Motivating Reluctant Readers

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Introduction

Upon entering my second grade classroom, you will feel completely immersed in literacy. At any given time, my 21 students are asked to read stories, letters, directions, signs, posters, and books. Specifically during instructional time, both my mentor and I capitalize on the wide range of reading abilities and attitudes and engage students in silent reading time (SOAR) as well as language arts stations.

I have observed that some students never pick up a book when given the opportunity, regardless of the emphasis on literacy in the classroom. When they are *told* to pick up a book, during guided reading for example, they grunt, groan, are unhappy and unmotivated to read. They never seem to enjoy the activities presented in class and getting them to read anything is like pulling teeth. There are also some students that do participate as expected during the reading stations and seem genuinely motivated to achieve, but seem to falter when reading in other areas. These students never seem to enjoy reading during library time or at SOAR time.

I felt that witnessing both struggling and very strong readers waver in their desire to read was frustrating and difficult to handle as a teacher. I felt that it was important to delve into how to motivate students to read because they are constantly reading in school, at the store, on the road, etc. Reading is everywhere and even if one does not necessarily wish to read at any given moment, it needs to be done. By inspiring and encouraging these students to read, I believe they will look at literature and texts in new ways. The importance of this inquiry was to instill the excitement of learning new things and the inner desire to read, and be a good reader, into students. Hopefully through increasing motivation in students, learning can be increased as well.

Upon observing all the students in my classroom, I had noticed that the same students continually appeared to dislike reading within the classroom. I initially wondered why they might be so adamant about not reading when given the opportunity in the classroom. There were many questions racing through my mind that may or may not influence why and how much these students read. As I began my inquiry research, I narrowed my questions down to the main wondering of how to motivate reluctant readers. I also wanted to look into factors that influenced reading behaviors in students and what methods I could possibly use to incorporate differing reading styles and passions into the classroom.[1]

Resources Used

Before beginning my own research in the classroom, I needed to consult experts. I began my wondering by discussing reading and strategies used to teach reading with our school's Title 1 teacher. I figured this may be a good place to begin since my initial thought was that students who don't enjoy reading tend to struggle with reading. She helped me discover that, just because a student may struggle with a text, it does not mean he or she dislikes reading.

In her line of work, the Title 1 teacher at our school focuses on many aspects of reading. She focuses on strategies used to decode words, fluency, inflection, and comprehension. Before entering the world of motivating readers, I discussed some strategies with this teacher that she felt I may want to utilize. We discovered that some students in my classroom would benefit from more in-depth work at decoding vowel

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[1] Refer to Inquiry Brief attached in Appendix A

sounds within a word. Once they are able to incorporate various strategies, they are more

willing to read difficult books and they will be able to build comprehension and fluency.

After discussing strategies with the Title 1 teacher[2], I looked into some text

resources she provided me. I was extremely interested in the book <u>Reading Strategies</u>

<u>That Work</u> by Laura Robb. This book went beyond discussing strategies and gave me an

intricate listing of how to guide students' book selections and what they should look for

in a book so that their attention is consistently captured from beginning to end.

Book Selection
- Look at the title and cover. Read the back cover or summary inside the book's jacket.
- Browse through the illustrations or photographs.
- Read the chapter headings or Table of Contents.
- Ask friends, your teacher, or librarian for recommendations.
- Find books about your hobbies or favorite topics.
- Look for other books by an author/illustrator you enjoyed.

(Robb, 1996, p. 36)

This list is one that capitalizes on what students already know and enjoy and will

promote their understanding and comprehension of the text. Most importantly, it will

guide their interest so that they can retain attention in the story.

