

# How Can Teachers Motivate



## Reluctant Readers?

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### Abstract

Motivating students to read is an important aspect of being an elementary reading teacher. Five second graders and their teacher were involved in the original work that this article is based on. Through classroom observations and one-on-one interviews, this research

showed the importance of motivating reluctant readers. This article focuses on one student (Ben) in particular and his struggles with reading motivation. Through this lens of motivating reluctant readers, this article proceeds to share ideas of how classroom teachers can motivate reluctant readers in the classroom setting. Teachers can do a variety of things to motivate their students to read. One of the first things teachers need to do is get to know their students. Teachers also need to utilize a variety of motivating reading experiences to help motivate students as well as create an engaging and open literacy environment. A final way teachers can motivate their students to read is to implement motivating and relevant classroom activities. Utilizing these ideas to motivate readers will hopefully work to create lifelong learners.

It is reading center time in Miss Beckham's second grade classroom and her second grade students move from center to center at the sound of the timer. On this particular April morning, students are engrossed in activities revolving around their current author study of the nonfiction children's author Steve Jenks. Since Miss Beckham loves Steve Jenks' books, she has created an environment full of enthusiasm about this author study for a couple of months, which, in turn, created a very motivational environment. The twenty-seven students in this classroom eagerly read these books in various formats from partner reading to read-aloud to a small group scavenger hunt for information from a particular book. During this time, the students identified as struggling and requiring extra assistance in the form of small group reading instruction with the Title I teacher were even able to decode difficult words. For instance, Scully was so motivated to read these books that he was easily able to read the word 'threatened' without any outside assistance while reading one of these highly engaging books.

On a similar morning about five weeks later, the students are participating in the four daily centers. They read a story from the reading book, listen to a chapter book read by a parent volunteer, participate in a word work station that is largely based on the weekly spelling words, and choose between taking Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes and reading a book of choice. On this particular morning, Ben is displaying his lack of motivation by making choices to avoid reading. At the AR/free read station, he sits at the computer and seemingly pretends to take an AR quiz for more than 15 minutes instead of reading a book of his choice. About an hour later Ben makes a similar choice after completing a word game paper at the word work center. He chooses to talk to his friends rather than the expected scenario of reading a book. This situation occurred after he was lectured by his classroom teacher about the importance of reading

during the appropriate time of the day rather than talking to others and wandering the classroom.

These two scenarios point to the importance of the literacy environment, and student attitude and motivation to read in the reading classroom. A student's attitude toward reading as well as motivation to read often decide whether he/she chooses to read or do other activities instead, even if the child is a fluent reader (Lazarus & Callahan, 2000; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Reading attitude and motivation are also essential to the development and use of lifelong reading skills (Lazarus, & Callahan, 2000). Reading attitude and motivation may also impact a child's eventual ability due to motivation, engagement and practice factors (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995).

### What does the research say?

#### Motivation Theory and Motivation

Motivation theory works to explain why some readers are more likely to choose to read than others. Winnie and Marx (1989) explain how motivation theories account for three aspects of behavior. The first involves what a student chooses to do in a certain interaction or situation, such as choosing to raise his/her hand or avoiding eye contact during a class discussion. The next aspect of behavior is the "temperament of a person's behavior" (p. 224), such as being able to ignore distractions and the care taken in completing assignments. The final aspect of behavior mentioned by Winnie and Marx is persistence. This concept is related to the time allowed to complete a task versus the amount of time spent completing it. For instance, some students may spend a lot of time creating a word web or concept map while others spend as little time as possible. Since motivation is such an important aspect of engaged, successful reading, these behavioral concepts need to be taken into consideration.

Consistent with the above explanation, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) suggest that "reading motivation is the individual's personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading" (p. 405). Guthrie and Wigfield explain some key motivations for reading, including having learning or performance goals, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and social motivations. Learning or performance goals include the reasons why a person chooses to read, such as the desire to learn more about a particular topic or wanting to outperform others. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are key to the desire to read. Intrinsic motivation is an inward need to read for the sake of reading or learning more about a topic. Extrinsic motivation is the desire to read in order to receive an external reward, such as recognition or a trinket of some kind. Students with a high self-efficacy towards reading "see difficult reading

tasks as challenging and work diligently to master them, using their cognitive strategies productively" (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 408). Poor self-efficacy towards reading results in a lack of motivation to read. This is especially present in students who may have struggled in learning how to read and still think of themselves as poor readers even though they are reading on a much higher level and seem to enjoy reading some books. Social motivations for reading make children want to read in order to interact with their peers about the book. All of these motivational constructs help to explain why some readers are more motivated to read than others.

