Yes, Virginia, Motivation Matters

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Motivation Matters

What motivates students to read is a complicated issue. Paul Tough, author of *How Students Succeed* (2012) suggests that "this is the problem with trying to motivate people: No one really knows how to do it well…what motivates us is often hard to explain and hard to measure" (pp. 66-67). Further, there is a difference between what motivates us in the near term and what we choose to do over the long haul. While the promise of a pizza party might motivate some students to achieve a goal of reading five books that week, it does not ensure that the child will want to pick up a book again after eating the pizza.

What we need to consider as educators is what we are after when it comes to our students and their reading. Do we want them to have read a particular number of books over a set period of time or do we want them to enjoy and learn from reading – to choose it as an activity even when no reward is offered? This is an important distinction, because our desires and expectations for students strongly influence the instructional choices we make, and thus, the motivational context of the classroom. Some choices are more likely to encourage a motivating classroom context for reading, whereas other practices we choose may work against us.

What the Research Tells Us

Many schools (perhaps yours) support reward-based reading programs - those where students or classrooms receive some prize or earn a fun event as a result of reading. Extrinsic rewards are common in our lives: we work to get a paycheck; we get points for staying at a particular hotel or drinking coffee at a particular shop. We like rewards! But if we didn't get a paycheck, would we still show up to work? Hmmm…. So if we take away the prize for reading, will students still read? When

it comes to influencing lifelong practices, we might want to be more thoughtful about how and when we use extrinsic rewards.

If you take a look at the notable body of research on reading motivation that has accrued over the past three decades, there are several researchers who question the efficacy of using extrinsic rewards for reading with K-12 students. Some early studies indicated that rewards and incentives can actually undermine intrinsic motivation – that is, a student's desire to read for their own reasons and their own enjoyment (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The concern here is that students may be motivated by the reward itself, so the choice of reward is to be carefully considered. Marinak & Gambrell (2008) found, for example, that books and time to read are the most intrinsically motivating rewards you can offer if you want them to read. If we really want students to find reading to be both valuable and enjoyable *for their own reasons,* then we need to find the practices that we can implement in our classrooms that will guide students in discovering their own joy in reading.

Why Motivation Matters

In reviewing the research on reading motivation, Schiefele and colleagues (2012) found that "[a] multitude of studies have suggested that students' motivation impacts their processes and products of learning above and beyond cognitive characteristics such as intelligence or prior knowledge" (p. 427). They follow that as academic learning is predominantly text based, reading competence plays a crucial role in learning. Reading motivation, then, is important to developing reading competence as it influences both the amount and breadth of student reading (Schiefele et al., 2012). There are a number of studies that support the idea that amount and breadth of reading is the single largest factor that influences reading achievement (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). In other words, the more they read, the better they become.

The Reading Habit

Schiefele and colleagues (2012) make another important observation about reading motivation; there is a distinction between *currant* and *habitual* reading motivation. We are demonstrating a *current motivation to read* when we choose to read a specific text in a given situation. Reading a book for your book discussion group is a current reading event.

Habitual reading motivation, on the other hand, suggests a relatively stable willingness to *initiate* reading activities. This conceptualization might cause us to consider whether we have done enough to support our students in developing a habit of reading for learning and for pleasure. Have our practices supported them in finding the joy of reading for their own reasons and the security that they are competent to read the texts they enjoy?

ARCing Towards the Reading Habit

Students who develop a habit of reading are intrinsically motivated to read, regardless of whether there is an incentive or reward to do so. This should be our gold standard as educators – at least if we want our students to be readers for life. We already know a great deal from the literature regarding the types of instructional choices that promote the reading habit. Of these, <u>Access</u> to books, reading tasks that are <u>Relevant</u> and opportunities for student <u>Choice</u> have been linked to reading engagement and achievement (Anderman & Midgely, 1997; Gambrell, 2011; Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000). When these three elements are combined in reading activities –access, relevance, and choice – the overlapping benefits create a synergy that may support intrinsically engaged reading for current tasks that may develop into a habitual reading pattern.

Access

Studies document that classrooms rich in reading materials support higher levels of reading motivation than classrooms that have few materials (Guthrie & McCann, 1997; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Having a sufficient number and variety of books, magazines, graphic texts and other reading materials offers more choice to students who come to us with varying reading interests.

However, just having the books in the classroom is not sufficient to engage students- rather, how the teacher makes the materials available to the student is equally crucial. Students need to be aware of – or part of - how the materials are organized, how they are used, and how they are shared.

