

 SCHOLASTIC
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Paper

Raising Students Who Want to Read

by

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Let me begin by stating my thesis immediately. No reading program is complete if it doesn't include motivation. It's that simple. Of course I agree that a comprehensive reading program needs to cover the basics: phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, fluency, and automaticity. But even with all of that, a program will be incomplete if it doesn't incorporate motivation.

Good teachers already know that. A few years ago the National Research Council confirmed that one of the main stumbling blocks that can prevent children from becoming skilled readers is a lack of motivation (Snow et al., 1998).

In the next few pages, I will discuss what I mean by motivation and the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. As you'll see, I believe they are interrelated, but a key goal is to develop students' intrinsic motivation. Next I'll lay out nine principles that teachers can follow in order to help students become motivated readers. Along the way I'll include tips, in the form of resources, that I've found to be helpful.

Moving from Extrinsic to Intrinsic Motivation

As we think about ways to motivate students, we need to distinguish between two different kinds of motivation. When students are motivated to read because they enjoy reading and think reading is valuable, we call that intrinsic motivation. When they're motivated by outside factors, like rewards or deadlines, we call that extrinsic motivation (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000). I think everyone would agree that the goal is to have kids become intrinsically motivated to read. But if we want them to get there, we have to help them along. In many cases, we have to start with extrinsic motivation and outline a path that lets students see that they can generate some intrinsic motivation themselves—that they can set their own best effort and operate at the top of their potential.

Extrinsic motivation is basically an incentive program: “If you do this, you get this,” or “If you do this, you get to see this.” Extrinsic motivation has its place, and it does work. We, as adults, are all motivated by a paycheck at the end of the month. We may not be working only for the paycheck, but it’s still motivating to know that it’s coming. Similarly, we have to think about what will motivate students.

At a certain point, though, it’s more effective to help students shift toward intrinsic motivation. At first, when the focus is on extrinsic motivation, the students are doing the work to please you, or because you say the result is going to be good. But as they continue to work, they can develop more of their own intrinsic motivation. One way to encourage that is to let children see their progress. If a teacher charts their progress, students become motivated by their own achievements and successes; it’s motivating to see your performance going up, rather than staying the same. For example, if the teacher says, “We’re going to check our progress at the end of the week,” or “Hey, it’s Wednesday, and we were hoping to get through this topic by Friday,” that will help to motivate the students on Thursday. But if nobody is encouraging the students to meet a timeline or to put in their best effort, they will be less likely to push themselves and grow.

Students can operate at the top of their game or somewhere in the middle. I think that the teacher is an important factor in getting them to operate at the top of their game. There are a hundred ways to tell students that they’ve done something well, to spotlight their successes, and to encourage them to be aware of their own progress: “You know, this is where you were three weeks ago, and here you are now.” Or, “You’ve added this many words to your vocabulary. Do you know that people need to know 25,000 words to be good readers? Now, you’re one step closer to that. We’re biting off one piece at a time.”

The goal is to get students—at all levels of ability—to see that they have to begin somewhere. And to get them to say, “Today, I begin.”

What Teachers Can Do

Practically speaking, the obvious question is “How do we do that?” How can teachers help their students develop the motivation to become skilled readers who love to read? Over the years, a lot of research has been conducted in real classrooms with real kids to try to answer these questions (e.g., Gambrell & Marinak, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Snow, 2002; Turner, 1997). When you put all of this research together, it points to several concrete things that teachers can do:

1. Match students to “just right” texts on their reading level that they can read without difficulty.
2. Provide a wide variety of texts that are interesting and appropriate for students’ age ranges and personally relevant to individual students.
3. Empower students by allowing them to select their own texts.
4. Let students know what to expect. They can get excited about what’s coming.
5. Encourage students to take an interest in monitoring their own reading progress.
6. Talk, talk, talk about books—discuss the characters, settings, and plots of stories and the content of nonfiction books.
7. Support students with immediate, continuous feedback and encouragement.
8. Use technology to excite students’ interest.
9. Set expectations for success.