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) also point out that attitude is different from motivation. Attitude refers to whether or not a student likes to perform a particular task, such as reading for recreational reasons and reading for academic reasons. Motivation involves the reader's goals and desires to read. A highly motivated reader will choose to read at any given time.

A student's motivation to read and self-efficacy towards reading are enhanced when they are given the tools to complete the task successfully (Guthrie et al., 2004; Lutz, Guthrie, & Davis, 2006). Strategy instruction, such as teaching students comprehension strategies, helps students gain confidence in their ability to read and comprehend the text. For example, teaching students to ask questions while reading encourages students to stop once in a while to check and make sure that they are understanding what they have read, which gives them more confidence in what they are doing and learning.

Guthrie et al. (2004) shared some important aspects of classrooms that supported intrinsic motivation to read, including "a) content goals for instruction, b) choice and autonomy support, c) interesting texts, and d) collaboration for learning" (p. 404). These relatively simple classroom practices have a great impact on students' motivation to read and to continue reading. Cole (2012), shared some similar classroom practices that aid in the development of students' intrinsic motivation mechanisms:

- Teacher modeling interest
- Sincere praise
- Collaborative learning
- Student success
- Teacher caring
- Using students' interests
- Giving choices
- Decreasing rewards
- Meaningful work
- Allowing autonomy
- Appropriate challenge
- Informative, not judgmental, feedback (p. 71)

By utilizing these mechanisms, teachers are able to motivate students to want to read and hopefully become lifelong readers.

Perhaps one of the most striking things to note about motivation theory is the fact that this essential part of the reading process was not included as one of the pillars detailed by the National Reading Panel (2000). Motivation is what drives students to read for pleasure and enjoyment and basically become a lifelong reader, but it was not noteworthy enough to be considered by the panel as part of these essential aspects of good reading instruction.

### Literacy Environment

According to Cambourne (2000), a literacy environment is a complicated concept, which primarily includes the aspects of the physical set-up of the classroom, the human behaviors, and the programs available in the classroom setting. These aspects work together to create an engaging environment that promotes positive attitudes toward reading as well as a desire or motivation to read.

The principal aspect of the physical environment is that it should be motivationally print-rich in both the relevance of the print adorning the walls as well as the materials provided to the children. This print should have a function within the classroom setting rather than simply serving as decorations. This print can include materials that guide daily activities, such as directions for completing the morning routine, and teacher-made charts, such as a list of ideas for how to start a new writing project. Another important idea for a good literacy environment is to provide children with plenty of literature from a variety of genres, including fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, and traditional literature, and types, including picture books, chapter books, graphic novels, and magazines on a range of ability levels. This variety of literature is an essential part of the literacy environment (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey & Del Noro, 2011) and encourages the intrinsic motivation discussed above, including providing books related to students' interests and allowing students the opportunity to choose their own books to read. The environment should also include areas for large group reading, such as a large rug, where the teacher and students could meet as a class for instruction and large-group read-aloud. This area is an essential part of a motivating classroom. During the large group time, the teacher is able to promote motivation by sharing her interest in reading as well as introducing students to new and challenging books.

Interactions, teacher behaviors and verbal explanations also impact the literacy environment and

student motivation. Allington (2002) explained that the classrooms he considered exemplary "encouraged, modeled, and supported lots of talk across the school day" (p. 755). Allowing students to talk and interact with each other in positive ways revolving around reading and writing helps the students see the value in reading and writing while learning to value the opinions of others in a supportive environment. Capitalizing on teachable moments throughout a lesson is a valuable way to promote literacy and language development (Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley, 1999; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998). Positive interactions between the teacher and students are also an important part of the literacy environment. This includes the kind of feedback that students receive, which "should focus on what the student did correctly, as well as what needs to be done to improve future performance" (Konold, Miller & Konold, 2005, p. 66). As mentioned by Cole (2012), receiving informative feedback that is not judgmental is an intrinsically motivating mechanism that helps students want to continue reading to "get it right." Questioning is also a notable aspect of the human behavior feature of a positive literacy environment. Asking open-ended and higher order questions helps students to develop better literacy skills and achieve at higher levels (Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley, 1999; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998).

