

Examination of Teacher Practices on Student Motivation for Reading

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Implementing principles of motivation in reading instruction helps increase students' enthusiasm and engagement in reading.

Teaching children how to read is only one part of a reading teacher's job. Inspiring children to value reading is also essential. Prior research has documented the importance of motivation for literacy development (Baker, Afflerbach, & Reinking, 1996; Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2015). Gambrell and Marinak (2009) refer to reading motivation as a key element in reading instruction and emphasize the importance of fostering the love of reading in teaching. Teachers who are successful at teaching both the skill and love of reading provide a foundation for lifetime reading (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

Past research has shown that when motivation declines, reading scores typically do too. When students have little motivation to read, they read less, spend less time with texts, and are slower to develop early skills such as decoding and fluency. Conversely, students who read often become more proficient readers and thereby read more. This cycle is referred to in research as the *Matthew Effect*: a biblical reference from Matthew 25, indicating that "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" (Stanovich, 1986). Teachers play an important role in preventing this decline and promoting student motivation for reading.

Over the past 25 years, experts have defined several principles and practices that promote reading motivation (Fox, 2014; Gambrell, 2011; Gambrell & Marinak, 1997; Turner & Paris, 1995). Sharp, Brandt, and Gardner (2016) synthesized existing research on reading motivation and coined their own updated list of motivational principles, calling them the *Salient Seven*:

1. Choice gives students the opportunity to select between two or more options according to preferences, such as book titles, response projects, work partners, and so forth (Turner & Paris, 1995).

2. Collaboration happens when students and teachers are engaged together in lively discussions focused on books and literacy-related tasks (Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000).
3. Control entails giving students power to influence their own reading success by providing needed instruction in literacy skills, giving students control to make decisions in using them, and allowing students to take part in their learning goals (Turner & Paris, 1995).
4. Challenge, or "supported struggle," allows students optimal level learning tasks by providing open-ended assignments and scaffolding challenging tasks into manageable bite-sized steps (Tulis & Fulmer, 2013).
5. Authenticity is providing learning within meaningful and relevant contexts. Classroom books and related activities should reflect students' academic needs/interests, cultural identities, and societal awareness (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers should model authentic, genuine interest in reading, books, and all forms of literacy (Gambrell, 1996).
6. Technology motivates students with options for reading practice or response projects (Fox, 2014). Most students who have grown

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up with technology will come alive, even struggling and reluctant readers (Cutler & Truss, 1989).

7. Proximal rewards are rewards or incentives that point the reader back to additional opportunities for reading (Gambrell, 1996). Proximal rewards aim to build intrinsic motivation and inspire students to read more. Examples of a proximal reward would include read-a-thons, meeting an author, or receiving a book for accomplishing set goals.

Background

Background of Participants

Given the Salient Seven reading motivational principles, we investigated the effect these principles would have on students' reading motivation when implemented in classroom practices. Nine teachers from a western state elementary school volunteered to participate in this study.

These teachers taught 256 students in grades 1–6, all in traditional one-teacher classrooms. Eight of the nine teachers had taught between nine and 29 years, plus one first-year teacher. The racial demographic of the school was 70% White, 22% Hispanic, and 8% Pacific Islanders. Forty-two percent of families were low income and received free or reduced-cost lunch.

Background of Implementation and Professional Development

At the onset of the study, the teachers were interviewed about their current practices in reading motivation. This information was used as a baseline for changes that happened during the implementation of the study. Data were collected throughout the study by teacher report, classroom observations, and interviews. Teachers were given instruction and training in motivational principles and then supported as they implemented them in their classrooms. The professional development plan consisted of two broad phases.

Phase 1. Teachers received a four-hour training on reading motivation research.

- First hour: Jigsaw discussion of research articles with participating teachers and researchers (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2000; Turner & Paris, 1995).
- Second hour: Instruction on the Salient Seven principles of motivation using a PowerPoint with discussion areas throughout (Sharp et al., 2016).

- Third hour: Brainstorm session for ideas on classroom implementation, starting in small groups then moving to whole-group share.

