alarming numbers of capable students rarely read without a teacher request and make little effort to use reading-comprehension strategies. Since the amount of reading is strongly associated with reading achievement, nonreading students fall behind. Though they may lack competence, more crucially they lack of motivation. Since both competence and commitment are necessary for school-relevant literacy, schools need to incorporate practices ensuring that readers are motivated as well as skilled. This article describes the features of reader motivation, provides a classroom example illustrating a motivational classroom, asserts key instructional principles for increasing competence and commitment, reviews research on those principles, and offers conclusions.

Reading Motivation

Competent readers are intrinsically motivated, reading with curiosity, involvement, and preference for challenge. These qualities predict reading frequency and comprehension. Extrinsic motivation—desire for recognition and enjoyment of competition—though associated with intrinsic, is less related to comprehension. Reading teachers value intrinsic motivation but often fail to institute classroom practices that develop it. Building classroom engagement in reading through situational interest can help.

Interest in texts or other objects can be divided into two types, individual and situational. Individual interest endures through various encounters with an object, while situational interest is transitory affective engagement with an object. In schools,

situational interest is often evoked through hands-on activities. An encounter with an unusual animal, for instance, will arouse and focus attention, even if no lasting interest develops.

Situational interest can direct many literacy activities. Tangible objects can initiate reading-comprehension activities in informational texts. Interest in objects is readily transferable to reading about them, and that may spur interest in related topics, building comprehension. Illustrated and attractively designed books can stimulate interest similarly, even in nonreaders. Educators need to foster emergence of intrinsic motivation from situational interest. Teachers can provide a scaffold for this emergence, as the following example illustrates.

Classroom Example

In Sally's elementary classroom, she has been integrating reading with science and social studies instruction. She is now teaching a unit on birds in relation to world environments. The classroom displays related materials like feathers and live birds. Lining the room are books on birds and climates. Sally currently directs instruction toward environmental survival and subtopics like eating, locomotion, and defense. Inquiry into these concepts helps children focus their interests, as do real-world activities like dissecting owl pellets. To boost interest, Sally encourages children to ask questions and investigate answers through reading and writing.

Sally uses books about birds to discuss the organization of informational books. She needs to teach students how to use these books to satisfy their curiosity about birds, explaining the table of contents, index, and paragraph headings and showing how pictures relate to text. She follows her explanation of book features with an exercise in which

classmates choose a favorite question about one of the survival topics and discuss which book features, like the index, can help them answer it. They then search for answers, locating relevant information in books of varying difficulty. Next, answers are shared and documented with textual evidence. Finally, students collaborate to answer survival questions about animals in different climates, extending scientific knowledge and reading skill.

Instructional Principles

Visible in the classroom example are practices generally present in classrooms fostering reading engagement and absent in less engaged classrooms. These six practices serve as principles for supporting more engaged reading.

Using Knowledge Goals

Goals for reading instruction should be primarily oriented toward knowledge, not cognitive strategies like questioning and summarizing, since the strategies are learned more easily if anchored to conceptual knowledge. If tasks focused on strategies are linked to building interesting knowledge, students are more likely to learn and use the strategies as means to the desired end of extended understanding. Further, linking reading instruction to knowledge goals allows teachers to build frameworks like Sally's for deeper reading.

Linking Real-World Experience to Reading

Experiences with tangible objects and events should be linked to reading because text related to such experiences will likely be read with keen attention and processed more deeply, as students' curiosity leads them to sustained efforts to understand. Interesting experiences develop desirable reading skills, including prior knowledge use,

questioning, comprehension monitoring, and ideas organization. Teachers can then help students implement these strategies deliberately.

Supporting Students' Autonomy

To help bridge situational interest and intrinsic motivation, teachers should support students' process of choosing and behaving autonomously. If teachers link choices to learning activities, academic achievement improves. Since different children experience the same learning object uniquely, what interests them varies. Allowing them to choose ways to explore the object through reading helps sustain that interest. Moreover, many children enjoy opportunities for controlling their learning, so encouraging autonomy sustains motivation.

Using Diverse Texts

To evoke situational interest, diverse, interesting texts should be offered. These should have familiar content, vivid details, accessibility, and attractive visual features. Different levels of difficulty should be offered, given the range of reading levels typical in elementary grades. Unlike single textbooks, diverse texts allow students to choose individual interests at levels suitable to their understanding. A range of books thus encourages motivation.

Collaborative Learning

Collaboration should be facilitated to increase motivation, since social interaction is gratifying. If students have enjoyed situational interests together, they will spontaneously collaborate in reading texts and sharing knowledge. Encouraging learning about different topics and merging information in group activities can foster

collaboration. Enjoyment of this social interchange can mediate between short-term and lasting interest in reading.

Cognitive Strategies

To support students' perception of competence, teachers should provide direct instruction of cognitive strategies like questioning and organizing knowledge. Without mastery of these skills, students will be less able to extend situational interest to deeper understanding and future reading. Empowering students with cognitive tools builds confidence and increases knowledge, which itself can motivate further reading gains.

In sum, these instructional practices should be seen as interdependent principles. Reading comprehension relies on motivation, which fuels strategy development. Classrooms fusing cognition and motivation can optimize reading achievement.

Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction

To test these principles, the author and colleagues built them into an instructional framework, Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI), implemented in Grades 3 and 5. The researchers found that most involved students improved in reading comprehension and intrinsic motivation, while extrinsic motivation decreased. Crucially, improvement in reading strategies and intrinsic motivation were interlocked. Students who were both motivated and strategic were defined as engaged.

A yearlong comparison of CORI and traditional instruction for Grades 3 and 5 students was measured on a year-end reading assessment capturing comprehension, strategies, motivation, and science knowledge. CORI students outperformed traditional ones by 20% on using reading strategies with informational texts. In another comparison with new students and two assessments, CORI students outperformed traditional ones by

12 to 15% in comprehension. In these comparisons, CORI students demonstrated higher understanding of environmental science concepts. This result depended on improved use of reading strategies. Further, while CORI students equaled others in extrinsic motivation, they were higher in intrinsic motivation, suggesting that the program may foster lasting reading growth.

Conclusions

If experiment designers produce a desired effect on a valid measure of learning, the design has strong support. CORI designers accounted for all factors in improved comprehension, including student characteristics, reading materials, writing activities, motivational support, parent involvement, and administrative factors. This comprehensive design allowed designers to conclude that benefits were intentionally produced. The design also resulted in strong knowledge of the nature of benefits.

To move beyond experiments to larger-scale support of CORI principles, the researchers also investigated whether CORI principles work in other contexts. They examined what factors in reading-comprehension instruction distinguished between schools increasing on the Maryland accountability test over a 2-year period and schools decreasing on that test. Instructional factors came from a questionnaire administered to Grades 3 and 5 teachers. Two main factors predicted reading comprehension achievement gains in Grade 5 (and none in Grade 3). First was integration of reading instruction with science or social-studies content. Second was use of abundant books and reading resources in reading instruction. These trends occurred for low- and high-achieving schools. Thus, two CORI principles are associated with successful instruction on a broader scale.

Successful reading programs, especially those for Grades 3–5, should embody the six principles of instructional practice described. Research also supports the value of these principles in middle school as well. When students perceive that the principles prevail in their classrooms, they become engaged, motivated readers and learners, architects of their cognitive growth and affective maturity.