The final aspect of the classroom literacy environment that Cambourne (2000) mentioned includes the literacy programs and routines that are implemented in the classroom setting. Implementing explicit and systematic instruction in literacy is an important aspect of the literacy environment (Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley, 1999; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998). Experiencing reading in a variety of formats, including whole group (read aloud and comprehension strategy instruction), small group (guided reading, skills groups, and/or continuation of strategy instruction), and one-on-one (with teacher and individual reading) is also an important aspect of the routines that should be implemented into the classroom structure. Planning motivating activities is another important aspect of the literacy environment. These activities engage students in the classroom literacy environment, and help them to want to learn to read and write.

### Attitude

Lazarus and Callahan (2000) explained the importance of reading attitude, asserting that, "Reading attitude fulfills a pivotal role in the development and use of lifelong reading skills" (p. 217). Throughout the last few decades, researchers have explored aspects



of reading. In their comprehensive study of reading attitude, McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) studied a national sample of over 18,000 students from 229 schools in 95 districts across 38 states. They found a decline in attitude toward both academic and recreational reading from grades one through six. The researchers also found a relationship between negative recreational reading attitude and reading ability. Students who struggled with reading shared a worse attitude toward reading than students who were successful readers. In contrast, Lazarus and Callahan (2000) found that students identified with a learning disability who received instruction in a resource room did not fully share in this negative trend. These researchers found a declining attitude toward recreational reading across grade levels, but attitudes toward academic reading remained steady from the primary to intermediate grades.

Williams and Hall's (2010) study reiterated some key concepts about reading attitude and the motivation to read independently. Through the use of simple interviews, these researchers found support for the importance of allowing students time to read independently. This assertion comes from the fact that students reported that they learned more and became better readers by reading independently rather than being read to by their teacher or another adult. Students also indicated an understanding of reading being important to school success, as well as to later success in life. Reading as a source of entertainment was one indication of these students' attitudes toward reading. More than half of the participants shared that they read after school indicating their positive attitudes toward reading and a strong motivation to read independently. Interestingly enough, the National Reading Panel also did not include the importance of promoting independent reading or reading at home.

Williams and Hall (2010) also indicated the importance of teachers explaining to students the purpose of a teacher read aloud. Teachers can model comprehension strategies through a think aloud, but students need to understand why that is happening. Teachers should explicitly explain to students that listening to fluent reading can help them become better readers. Reading aloud is more than just a time filler so students need to understand the purpose behind this essential reading activity. This explanation and eventual understanding will lead to students feeling motivated and wanting to try the comprehension strategy during their own independent reading.

Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) found an interesting phenomenon when comparing data from 1998 to that obtained in 2003 in the United Kingdom. They studied students who were in years four and six in

school, and discovered that students reported having more confidence in reading and needing less support in 2003 than in 1998. However, these students were also less likely to enjoy reading in 2003 as compared to 1998. These results were confirmed by the fact that new literacy legislation changed instruction delivery following the 1998 survey. These survey results indicate that students are losing their motivation to read because of literacy legislation and classroom instruction changes. As Cole (2012) explained, "A focus on tests and test preparation can push aside classroom events that support student interests, self-selected reading, and significant time to read" (p. 71). Instead of creating literate, life-long readers, we are creating alliterate students who only read when they "have" to. Teachers need to find ways to motivate all students in the classroom setting despite the challenges of current legislation and testing requirements.

### The Research Setting

This research occurred in a major Midwestern city. The researcher observed five focal students who were struggling readers for eight weeks in the spring of their second grade year. The data sources included observational field notes of the five struggling readers during class sessions as well as interviews with both the students and the teacher.