- Fourth hour: Completion of individual implementation plans assisted by researchers. Teachers outlined their motivation plan, needed resources, journaling routine, and observation/interview times.

Phase 2. Throughout the year, teachers received continuous instruction and support as they implemented their plan. Ongoing support included (a) consultation visits to the

classroom, (b) monthly emails from researchers addressing progress, roadblocks, and questions, and (c) grant monies to fund classroom books and a visit from a national children's author.

Most plans were couched within well-known literacy instructional practices (e.g., read-alouds, literacy circles). However, with new knowledge of motivational principles, teachers were encouraged to use these practices more intentionally within their daily instructional routines. One of the aims of this project was to offer teachers a departure from the mandated methods often prescribed by outside programs or protocols and shift the focus to empowering teachers with knowledge and support as they implemented their plans into their own classroom contexts.

Literacy instruction for these teachers was scheduled during the morning block of school, with time occasionally overlapping into science and social studies instruction in the afternoon. This practice remained quite consistent throughout the study. Changes in literacy instruction were manifest more in how this time was used, rather than in taking additional instructional time from other subjects.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- In what ways can you begin to implement motivational principles in your reading instruction?
- What challenges or concerns confront teachers as they begin to change their current practices of motivating students to read?
- How are these ideas to increase reading motivation similar to or different from those being used in your classroom or school?
- How can implementing motivational principles encourage students to enjoy reading more?

Method

Taylor-Powell and Renner's (2003) five-step qualitative analysis design was chosen to capture the nature of the transformative changes the teachers and students were going through. The measures focused on the influence that the professional development had on teacher practice and the effects the teachers' practice had on their students. Student measures included classroom observation and teacher journaling.

The first step of the analysis was to get to know the data. The data were reviewed multiple times to become familiar with the information. Second, an analysis was done by two people independently on the basis of the preset categories of the Salient Seven motivational principles, looking for any evidence of the principles' effects on teachers or students. Third, the evidence was categorized into charts, bulleted points, and related "stories" given as statements from teachers. Fourth, analyzers came together to compare notes and begin identifying patterns and connections within and between categories.

As this process unfolded, data showed the teachers' focus shifting from the motivational reading principles to instructional techniques that foster reading motivation. What became evident was a strong propensity for teachers to communicate about reading motivation by way of instructional practices, such as read-alouds or literature circles, rather than through the reading motivational principles themselves. The instructional practices were familiar and observable, making them easily accessible for implementation planning and conversation.

This shift in focus caused the preset categories to change from the seven reading motivational principles to an analysis of the instructional reading practices where motivational principles were then identified. For instance, interactive read-alouds revealed the underpinning of several reading motivational principles. *Authenticity* could be identified as teachers' shared genuine interest in the book and in the open and honest teacher-student conversations that followed. Interactive read-alouds also provided *collaboration* between teacher and students as conversations about the books took place throughout the read-aloud time. The principle of *proximal rewards* was evident as students begged for more time to read and worked hard to earn some extra reading minutes. Some teachers incorporated the principle of *choice*, giving their students opportunity to choose the read-aloud books. Thus, the interactive

read-aloud practice was categorized as a "super category" (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003, p. 5) because of the multiple reading motivational principles exhibited. Reading instructional techniques were also categorized with "relative importance" (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003, p. 5) because of their multiple appearance across teachers and grades throughout the data. Reading instructional techniques such as read-alouds, literacy circles, and book blessings were placed in this category.

The fifth and final step of the analysis was interpreting the data. Interpretation led to two prominent themes. One prominent theme found across all participating teachers was their initial hesitancy to incorporate reading motivational principles into their practice, starting with only one, maybe two. This initial hesitancy was countered with each teacher increasing their eagerness to incorporate more principles into their instruction as they experienced students' enthusiastic reactions to the instructional changes. A second theme showed each teacher having uplifting stories to share about their struggling or reluctant readers as they observed the effects the motivational instruction was having on those students.

The narrative data provided clarification, understanding, and explanation of the influences that the professional development had on these nine teachers and their attempts to implement the even salient reading motivational principles.