Let me explain each of these ideas in more detail.

1. Match students to “just right” texts on their reading level that they can read without difficulty.

Educational psychologists say that the most powerful learning happens when it’s in the “zone of proximal development”—that is, when something makes you use skills that you haven’t quite mastered yet, but you’re just on the verge of grasping (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). In teaching children to read, we need to match each student to text that is just challenging enough: not too easy for that particular student, but not too hard either.

By carefully matching the reading level of each text to a student’s ability, teachers can make reading challenging but attainable. That way, the teacher pushes the student to grow, while still making sure that it’s possible for the student to succeed (e.g., Gambrell, Palmer, & Codling, 1993; Morrow, 1996). It can be a recipe for success in learning new skills, and it can help keep students motivated, too.

Tip: *Reading Is Fundamental is a nonprofit organization. Its Web site is chock-full of resources for teachers and families. You’ll find book lists, tips, articles, and advice to promote reading success. <http://www.rif.org/>*

2. Provide a wide variety of texts that are interesting and appropriate for their age range and personally relevant to individual students.

Reading is motivating if you’re reading about something that you’re very interested in. Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm (2002) have written about how books need to grab poor readers’ interest in the first few paragraphs, or else the kids may give up on the book. Personally, I’ve never met a middle schooler, high schooler, or fourth grader who didn’t want to read about something that was important in his or her life. If you’re a skateboarder and you happen to come across a book about skateboarding, you usually want to take a look at it. If you’re about to get your driver’s license, you want to read the DMV handbook. If the subject of a book or a text is in your life, that’s tremendously motivating.

In any classroom, you'll find that the students have an enormous range of interests. That means that the teacher needs to be able to offer them a wide variety of books (e.g., Gambrell, 1996). The more diverse the options, the more likely it is that every student can find something that interests him or her individually. Caswell and Duke (1998) indicate that increasing students' access to informational texts can motivate students who prefer reading this type of text over narrative texts or have strong interests in informational topics.

Because teachers know their students and have some idea about each student's personal interests, teachers can provide the connecting piece. They can make the "just-in-time recommendation" to match just the right book to just the right student. The right connection can transform a student from a reader who can read and doesn't into a reader who can read and does. Or it can take a student who doesn't read very well and never picks up a book, and change that student into a reader who wants to read more because the topic of the book is so compelling.

Tip: *How do you find the right books? The International Reading Association has partnered with different groups including the Children's Book Council, the National Council for Social Studies, and the National Science Teacher's Association to come up with Kid's Choice lists, Teacher's Choice lists, Notable Science Trade Books, and Notable Social Studies Trade books. These are all organized by grade range and reading level with summaries. You can get all of the lists online. Start with www.reading.org/choices and find links to all of the other lists. Read Across America also has book lists in its resources kit. Check: <http://www.nea.org/readacross/resources/#kit>*

3. Empower students by allowing them to select their own texts.

Students need to know that they have some power over their education. When they aren't given any choices, it certainly doesn't inspire them to be proactive about their participation, because they feel it's already a done deal: "I'm gonna get what I'm gonna get, no matter what I do or what I say." On the other hand, though, if students can make choices, then they feel empowered. When kids were asked what motivates them to read, this is what they said: "Let kids pick out books at the library or the bookstore. It's almost a sure thing they'll want to read them. If you pick them out, they won't."

We need to empower kids in their own literacy. Giving students choices within their activities and assignments—for example, by letting them choose which books to read—can make a big difference in getting them involved and engaged. Research shows that letting students select their own books helps to increase interest value, and that helps boost motivation (e.g., Wigfield, 1994).