After looking at strategies that students may use to decode words and letter

sounds as well as read for comprehension, I focused on how to motivate students who

may not necessarily struggle with the basics of reading. According to the book

<u>Motivating Reluctant Readers,</u> edited by Alfred Ciani, students' reading abilities are

affected by their self-concept. This book is a compilation of vignettes and teaching

strategies from teachers and administrators from all over the country. One such teacher,

Bonnie Deeds, states that "there is an intricate interrelationship between a person's image

of self and the ability to read." (Ciani, 1981, p. 78) As I continued to read her work, she

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[2] To see samples of collected strategies provided by Title 1 teacher, refer to Appendix B.

made valid arguments that students are fully aware of their academic abilities and may have low self-concept affecting their desire to read. At the opposite end of the spectrum, students who can read fluently and with ease may also suffer low self-concept if they are teased about the difficult books they read. Keeping this in mind, I knew that I had to encourage some of the students within my classroom walls and push them to read at their ability level while simultaneously lifting their self-image.

In his book, Ciani also poses the question: "Should we provide what is good or what entertains?" (1981, p. 37) He further answers his question by claiming we should incorporate both positions into our classrooms so that students are exposed to anything that they can read as well as enjoy.

> "Do almost anything that will get a reader into a book. Then, teachers or librarians, functioning as guides, can expose students to evaluation criteria and show them how they can establish their own preferences. With a suggested book list, where students make choices about what to read, the essence of the notions of what is good and what entertains will naturally emerge. (Ciani, 1981, p. 37)"

After reading from the teachers' perspective, I consulted the students' point of view. In the book Children's Voices, I gained insight into the plight of some learners and how they feel forced to read texts. One example of such a student struck me personally because it is a trap my elementary school teachers fell into and one that I wish to avoid.

> "If I go to the library, which isn't very often, I look for books about sports players, especially baseball players I know. … I don't read thick books. I was reading one thick book, *Halloween* … I also knew something about the movie. I was reading this at school when I got to this good part where snakes started coming out of a person's head.

My teacher yelled at me to stop reading and pay attention … I quit reading it later because I'd never have finished a book that thick." (Hudson-Ross, Cleary, Casey, 1993, p. 154)

This quote exemplifies my thoughts and feelings about what I was doing with students. As a result of reading this text, I was made aware of how some children feel about the discouraging methods teachers inadvertently use to get them to focus on current lessons. This is one example of how a reader's self-image and ability were put in question by an authoritative figure mandating what should be read at any given time. It is something that helped guide my inquiry in encouraging reading and in changing methods I currently use to teach.

Lastly, <u>Motivating Hard to Reach Students</u> was a book used to discover how to incorporate current motivational theories into a learning environment. The text discussed many theories and discoveries of learning. It provided a wonderful checklist of ideas to use, suggested books for further research, and activities to implement with students. This is a crucial text used in learning how to motivate students in all areas of education, but it seemed to focus most on creating an atmosphere that inspires students to *want* to learn and also on lifting the self-concept of all students so that even the at-risk children can do anything you desire, ask, or direct them to do.

Inquiry Plan and Data Analysis

Data Collected:
1. *Survey*
2. *Interview*
3. *Book Buddies*
4. *Anecdotal notes*
5. *Modified Lesson Plans*

1. Survey

To begin my inquiry project, I conducted a survey with all 21 students in my class. This was a reading attitude survey that asked numerous questions about how students feel when reading at home and at school. At the end of the survey, there was a chart that allowed the students to convey to me what genres of books they most enjoyed. They were instructed to place an X or a check mark in the appropriate box to inform me of how they felt when reading specific types of books.[3]

The survey was given to everyone so that I did not discriminate against any students. This data then allowed me to analyze how all the children in the class felt about reading. To get an analytical answer from this survey, I calculated the number of answers the students used. In each answer, there were four options. The Garfield faces ranged from one (very excited and happy to do this) to a four (not wanting to do a specific activity or not enjoying it). I tallied how many of each answer (one, two, three, or four) each student had and then combined answers to obtain a majority. The students that had an 11 or higher on the "Happy" end (one or two) were the students who enjoy reading and are somewhat or highly motivated to read both at home and at school. The students who scored an 11 or higher on the "Angry/Upset" (three or four) end were those students who do not enjoy reading for any number of reasons.[4]