Results

The following sections describe the teachers' implementation of the Salient Seven motivational principles within their instructional reading practices and the effects these had on students' reading motivation in their classrooms.

Read-Alouds

All nine of the teachers adjusted their read-aloud routines to strengthen reading motivation in their classroom. The first change was to read aloud every day. Previously, teachers had either neglected this practice or had been inconsistent in doing it. Students felt little excitement for the reading time and did not really get into it, but their attitudes changed as teachers read daily. Consistent, daily interactions with the book provided steps in helping students connect with the characters and theme. Students now began to look forward to the reading. Teachers heard

comments such as, “Yes! I love reading time!” or “I love this book!” Some students went to the library and checked out a copy of the book so they could follow along during the reading. Often students asked the teacher to read more when the read-aloud time was over and left the reading circle stating they could not wait to read again tomorrow.

One day at a particularly interesting part of the book, students in a third-grade classroom begged the teacher to read more. They cheered when the teacher agreed, surprised at her response to change the schedule for that day. This positive response added to the excitement and connection students felt for the book. Because of demands of other valued curriculum, this response was rare. But the novelty seemed to cause a heightened attentiveness, engaging students more deeply into the book.

On another occasion, as a fourth-grade class concluded the read-aloud for the day, the teacher teased that *maybe* she would read ahead at home. The students responded with a resounding “NOOO way! No fair! You can’t read ahead of us!”

Teachers began to select the read-aloud books more carefully, taking into consideration the personalities and interests of their students. In upper-grade classrooms, the teachers asked students for input on the book selection, taking a vote on a few different titles. In an early-grade class, the teacher made the book selection a daily job, allowing one student to secretly pick a picture book and set it on the teacher’s chair. The rest of the class excitedly anticipated what the book would be. Groups of students were heard talking about the book they would choose for the read-aloud.

Some of the changes that occurred during the read-aloud experience were not initially planned, but evolved as teachers saw increased enthusiasm for the daily reading. Teachers began including reading instruction during the read-aloud when appropriate. Rather than reading straight through the book, they would stop periodically to summarize, predict, discuss interesting words, examine characters, or share favorite parts. Teachers began to gain confidence in their ability to use this as another mini-instructional time. As they did, they noticed students were more engaged and participated more in discussions. A third-grade teacher noted the following:

One day at the end of our reading, I asked students to predict what they thought would happen next in the story and tell why. Almost every single student raised his or her hand to offer a prediction. They were dying to

share! Students shared their ideas and together we discussed the evidences from the book that would support each prediction. Students were able to practice comprehension skills with the books we were reading in authentic settings. The students were overheard in the lunch line talking about the book and saying, “I wonder whose prediction is right?”

Literature Circles

Upper-grade teachers implemented literature circles to help increase reading motivation. This instructional format was appealing because of the focus on collaboration. Previously, small-group reading instruction was predominantly teacher led, inconsistent, and/or lacked follow through on reading assignments. Student participation was low. In response, group meetings were increased from one to two times a week to three to five times a week. Teachers selected books with each group in mind and allowed the students to have input in the book choice. Students wrote in response journals as they read, noting connections, questions, favorite parts, and summarizations. They brought the journals to the meetings as a springboard for discussions and to show evidence of understanding.

During the discussions, students were assigned roles (notetaker, questioner, summarizer, discussion leader) to help keep them involved and participating. These changes yielded better involvement in the assignments and increased participation in the book discussions. One teacher stated that “groups became a buzz of enthusiastic conversations and thoughtful comments.” Pockets of students were heard discussing their book at recess, talking about favorite parts or anticipating what would happen next in the plot.

One fifth-grade reader was so enthusiastic about the literature circle process that he set up his own literature circle with friends. He persuaded his friends to go to the book fair with him and pick a book together. They formed a “private club” that met during recess to discuss the book. The group would come in from recess at times, reporting to the teacher that they were at the “best part” of the book. The teacher later noted that the student who initiated this spontaneous literature circle was a struggling reader who previously had never read an entire chapter book.