### Attitude Toward Reading: Self-Reported and Observational

For the purpose of this article, I will focus on one focal student in particular. Ben (self-chosen pseudonym) showed a bit of a mismatch between his stated feelings toward reading and his actions in the classroom setting. During our first interview, Ben explained to me that he feels good about reading and likes to read a lot as well as explaining, "I like to read because you never know what's going to happen next in a story and if you read and read and read then you know everything" (interview data, 4-29-11). In contrast to this apparent liking of reading, Ben was often observed avoiding reading. These avoidance behaviors included talking after finishing his work on 5 occasions, going to the bathroom/getting a drink when he was supposed to be working or reading on five occasions, and having a book out without actively reading on 3 occasions. Ben's thoughts on the importance of reading were also a bit concerning. Ben shared that he feels that reading is important "because you need to know to read to go in grades and finish grades and just go up into another grade" (interview data, 4-29-11). This view of reading shows his view of its importance in the school setting, but this view will likely not lead to Ben being a lifelong reader. At this stage he was not seeing the importance of reading for enjoyment.

On two occasions Miss Beckham intervened to help Ben choose books of interest. On the first occasion, Miss Beckham talked to Ben about the importance of reading books all the way to the end in order to become a better reader. Miss Beckham helped Ben choose a Magic Tree House book to read that he seemed to enjoy reading for the next few days (field notes, 4-13-11). The problem was that once Ben finished reading a book he had trouble choosing a new book on his own. By the end of my time in the classroom, Miss Beckham was working with Ben again to try and figure out a book to read. During a conversation about Ben's avoidance of reading one Monday afternoon in the middle of May, Miss Beckham discovered that some of Ben's issues stem from the fact that his mother "made" him read in the evenings and he found it to be boring. Miss Beckham discussed with him the kinds of books that he likes to read and Ben shared that he liked reading books about boys being silly. Miss Beckham found some books on the bookshelf and Ben chose to start reading the Big Nate series by Lincoln Pierce (field notes, 5-18-11). Miss Beckham's actions helped Ben become a more active and motivated reader over the last couple of weeks of my time in their classroom. This actually leads to a major issue facing teachers. How can teachers help students become more engaged readers in an effort to improve their attitudes toward reading and motivation to read? The next section will examine what teachers can do to help students improve in both attitude and action.

### What can teachers do?

#### Get to Know Your Students

Getting to know your students involves much more than just knowing their names. Teachers need to learn about their students' attitudes toward reading, motivation to read, likes and dislikes, family background, academics, and literacy goals. In order to help a child grow and develop as a reader a teacher should learn about how a student feels about reading and him/herself as a reader (Strickland & Walker, 2004). This can be done through a written survey, or a simple interview where the teacher sits down and has a conversation with the student.

**Elementary reading attitude survey.** McKenna and Keer's (1990) reading attitude survey is a validated and reliable way to learn more about how students feel about both academic and recreational aspects of reading. This survey helps teachers develop an understanding of students' views on books, reading, and reading-related activities that occur both during school and at other times.

**Motivation to read profile-revised.** The motivation to read profile-revised (MRP-R) (Malloy, Marinak, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2014) gives teachers insights

into what drives their students to choose to read. This profile was originally created in 1996, but it has been revised to reflect recent changes in the literacy landscape, including linguistic and cultural changes. The MRP-R includes a survey portion that can be administered to the whole class and includes ten questions designed to measure how students value reading and ten questions that measure a student's self-concept of him/herself as a reader. This tool also includes an open-ended conversational interview that can be accessed in a digital form for easier recording.

**Personal interest inventory.** Teachers can ask both students and parents to share more information about the student and their family background in the form of a written survey. A simple survey completed by students allows teachers to learn more about what their students like and don't like. A survey completed by parents during an open house night allows teachers to learn more about a child's family life and background experiences.

The information obtained from these sorts of surveys helps the teacher choose materials of interest to be shared with students as read-alouds, placed on the bookshelf and used in instruction that are also appropriate to use with the child/children. The information gathered through these methods also helps teachers plan for instruction. Developing a knowledge and understanding of a student's family background and home situation is also a central aspect of getting to know your students. This background knowledge allows a teacher a better understanding and helps him/her to plan accordingly.

#### Utilize a Variety of Motivating Reading Experiences

The simple fact that reading helps students learn to read is often overlooked in classrooms. Students need a large variety of reading experiences when they are acquiring the difficult task of learning how to read and start developing their individual self-concept about reading. Miss Beckham worked hard to provide her second graders with a variety of reading opportunities each week, including small group reading, buddy reading, independent reading, and teacher read-aloud.

**Guided reading.** Guided reading and other forms of small group reading allow the teacher to focus on specific skills while working with a smaller groups of students. It is essential that teachers work to find materials for guided reading that will interest the students and make reading seem relevant. Teachers also need to choose a variety of books to read with students.