Tip: *Kids like to know what other kids like and think. They also like knowing their opinion is valued. Nickelodeon's Kids' Choice Awards are popular for that reason. There are programs that let kids vote for favorite books, such as Maryland's Black-Eyed Susan Award (www.tcps.k12.md.us/memo/besall.html). You can use this as a model, even if you're not in Maryland.*

4. Let students know what to expect.

If they know something about what's coming up, they can get excited about it. Take for example, going to a restaurant. Sure, you might be motivated to go to a restaurant if you were hungry, but wouldn't you be more motivated if you knew what was on the menu? Perhaps seeing that restaurant on the Food Network or knowing that your favorite movie star likes to dine there would further motivate you to go. The more you know about what to expect, the more motivated you are to go. If you've taken the trouble to identify student interests and pull together books that meet them, let the students know what's coming up. They'll have a sense of control, and they'll be eager to read.

5. Encourage students to monitor their own reading progress.

As I mentioned earlier, another way to give students power over their education is to give them tools to track their own progress. Charts or reading logs can help students keep track of the number of books they've read, the new words they've learned, or the amount of time they've spent (e.g., Braunger & Lewis, 1998). Those kinds of tools help make the process more concrete for children and give them a way to see their progress with their own eyes. When students are able to point to something and say, "Look at how much I've done," they feel proud of what they've accomplished—and they should. Even more important, that rush of pride can also motivate them to keep trying, so that they accomplish even more.

Tip: *"Book It" is a reading-incentive program. You set the reading goals, and when students have met them, you give them a certificate for pizza. In the teacher section on the Book It Web site you'll find reproducible pages to use for keeping track of student reading—by the book, by the number of minutes read, or by the number of pages read. For information, go to: www.bookitprogram.com*

6. Talk, talk, talk about books—discuss the characters, settings, and plots of stories and the content of nonfiction books.

Talking about books can be one of the most powerful motivators of reading. Oprah's Book Club is the perfect example. It has transformed thousands of individual viewers into a community of readers by making reading a social activity. She builds "buzz" around a book simply by talking about it. As a result, thousands of her viewers read and even form their own book groups. Talk about being a great motivator of reading!

When reading is a social activity, a deep and complex understanding of what is read can grow from those discussions (Langer et al, 2000). Discussion gives students the opportunity to share their unique perspectives and personal experiences. In addition, Block and Pressley (2002) indicate that "the group discussion is the catalyst for raising questions that the students might not have formulated on their own. It is these questions and the diversity of ideas and knowledge that capture the students' interest and propel their desire to read and learn." You can have students talk about books in small groups or organize whole-class discussions.

7. Support students with immediate, continuous feedback and encouragement.

If you want students to monitor their own progress, give them plenty of feedback on how they're doing along the way. Sometimes, students need more encouragement to pump them up when they're first starting something than they do later on, once they're into it. It's important to be overtly complimentary when kids begin something new—not in an insincere manner, but by saying plainly, "I'm glad that you're starting this," or "It's going well."

As students progress further, the teacher's feedback needs to become very specific. Just telling them, "You're doing great" all the time might make them feel good, but it's not very helpful. It's much more effective to tie your feedback to a student's achievements and make reference to specific things that he or she has done. As an educator, I found that I needed to be very specific about the student's performance and the recommendations I made. The more specific I got, the better off the students were.

For example, you might say: "When you talked about the chapter you just read, you connected it to something that happened to you. That was really good. It's great to connect what you read to your own life." Or "It was interesting how you connected the character to your own life—it shows me that you have a deep interest in what the character is doing."

8. Use technology to excite students' interest.

Students have a steady diet of technology in their out-of-school activities (Roberts et al., 1999), and it's second nature to the kids of today. They are using DVDs, CDs, and earphones are growing out of their ears. I think we can capitalize on that, because it's obviously something that they like. It's the old adage of "It's interesting to me if it's in my world." In the classroom, technology is a motivating agent because it is familiar, forgiving, and exciting. Haven't you seen kids fight over a computer? Technology is fun for them. It doesn't feel like drudgery. It's not the same thing as "Get out your piece of paper, fold it down the middle, and number the lines from 1 to 20."

There are many ways that teachers can build technology into literacy education. They can have students work with interactive reading software. They can use video to introduce students to topics and get them pumped up before they start reading more about it. Even if a student isn't especially motivated to read, if the technology gets the student going because he or she gets to work on a computer, it motivates them to continue.