After assigning a numerical response to each child, I discovered that six students fell in the definitive "Angry/Upset" end of the survey. They scored very highly based upon their responses in the columns labeled three or four. The rest of the students were found to have a majority of answers in the "Happy" column although some results were a

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[3] *Survey* – a sample uncompleted as well as chosen completed student surveys can be found in the Appendix C.
[4] *Survey* – Calculations for the survey responses can be found in Appendix D

very slight majority. Because of their borderline responses, I would be sure to include these students in my focus of motivating readers if this project were to be extended for any given amount of time.

<div align="center">*2. Interview*</div>

After analyzing the surveys and discovering the six students I would use in my inquiry, I conducted an informal interview. I informed the students that they would be working closely with me on reading strategies as well as different types of reading and allowed them to refuse the opportunity if they wished. None of the students disagreed or felt uncomfortable with the process, so I went ahead with the interview.

Since the students chosen to participate portrayed a wide range of reading abilities, I began by compiling background information about their levels. Below is a list of the students and their current instructional reading stage.[5]

> John – Developing Stage
>   Title 1 student
> Brian – Developing Stage
>   Title 1 student
> Cynthia – Beginning Stage
> Billy – Beginning Stage
> Megan – Beginning Stage
> Chad – Beginning Stage

I asked each of the students very simple questions about why they answered the survey questions in certain ways and asked them to be completely honest. Both Title 1 students, John and Brian, told me that they tend to get frustrated when reading in class. I asked them to explain their thinking further and Brian elaborated by telling me that "I don't like reading or working with Instructional Books. They are too hard and I get

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[5] *Note:* All names have been changed. Student profiles can be found in Appendix E.

frustrated when I need to do an activity after I read. Can't I just read for fun?". He explained that he doesn't like to always read to learn and he sometimes wants to truly enjoy what is being read. This led me back to my research in Ciani's book and reiterated the question: "Should we provide what is good or what entertains?" (Ciani, 1981, p. 37).

As I continued the interviews with the students, I noticed a trend among all six students that they felt the books in our classroom were boring. They felt that the classroom library books were too hard, too easy, or uninteresting. They also didn't like any of the books used during stations because they were forced to read those books and do activities based on the texts. Some of the boredom, according to Cynthia was that "there aren't enough pictures". I asked her if she enjoyed reading books with pictures and she responded that "I like the pictures because it helps when I don't know a word. How else am I supposed to read?" When watching her read during class time, I had noticed that she places a lot of emphasis on pictures in a text.   When analyzing my interview notes[6], this was something I kept referring to. In later inquiry activities, I would capitalize on and utilize the students' pictorial emphasis in literature.[7]

The most surprising interview with a student came about from Megan. She is one that I have seen reading more challenging books at either a third or, occasionally, a fourth grade reading level. She told me that she is bored in the class because the books we (the teachers) choose to use are not hard enough. When I asked her if she would like more difficult books, she responded "I want to read harder books, but I need pictures or I get bored." She told me she enjoys using her imagination when reading and when she has pictures to prompt her reading, it helps her visualize what is occurring in the story.

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[6] *Interview* – Notes on the interview can be found in the Appendix F.
[7] See section on Book Buddies and book selection.

3. Book Buddies

After the initial interview, I decided to engage the six students in a Book Buddies program with Kindergarten. I wanted to see if reading aloud to kindergarten students would help increase self-esteem and motivate second graders to become the teachers of a book and, in effect, enjoy what was being read. To begin the program, I met with the six chosen kindergarten students who would benefit from the experience. These students were picked by their teacher who felt they could use extra support and exposure to reading from older peers. These students were ecstatic about the prospect of having second grade Book Buddies and could not wait to begin. I asked them what some of their favorite types of books were and, to capitalize on my students' pleasures, if they enjoyed a lot of pictures in their books.