As literature circles became more successful, teachers reported a shift in their own thinking. First, they became more positive and involved in the books as well. They engaged with the students and were authentic contributors to the discussions,

sharing their own comments, favorite parts, and questions. Students sensed their teacher's enthusiasm and interest in books.

Teachers also became more confident in integrating reading instruction into the book discussions, just as they had in the read-aloud experience. They gradually relied less on the traditional worksheets as evidence of student comprehension and vocabulary practice. They used the group discussions to address this. A sixth-grade teacher noted the following:

As we began to read, I'd say, "Let's recap or retell what has happened in the book to help us remember what is happening. Refer back to the last three chapters. We are going to summarize those chapters as a group. Summaries should describe the happenings of those chapters in just a few words."

Book Talk

Teachers in all of the classes increased opportunities for book talk to improve reading motivation. Book talk, simply stated, is opportunity for conversations or talk about books (Beck & McKeown, 2001). At first, book talks were scheduled events, but they gradually began to happen more spontaneously. Book talks happened in a couple of different formats. One format was the built-in discussion time of literature circles or the read-alouds mentioned earlier. The more students read and became involved in the books, the more they had to say about them, and teachers began to plan for this discussion time.

Another book talk practice was called "blessing a book" (Marinak, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2013). This was when the teacher would introduce a new book or a classic from the classroom library by sharing an enthusiastic synopsis or favorite part. The book was then placed in a special basket for students to read. Students began to look forward to these book suggestions. Teachers noticed that the more they talked about books, the more students read them. These books became popular picks in the classroom for several weeks and students began to request more time to read them.

Not long after one sixth-grade teacher started the practice of blessing a book, a group of students asked to do their own book blessing. They came with a plan, a sign-up sheet, and a special stool from home. Students took turns sharing their favorite books with their peers. This practice became a regular part of the weekly schedule. A sixth-grade teacher noted the following:

These book talks helped the other students get excited about books. Students would want to read the books

that their peers suggested and loved. Even struggling readers wanted to read them and took them on.

Goal Setting

Teachers and students together set class reading goals to help increase motivation. Traditionally, teachers set reading goals with individual students, not as a class. Now in addition, they set a class goal and worked together to accomplish it. The goal was set in preparation for an exciting upcoming event centered on reading. The anticipated event motivated students to read and work toward their goal in purposeful ways. The end reward for achieving the reading goal for this group was a visit from a well-known children's author.

At the end of the term, every one of the classes had met and exceeded their original group reading goals. Teachers were thrilled to see the increase in student reading as they eagerly looked forward to the author visit. Even struggling readers were reading more and were excited to add to the class goal. A fourth-grade teacher explained,

Once we introduced that [a beloved author] would be visiting in a few months, the students were fired up! We set a goal for 6,000 minutes or 20,000 pages. We hit 6,000 minutes pretty quickly and the students shouted, "Let's do both!! Let's do 6,000 minutes and 20,000 pages!" They surpassed that too.

A first-grade teacher shared,

As a class, we decided on 350 books. A graph was made that could be colored in as the books were read. Each week, we would add up how many books the students had read. Students got to color the number of books on the chart building up to 350. The last week we wondered if we were going to make our goal, so the students decided they would read extra at home. On Monday, when we added it up, it was 384 books! They were so excited! They were patting each other on the back and high fiving each other.

As the classes worked toward their reading goal, students began encouraging one another and celebrating each person's reading contribution. This mutual support spread, and a closer, more supportive community began to develop. For example, in a third-grade class, students noticed one girl who was consistently completing her reading each day. She happened to be a struggling reader who usually did not have much to celebrate about reading. The other students enthusiastically supported her, saying, "Good job! You must be reading all the time!" This

struggling reader proudly answered, “Yeah, I am!” A third-grade teacher noted,

It was also great to watch the struggling readers because they don’t get congratulated a lot. The kids were cheering each other on to their goal. It was so fun that [the struggling readers] felt so proud, and their smiles were so big!