9. Set expectations for success.

Establishing goals is an important part of motivation. We need to encourage students to think big and be confident—to ask “What am I aiming for?” and “How can I do this?” Of course, the goals need to be realistic, so that students can reach them. But when students achieve their goals, it's tremendously motivating.

It can be an effort to focus on positive goals and achievements, especially when a teacher is dealing with a student who's struggling. However, it's certainly worth the effort, because it's far more motivating for students to think about how much better they could be than to think about how awful they are. When a teacher focuses on failure, the student thinks, “I'm not good at this, and I'm never going to be good.” On the other hand, when a teacher sets attainable goals and focuses on successes all along the way, then even if the student fails to meet a particular goal on the first try, he or she thinks, “I wasn't good today, but I know that I can be better because I've been getting better every day. Today I might have had an off day, but two days from now I'll probably do well.” It's motivating to get things right, and it's also motivating when you get things wrong but someone says “This is the way to get it right. You know that you can perfect this.”

In my own childhood, I had a seventh-grade teacher who was very effective in motivating me. The reason she was so effective is that I always got A's before I met her, but then she started to give me B's, and I couldn't understand it. And she said, “Well, you know what? Yes, your work is good, but it's not as good as you could do.” After that, I was very motivated to live up to her expectations for me—to prove that I could do the work as well as she thought I could.

Conclusion

Effective readers aren't just people who've learned how to read. They're students who are motivated to read, because they've discovered that reading is fun, informative, and interesting. Motivated readers want to read. And the more they read, the more they can develop their skills. If there are signs of reading difficulty, we can intervene to get students back on track.

Sometimes, people say that certain kids haven't learned to read because they aren't motivated. I disagree. We can't blame the kids for being unmotivated. Instead, we must figure out how we can help to motivate them.

Some people will say, "Well, if the kids aren't motivated, what can we do?" The answer, as I've tried to show in this paper, is that we can do a lot. Yes, there are going to be some kids who are more difficult. There are going to be some kids who are stone-like in their attitude. We've all run across that kind of student. But it's our job to help turn them around.

When I think about some of the great teachers whom I've known, one of the things they have in common is that all of them have been able to figure out how to motivate their students to do the harder things. That's good teaching. You'll notice that I didn't say it was *easy* teaching; I said it was *good* teaching.

Getting students excited about reading is more than half the battle. When kids are motivated to read, they'll be willing to work hard to improve their skills. That means that even kids who have had trouble reading in the past can still have the chance to succeed.

After all, it's never too late to become a lifelong reader. Today can be the first day of your students' reading life.

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Phyllis C. Hunter, President of Phyllis C. Hunter Consulting, Inc., was honored by the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) Hall of Fame with the 2002 Marcus Foster Distinguished Educator Award for her dedication to educational excellence. Mrs. Hunter serves on the National Center for Family Literacy Board of Advisors. Because of her commitment to equal access in education, Mrs. Hunter was appointed to the National Institute for Literacy Advisory Board by President Bush. Previously she served as an advisor on the President's Educational Transition Team.



As a reading consultant specializing in scientifically research-based programs, Mrs. Hunter worked together with then-Governor George W. Bush to implement the Texas Statewide Reading Initiative to guarantee that all children are reading at grade level or better by third grade. Mrs. Hunter believes that reading is the new civil right, and works diligently to ensure that no child is left behind, so that all children have the opportunity for success.

Mrs. Hunter is an executive board member of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. As an administrator for seven years in the Houston Independent School District, she managed the Reading Department for the district's 282 schools (Grades PreK-12) and was also responsible for the following key initiatives: A Balanced Approach to Reading; Success for All; Reading One-to-One Tutoring; Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Institute for Teacher Excellence (Project RITE); Benchmark Schools, A Goals 200 Program; National Institute of Children's Health and Development Research Program; and Texas Reading Academies.

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ISBN 0-439-74221-8



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