Before we began this project, I took my students to the library to choose books for their new Book Buddies. I gave them ideas as to what their buddy would like based upon the kindergarteners responses to my questions and informed the second graders that young children enjoy lots of pictures, big words, and bright illustrations. I also prompted the students to think of favorite authors or illustrators they might have and choose some of their books. I asked them to think of what books they liked when they were in kindergarten. After our trip to the library, I took the second graders to the kindergarten room where they met with their buddy for the first time. In this ten minute period, the second grade students grew frustrated. I allowed this frustration period to continue to occur until the end of our time because I wanted the students to see the importance of the books they chose for their buddy. Upon returning to the room, I talked with the six students and asked why they were upset. John and Brian had chosen books that were too

difficult for them to read; Megan had chosen a book that her buddy could not understand; Cynthia had chosen a book with gorgeous pictures, but her buddy was too distracted to and would not listen to the words in the story. They quickly realized that the next time they would choose books, more effort would need to be put forth.

When preparing for the next day of Book Buddies, I noticed a drastic change in book selections. All six of the students picked a favorite book they had when they were younger. When I asked why they chose these books, it was unanimously because they were familiar with the text. They knew all of the words and the pictures and could read more comfortably with their buddy. When I watched them read these new books to their buddies, I took notice of how at ease all twelve students were with each other and how the second grade students, being so familiar with their new books, were able to hold discussions about illustrations, challenging vocabulary and events in the story. I could see their self-image rising before my very eyes and when I asked them why they seemed happier about reading, they responded that "the book was something I knew" and "I was really excited when my buddy asked me what a word meant and I could explain it!"

I continued using the Book Buddy program twice a week for four weeks and it continuously placed the students in good spirits and created excitement about reading. There was only one instance of one of my students, Billy, having difficulties with his buddy. Billy was the only boy in my group that was paired with a kindergarten girl and, at first, he agreed to do this. As we continued the project, however, he grew distant from his classmates and me and he became miserable when it was time to go to kindergarten to read. Not realizing the gender pairing was a problem, I inquired why he didn't want to read for the day. When he told me his buddy "annoyed" him, I asked if he would be

willing to attend one last time before quitting so that she could have one more book be read to her. He agreed and I focused my observations for the day solely on his reading. He read his story with inflection, excitement, and even discussed the pictures with his buddy. He created different voices for the characters and showed no signs of struggles. I could not figure out why he desired to stop the Book Buddies because he was so excited about reading when he was actually in the kindergarten classroom. Yet again, I asked if he would go to kindergarten one more time and, again, he agreed. The next time we went to our buddies, I tried pairing him with a young boy. So as not to pinpoint Billy, I changed other partnerships as well. This had a great impact on all of the students because it provided variety. They were all so willing to read with their new buddies and break away from routine that the excitement and quality of reading was increased dramatically. All of the second grade students benefited from the change in that the new buddies focused on their reading and encouraged them to keep going in the book. The new buddies begged the second graders not to leave and when we re-entered our own classroom, my six students all went directly to the classroom library to gather new books for the next visit.

The Book Buddies program was incredibly successful because it gave the students freedom in book choice, an increase in self-esteem when dealing with kindergarten listeners, and a sense of enjoyment in what was being read at any given time. As a side effect, it also created a close community of readers in this group and the six students suddenly became each other's guiding force as they encouraged, questioned, and cooperated with each other in all areas of reading.

Another piece of data that I collected and used to discover what motivates

students was observing their interactions with the class. I witnessed how the six chosen

students presented projects or activities in front of the class. I noticed that the students

who told me they felt reading was too hard in the classroom or that they did not enjoy

reading out loud were the ones who struggled when presenting in front of their peers.