Book baskets. As adults, we often choose a book to read based on the recommendation of our friends or family members. In the classroom, a book recommendation from the teacher can be the spark that kindles students' interest in books that they might not have noticed. In the teacher's book basket are 10 – 15 books that the teacher presents in a 'book sell' that might hook students into giving it a try – just enough about the book to be interesting without giving it all away. Some (or all) of the books can be changed weekly.

Ideally, a variety of text types (narrative, informational, poetry, graphic) should be included, as should topics that would be interesting to the students in the classroom, not just the teacher's own favorites. For example, a teacher might be repelled by a book on dangerous spiders, but giving a book talk on how frightening the pictures appear will likely interest quite a few fans of the crawling arachnids (as well as fans of anything that repels the teacher!).

Bridging school to home. As the classroom library grows (and teachers do tend to hoard books over the years!) precious opportunities are created for sharing books with our students in a more permanent way. Books that have become a bit dated, perhaps more than five years old, can be marked with a piece of colored tape on the spine and set aside as a 'give away' book. This makes the books special

again, because these are books that students can take home to read over Thanksgiving or winter breaks to keep them reading, or as a gift from the teacher for birthdays, Valentine's Day or the last day of school.

Relevance

Reading activities that are interesting and relevant to students' lives are more likely to engage them – both affectively and cognitively (Brophy, 2008; Duke et al, 2006; Fulmer & Frijters, 2011; Purcell-Gates, 2002). If students see that the literacy activities you invite them to in the classroom are reflective of things they already do or will do in the future, they are more likely to engage meaningfully.

Reading to share. When adults finish reading a great book at night, they don't wake in the morning desperate to find a shoebox to make a diorama; rather, they tell a friend or a co-worker about the great book they read. Students can also be given the opportunity to share the books that they loved as well as those they disliked. Teachers can do this by providing time for students to do their own 'book sells' (à la Reading Rainbow, for those of you old enough to remember). Another way is to create a 'listography'; ask students to add books titles to lists on the classroom website, contributing titles to "Loved it!", "Loved the illustrations", "I learned a lot" or "Wish I hadn't read it". The teacher can create some categories to start and the students can add others as needed (and approved).

Reading for a purpose. Reading is an important way to know what we need to know. If, for example, students are concerned about extreme weather, teachers can both provide access and information regarding resources for understanding how extreme weather develops and how to stay safe when it strikes, but also the support required to understand these texts. In the content areas, demonstrate how reading is important to different professions; how to read like a historian or an environmental detective, for example.

Similarly, demonstrate how narratives are great resources for understanding the lives of people similar to - and different from - us through historical fiction, or learning about how people solve problems like bullying or being 'different'. Stories help us to understand what makes us human and can inspire us all to be better versions of ourselves.

Choice

There is an abundance of research suggesting that students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to self-select materials for reading and to choose aspects of the tasks and activities in which they are involved (Cambourne, 1995; Guthrie et al., 1999; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Reading something because the teacher requires it is a natural consequence of being in a K-12 classroom; there are many times that reading is prescribed and required so that students learn essential content and skills. However, completely removing the opportunity for students to choose what *they* want to read is dis-empowering;

students do not learn to browse and choose books and to find texts that will absorb them. This also makes it difficult for teachers to discover the types of reading materials their students prefer.

Time to read. Students need our support in selecting books to read that might interest them. In a classroom where there are teacher and student book recommendations (see *Access* and *Relevance* above), there is a better chance for students to discover something they can't wait to read. They only thing left is *time* for reading. Students will need enough time to become absorbed in what they are reading. Teachers have been successful in carving out a good 20 minutes or more in the morning as students are coming in, after lunch or recess when students are settling back into the classroom, or before dismissal when end-of day quiet reading time makes dismissal feel less hectic.

Bounded choices. While teachers, having curricular standards to address, may have particular texts in mind for certain activities, providing students a bounded choice can bridge the gap between *required* and *desired*. If teaching about the American Revolution, for example, the teacher might pull together a set of five or six biographies or historical fiction texts that present multiple perspectives and viewpoints – those who were Patriots, Loyalists, or points of view less mentioned, such as those of women or First Americans. Students can learn about the events and experiences of the war, but can choose their own path to this knowledge based on a point of view that might interest them.

Make Motivation Matter

While we agree with Paul Tough that motivation is complicated, we have enough research available to us to make reading a more engaging prospect for our students. Giving careful thought to how we are valuing and presenting reading activities and opportunities in our classrooms is an important first step to creating classroom climates that encourage and celebrate the habit of reading. Applying the evidence-based elements of Access, Relevance, and Choice in designing reading instruction in your classroom show promise in helping develop engaged readers who are passionate, persistent and proficient.

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