

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, College Park

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” (reported in Fisher, Frye, & 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).
- » 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 (Guthrie, 2012; Allington, 2012; Wilhelm & Smith, 2013).
- » Engagement, motivation, and a growth mindset work hand in hand (Conley, 2014).

More to Know: Motivation Drives Reading Achievement

When it comes to reading achievement, motivation 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 (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 & Stanovich, 1992; Guthrie, et al., 2013).

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 & Lapp, 2012; Duke & 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

Closing Thoughts

Teachers who foster reading engagement through classroom instruction and high-interest reading materials not only increase the amount of time 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, but also of providing instruction that thwarts

avoidance behaviors in the classroom (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

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