These students were so nervous about reading in front of others that they could not even

read their own writing. Cynthia mumbled over words and quickly sat down before her

peers could ask her questions. When I later asked her to reread her writing in our small

language arts station, she was able to perform. She told me she could do this because

there weren't as many people watching her and she wasn't as nervous.

After following the same procedure with the rest of my group and analyzing their

behaviors in front of peers, I decided to have them try to reread projects in front of the

whole class.[8] This time, however, they presented a new project they had been working

on in science class. Although not completely at ease, the students were more focused and

able to stand in front of their peers and read more clearly, loudly, and steadily. They

were able to complete this new reading out loud because it was not technically a reading

activity, but a science activity. They felt that it was a different type of reading.

5. Modified Lesson Plans

Lastly, I created modified lesson plans to give the controlled group of six students

more freedom in book selection during school activities. These modifications allowed

followed procedures other students were using to complete writing projects, but allowed

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[8] *Anecdotal notes* – see Appendix G for notes on classroom performance.

them to choose their own books. An example of one of these lessons was one in which the students were creating perspective letters. Every student in the class was responsible for selecting a character from *The Emperor's New Clothes* and writing to another character from the chosen perspective. The inquiry students, however, were allowed to choose any fairy tale character they wished to write from and any fairy tale character they wished to write to.[9]

This modification was one that benefited these students because its freedom encouraged them to complete their work more accurately and quickly than usual. In particular, John is a child who will often refuse to do work and it impacts the speed at which he accomplishes tasks in the room. When faced with the challenge of writing the perspective letter, he was not amused. Instead, he chose a path of rebellion against me. After I explained to him that he had more freedom in the writing activity, he warmed up to the idea. I stated my expectations that, as long as he used the correct letter writing format and used details from the story he was writing about, he was more than welcome to choose any character he wished.

The other five students also benefited from this activity because the quality of their work increased when compared to past assignments. They were more creative in their writing, used more details from the stories, and took on a tone when writing from the chosen perspective. The students were drawn into the lesson and completely immersed themselves in their chosen subject.

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[9] *Modified Lesson Plans* – a copy of this lesson plan and its assessment is placed in Appendix H.

Claims

Claim 1: Motivation is a direct result of a positive self-image.

Evidence A: According to Motivating Hard to Reach Students, there are many new theories in the past decades that support the direct link between student motivation and their current self-concept. A downtrodden or at-risk child may suffer lack of self-image and therefore will be unmotivated to do work. On the other hand, a highly motivated student is one who has a high self-esteem and recognizes peers and adults as support systems to learning.

Evidence B: The students participating in the study were from varying reading abilities. Not only struggling readers are ones who suffer from lack of motivation; very intellectual students also lack motivation.

Claim 2: There are many factors influencing a student's motivation and learning styles within the classroom.

Evidence A: When it comes to reading, the students chosen for the inquiry were either bored in class or intimidated by peers. These factors contributed to their lack of desire in reading and their low motivation.

Evidence B: According to the Title 1 teacher and Motivating Reluctant Readers, it is difficult to have students read something too challenging or in a genre that is uninteresting to them. These factors lead to frustration and, in effect, lack of motivation.

Claim 3: Reviewing reading strategies before opening a book can greatly increase the excitement level of the story and the motivation of all students.

Evidence 1: When working strictly with two Title 1 students, it was found that the more they understood a word or phrase before reading a text, the better and more fluently the story was read. This led to reviewing strategies and dismantling texts for comprehension. Upon reviewing the text, the students were more willing to read books of the same nature.

Claim 4: Allowing students to share their reading abilities with other students increases self-image and motivates students to choose books independently and read them more than once.

Evidence 1: The six students participated in Book Buddies with Kindergarten and were held responsible for choosing books they could read and enjoy and that Kindergarten students would understand. These books were read numerous times by the second grade students and helped them to learn fluency and comprehension skills.

Claim 5: By allowing students to participate in extra events or variations of activities, motivation increases.

