

ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

“Reading engagement is more important than students’ family background consisting of parents’ education and income. Reading engagement connects to achievement more strongly than to home environment.”

—Dr. John Guthrie, National Reading Research Center at the University of Maryland,

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Motivation and reading comprehension go hand in hand; avid readers read extensively with deep comprehension (Duke, et al., 2011).
- ▶ Motivation works in a spiral: avid readers read more, and their reading prompts increased learning and a passion for even more reading. The reverse is also true (Guthrie et al., 2012).
- ▶ “A motivated reader is one who engages in significantly more reading than one who is not motivated to do so. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) identified a 300% difference in time spent reading between intrinsically motivated and unmotivated fourth- and fifth-grade readers” (Fisher, Frye, and Lapp, 2012).
- ▶ Intrinsic motivation drives student reading and reading achievement; students who read only for external reasons—prompted by grades, rewards, or recognition—do not read as often or as deeply (Guthrie, et al., 2012).
- ▶ A meta-analysis of 128 studies on the effects of rewards concludes that, “tangible rewards tend to have a substantially negative effect on intrinsic motivation. Even when tangible rewards are offered as indicators of good performance, they typically decrease intrinsic motivation for interesting activities” (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999; cited in Miller and Sharp, 2018).
- ▶ Readers motivated for personal reasons are more likely to remain interested in reading than readers who are externally motivated through rewards (Marinak and Gambrell, 2008). If we strive to encourage lifelong reading habits, rewarding and incentivizing reading is detrimental (Miller and Sharp, 2018).
- ▶ Inviting students to choose their own books or suggesting books that they can read and want to read has a profound positive effect on both motivation and comprehension (Miller and Sharp, 2018; Gallagher and Kittle, 2018; Beers and Probst, 2017; Harvey and Ward, 2017; Allington, 2012; Wilhelm and Smith, 2013).

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Engagement, motivation, and a growth mindset work in concert (Conley, 2014).
- ▶ Our assessments must be sensitive to these developments and provide information that describes the status of self-efficacy, the nature of a student's motivation, and the types of attribution that a student makes for reading success or failure. With such assessment information, we can create reading environments and instruction that foster healthy development of students' cognition and affect (Afflerbach, 2016).

More to Know: Engagement Drives Reading Achievement

When it comes to reading achievement, engagement trumps all—it's even more important than family background. In other words, it doesn't matter what education or income a student's parents may have—if students are drawn to read by deep longing and interest, they will succeed (Guthrie, 2008). Think of the inspiring stories of young people who read their way out of poverty and all sorts of life challenges (Westover, 2018; Walls, 2006; Murray, 2010).

The research is equally powerful and convincing. Many studies show that intrinsic motivation drives student reading. Students who read for internal reasons (interest, pleasure, favorite topics) read a lot and do well on all measures of achievement. In contrast, students who read only for external reasons—prompted by grades, rewards, or recognition—do not read as often or as deeply (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1992; Guthrie, et al., 2013).

As Miller and Sharp (2018) note, “Short-term reading excitement for an award or prize does not spark long-term reading engagement. Indeed, reading contests can harm students' reading self-efficacy and interest ... When we communicate to children that the only reason to read is to earn a reward or grade, we fail to impart reading's true value. Reading is its own reward and bestows immeasurable gifts on readers.”

Gallagher and Kittle (2018) maintain that choice drives engagement—and engagement drives reading and volume. Not only do motivated readers engage in significantly more reading than those who are extrinsically motivated, their level of engagement and comprehension tends to be deeper and richer (Fisher, Frey, and Lapp, 2012; Duke and Carlisle, 2011).

What's more, reading engagement and reading achievement interact in a spiral. Higher achievers read more, and the more engaged these students become, the higher they achieve. Engaged readers want to learn, and they are confident in their abilities. They

persist in the face of difficulty and keep at it until they have achieved their goals (Guthrie, 2012; Dwek, 2008). Likewise, lower achievers read less, and the less engaged decline in achievement. The spiral goes downward as well as upward. In fact, continued low engagement in reading is often a precursor to dropping out of school (Guthrie, 2008).

In general, helping *all* students succeed is not a mystery; we know the teaching elements that motivate and inspire (Muir, 2014):

- Building positive relationships and an inviting school climate
- Providing specific feedback that helps students succeed
- Inviting student hands-on, active work
- Honoring different learning styles
- Developing projects that stem from students' interests
- Avoiding bribes and rewards
- Honoring student voice and choice
- Connecting learning to problem solving and inventive thinking
- Fostering real-world connections

Do Rewards Work?

Paul Tough (2016) tells the story of Roland Fryer, a Harvard economics professor who has given out an astonishing sum of cash trying to encourage parents and their children to care about school and their schoolwork. Alas, all that money has made nearly zero difference and in one case, it even seems to have interfered. Tough explains:

From 2007 to 2009, Fryer distributed a total of \$9.4 million in cash incentives to 27,000 students, to promote book reading in Dallas, to raise test scores in New York, and to improve course grades in Chicago—all with no effect. “The impact of financial incentives on student achievement,” Fryer reported, “is statistically 0 in each city.” In the 2010–11 school year, he gave cash incentives to fifth-grade students in 25 low-performing public schools in Houston, and to their parents and teachers, with the intent of increasing the time they spent on math homework and improving their scores on standardized math tests. The students performed the tasks necessary to get paid, but their average math scores at the end of eight months hadn’t changed at all. When Fryer looked at their reading scores, he found that they actually went down.

Closing Thoughts

Teachers who foster reading engagement through classroom instruction and high-interest reading materials not only increase the amount of time that students spend reading silently, but also their overall reading achievement. At the same time, the research shows that teachers who do not focus on student engagement are actually hindering their students by increasing avoidance behaviors. When students avoid reading, they short-circuit the very process that would help them become better readers. Nurturing young readers is not simply a matter of providing instruction that fosters reading engagement—it requires providing instruction that thwarts avoidance behaviors in the classroom (Guthrie and Humenick, 2004).

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