Another notable change stemming from the class reading goal was increased time spent reading at home. Several parents commented to the teacher on how much more their child was reading. Some parents decided to check out the same book as their child so they could read together. Reading became a way for parents and students to bond. Teachers were pleased to see the reading goals begin to influence family reading practices too. Teachers noticed during parent-teacher conferences that parents and students more frequently included reading goals as part of their academic focus for the term. This had not happened before. One parent wrote a note to the teacher at the end of the year saying, “Thank you so much! My son loves reading now. He reads all the time at home. And we read together. He has increased two reading levels.”

Technology

All the teachers added at least one element of technology into their reading instruction to help motivate readers. Five of the nine teachers used the internet as a research tool to look up books, respond to books, or complete digital follow-up projects (discussed ahead). Three teachers added the use of Chromebooks as an option to get students excited to read. All of the teachers used technology to encourage students in their reading goals.

For example, one fifth-grade teacher used email to suggest new books to students (and parents) or to praise students for their efforts toward meeting reading goals. Another teacher created a class blog for students to comment on books being read or to send weekly blasts for new book ideas. A third-grade teacher posted individual reminders about reading assignments and gave encouraging feedback on students’ progress. Technology also became a good way to publish the progress of class reading goals through email blasts to students and parents, spreadsheets, and so forth.

Reading Response Activities

One of the most rewarding changes that teachers made was the implementation of open-ended reading response activities. Instead of the traditional

book report or comprehension questions at the end of the text, students could pick from a variety of meaningful options that would demonstrate understanding and comprehension. These activities included art, writing, music, digital responses, reporting, and interviewing. Students from different classrooms wrote newspaper articles, made dioramas, created digital stories, performed drama scenes, and so forth. Both sixth-grade classes did a wax museum activity in which the students selected a book about a historical figure to read and then pretended to be a wax replica of that person, decorating the scene, displaying relevant artifacts, and answering questions about themselves to parents and visitors.

Students enjoyed the variety of response options and looked forward to working together with peers on selected projects. They also loved the opportunity to share their completed projects with others. When it was time to share projects, students would comment, “Can we be first?” or “Can my mom come and watch?” A fifth-grade teacher observed the following:

Another thing I changed was doing open-ended projects at the end of the book. For the first project, I came up with the ideas that students could do, and they chose one. After that, students began to pick their own. It’s funny because now when they are only halfway through the book, they are already talking about what project they want to do.

Proximal Rewards

As stated previously, a proximal reward is a reward or incentive that points the reader back toward the desired behavior of reading (Marinak & Gambrell, 2008). The reward proximity construct (Gambrell, 1996) explains that intrinsic motivation is enhanced when the reward is closely linked to the desired behavior. In other words, a reader’s intrinsic interest in reading is fostered when the incentive not only rewards the behavior of reading but also reflects the value of it and encourages future engagement in that behavior. Proximal rewards foster intrinsic motivation more than the extrinsic rewards of unrelated trinkets or prizes (Deci, 1992; Marinak & Gambrell, 2008).

As teachers embraced the motivating influence of proximal rewards, they worked to improve the rewards they gave for reading. For example, instead earning a pizza coupon for completing a reading goal or a prize from the treasure box, students could earn a read-a-thon activity, an extra chapter of the class

read-aloud, extra time on the I-Readers, trips to the library, visits by an author, book giveaways, or raffle tickets for a chance to check out the teacher's special books.

One third-grade teacher implemented a book giveaway for students who completed their term reading goal. A fourth-grade teacher offered raffle tickets to be the first reader of a new book soon coming from the book order. A sixth-grade class worked to earn a read-a-thon that consisted of activities such as read-alouds, Readers Theatres, self-selected reading, partner reading, guest readers, and cross-grade reading buddies throughout the day. Additional read-aloud time became another popular reward.

The culminating reward for completing the class reading goal was the opportunity to meet a *New York Times* Best Seller children's author who would visit their school. Grant money was budgeted for this event, and the students were challenged to read at least one of the author's books before the visit. The students worked hard to accomplish this goal. All students, including reluctant readers, met this one-book goal, and then continued to read additional author books until the time of the event. Teachers scaffolded struggling readers to complete their book in needed ways (e.g., using parent volunteers, university volunteers, cross-grade buddies, or the same book for literature groups to aid students through the reading process). These struggling students were excited to complete the goal along with their peers. Struggling students in one classroom asked to be able to talk to the author and share which books were their favorites. The author came and spent the day, signed books, ate lunch, visited and answered questions. Each student received a book from the author for further reading—a best loved reward.