Evidence A: After participating in Book Buddies, the six students were more willing to choose books from the library, read a variety of authors and series books, and take literacy risks in challenging themselves.

Evidence B: By modifying lesson plans for the students to write creatively from a text of their choosing, work was done more efficiently, effectively, and with greater detailed effort.

Future Teaching Practice

Based upon my findings in this inquiry, I would like to incorporate many facets of reading strategies into my future practice. It is crucial that students begin with a basic knowledge of word sounds, meanings, and strategies to unlock words in a text. This is the building block of reading and without this knowledge, the students can not be expected to perform in a preferred manner.

Secondly, in my future teaching career, I would like to incorporate a Book Buddies program in the curriculum for my students. I understand that some schools may not desire cross-class reading, but this is something that could be done within the classroom and could be used as peer teaching. This is an activity that motivates students to learn to read more fluently and comfortably and I have found that it benefits the students by increasing self-image.

In conjunction with the Book Buddies, I have discovered that it is necessary to tailor some lessons to specific students. Some students may find certain subject areas more difficult than others and it is important that I try to use the best possible solutions and methods to reach these students. I have no qualms about modifying lesson plans and I have discovered that it truly helps some students comprehend what is being taught.

Lastly, I have discovered through my practice and through research that it is necessary to increase students' self-concept. This is the key to motivation and it creates havoc when the student believes he or she can not perform up to par. By engaging these students in interventions like Book Buddies, allowing them to participate in extra or different activities, giving them free reign in a library, or simply by showing them

support and not "yelling . . . to stop reading" (Hudson-Ross, Cleary, Casey, 1993, p. 154),

I can heighten their feelings of self-worth and allow them to mature into adult readers.

Reading should not be viewed as a punishment or taxing. It should not be

". . . hardly ever interesting. Most of the time it's just work that I have to do." (Hudson-

Ross, Cleary, Casey, 1993, p. 153). I have learned throughout this inquiry that if I

increase my students' awareness of the importance and enjoyment of reading, they will

be motivated to excel and will do their best to succeed.

New wonderings

Upon completion of this inquiry project, I have discovered some new wonderings

regarding the motivation of reluctant readers. First, I would like to talk with the parents

or guardians of my students. I have discovered that self-image is a huge part of how

motivated a student is to learn in a classroom, but I am curious as to how much of this

self-image is created and/or disseminated in the home.

Secondly, I wonder if there would be specific strategies or methods that would

work best for students with learning disabilities or handicaps that would truly get them

motivated to do their best possible work. None of the students in my study were tested or

diagnosed as learning disabled and I wonder if that has an impact on motivation as well.

Lastly, I now wonder how I can make the opportunities for those seemingly

"average" students who are motivated to complete work and succeed be comparable to

the students who need the extra attention. While running interventions and incorporating

strategies into my inquiry, I ran into issues form other students not participating in the

study who didn't understand the fairness issue of the procedures. How do I elicit the

most successful learning environment while incorporating all students to increase

motivation?

Resources

1. Ciani, A. (Ed.). (1981). *Motivating Reluctant Readers.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

2. Herr, M. (2001). Unlocking print. State College, PA.

3. McCombs, B.L. and Pope, J.E. (1994). *Motivating hard to reach students.* (pp. 9-19). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

4. McKenna, M. and Kear, D. (1990). Measuring attitude toward reading: A new tool for teachers *The Reading Teacher, 43*(9), 626-639.

5. Myers, J. (1993). Butch, jane, and bobby: Why I read. In Hudson-Ross, S., Cleary, L.M., & Casey, M., *Children's Voices: Children Talk About Literacy* (pp. 150-155). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.

6. Nos, N. (1999). *Guided Reading: Strategies That Work* (p.1). Bellevue, WA: Bureau of Education and Research.

7. Robb, L. (1995). *Reading Strategies That Work: Teaching Your Students to Become Better Readers.* New York: Scholastic Professional Books.