Consistent with the proximal reward theory, as students read more, reading became its own reward. These students worked for more and more time to read. They continued to meet and exceed their reading goals both individually and as a class. One student stated he had read more books than he had ever read before. A fifth-grade teacher shared the following:

All of my students, even low students, have read at least five chapter books, and that is a big difference for me. The goal was to read six books for the term. Most of the students completed the six books. Two students finished only five books, but reading five books was still great for them. I had a low class this year, the lowest I have ever had in reading, so I was really worried

about them. I still have those that struggle, but they have grown, and they have read a lot more.

Conclusion

The Salient Seven principles of reading motivation, when implemented by these teachers through their instructional reading practices, promoted an increase in student reading motivation. The analysis of teacher pre- and post-interviews, the implementation plans, classroom observations, and teacher journals showed positive changes in both teachers and students. These changes happened in varying degrees as the teachers uniquely implemented principles of motivation. Teachers developed heightened awareness of motivational principles and their usefulness in their classrooms. Teachers implemented these motivational principles into familiar instructional practices such as read-alouds, book talks, goal setting, literature circles, author visits, and open-ended book projects and read-a-thons. They started implementation slowly, sticking with one or two goals, but gradually added many more goals as they watched their students' responses to these changes.

Through this process, teachers observed the transforming nature these principles were having on their teaching. As they saw students become more engaged in reading activities, teachers worried less and less about end-of-year test outcomes and instead watched the authentic growth that began happening as students engaged in real reading and meaningful discussions with books. Students became more enthusiastic about books and reading. They spent more time reading and were excited to participate in related activities. Even struggling readers increased in efforts and improved in attitudes toward reading.

A synergistic response between teachers and their students developed as they both experienced a newfound enjoyment for reading. Teachers were surprised at how much they loved teaching reading again and reported an overall sense of renewal in teaching. One teacher stated, "I was amazed at the change. I will never go back to teaching the same again." Several teachers stated in the final interview, "I can't wait to start this again next year!" Students sensed their teacher's increased affection for books, conversations, and teaching. Together they grew a stronger interpersonal relationship. Friendships and a sense of community began to grow in the classrooms through the books, goals, discussions, and

book projects. This connection even carried over to homes and families.

Limitations

A noted limitation to this study is that all participants were volunteers. This would suggest that participants may already have qualities or attitudes that heightened positive outcomes, such as being high risk-takers or having strong buy-in to the underlying premise of the study.

To replicate this study within a whole-school setting or a broader population, grade-level teams could work together to plan activities, share resources, and problem solve. School-level instructional coaches and principals could be trained alongside the grade-level teams to provide mentoring and coteaching opportunities. In this way, more reluctant teachers can be supported as they discover how the Salient Seven can enhance and improve already familiar instructional practices.

Additionally, the expenses of purchasing books and inviting a children's author were funded through grant money. However, we have found that extra money is not essential to build reading motivation. The teachers in this study continued on to implement motivational principles in many low-cost, creative ways. For example, instead of a visit from a well-known author, teachers planned for a local university drama department to reenact parts of a

book the class had read. Actors stayed in character throughout the day and stayed for lunch. Teachers can see similar results with creative, low-cost ideas.

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TAKE ACTION!

1. Read and thoughtfully consider each of the motivational principles. Set aside time to brainstorm possible motivation ideas for implementation in your classroom.
2. Make a personal plan to increase reading motivation in your classroom. Decide what you will do and how you will do it. Personalize it to your classroom and teaching activities.
3. Notice and record changes that are happening with your students and with yourself as you implement principles of motivation.
4. Dare to try something new. Implement a principle you have not considered before.
5. Meet regularly with other colleagues that are working to implement motivational principles in their classroom to collaborate and share successes or offer support.

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