**Buddy reading.** During buddy reading, two students are reading together. This can occur side-by-side, knee-to-knee or any other format that the teacher deems appropriate. This sort of reading experience allows more students to read a limited number of books, such as during an author study, in addition to allowing the children to reread a selection in a different format with the help of a peer.

**Independent reading.** Independent reading is an essential aspect of a child's reading development. The opportunity to read a book of choice for an extended period of time can be invaluable to a reader at any stage of development. During this time, teachers can take the opportunity to help students choose texts that are appropriate for both the child's ability as well as interest level. Student choice is an essential aspect in helping students become engaged and motivated to read (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Senn, 2012; Williams, & Hall, 2010). Students need to have the opportunity to choose books as well as read them on a regular basis during the school day. One way to help students choose a variety of books is to give them a self-discovery bookmark that lists a variety of genres so students can keep track of the different genres they have read and enjoyed. This bookmark promotes the concept of choice while encouraging children to read a variety of books (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006).

**Teacher read-aloud.** A well-chosen read aloud book can greatly help students to become excited about the topic at hand as well as improve their comprehension skills, build vocabulary, develop an understanding of what fluent reading sounds like, and simply enjoy reading for the pleasure of reading (Cecil, 2011). When choosing these read-aloud books, teachers also need to consider what will appeal to all students, especially the boys. Teachers have a tendency to choose books that they, as the teacher and usually female, enjoy. Teachers need to work to share a large variety of books, including non-fiction, graphic novels, magazines, and other materials that appeal to boys more. Because teachers usually do not share graphic novels, web sites, newspapers and magazines, boys tend to believe they are not appropriate reading options (Senn, 2012).

### Create an Engaging and Open Literacy Environment

The environment and expectations created within a classroom will also affect a child's attitude toward reading, ideas about reading, and desire to participate in the act of reading. What a teacher does to create her/his classroom literacy environment is essential to the development of all readers in that classroom.

**Access to a large variety of books.** Children need to

have access to all kinds of books, including a variety of genres and formats. Fiction books should include all types of genres, such as traditional literature, fantasy, poetry, mystery, realistic fiction, historic fiction, and multicultural books. Nonfiction books should include biography books and informational books about a large variety of topics in both the science and social studies areas. Teachers and librarians need to be open-minded about the kinds of books that are "appropriate" for reading. In order to promote reading among boys, teachers, parents, and librarians need to help boys understand that graphic novels, newspapers, magazines, and web sites are all appropriate forms of reading. Senn (2012) explained that boys "enjoy texts that can be collected (books in a series, baseball cards, etc.), have visual interest (graphic novels, websites), are succinct (newspaper or magazine articles), relate to their own lives, and are funny or rebellious (comics)" (p. 217). Some examples of these kinds of books include: the Captain Underpants series, Jeff Smith has authored many graphic novels students may enjoy, Time for Kids, and National Geographic Kids are two magazines appropriate for all students, and Jack Ganto has written many books that boys can relate to, and Marvel comics offer digital versions and a limited number of print versions of their comics at <http://marvel.com/comics>.

**Create a "guys read" area.** This suggestion is based on the work of Jon Scieszka. On his web site, guysread.com, he explains the importance of embracing the idea that boys are different and have different needs when it comes to reading. He suggests including informational books by Seymour Simon, funny books by David Pilkey, books by Jack Ganto, some graphic novels, magazines, and newspapers. The guys read web site includes numerous suggestions of books that can be shared with reluctant readers.

**Supportive teacher actions.** Supporting all readers as they work to develop their skills is another way to create a literate environment. Students need to feel that they can take risks in order to grow and develop their reading skills. In this vain, praise and encouragement need to be specific and direct. Simply telling a child that she/he did a "good job" while reading does not help the child grow and learn as much as telling the child that he/she did a good job of self-correcting his/her mistake or using the surrounding words to figure out the unknown words. Children need to know what they are doing right to continue to experiment and try new things in their reading development.

### Implement Motivating and Relevant Classroom Activities

The activities that occur in the classroom setting, both planned and unplanned, can have a huge impact on

a child's literacy development. It is important to make reading and literacy a motivating experience for all students. Some ways to do this include showing boys that men read too, making reading relevant to their lives and interests, being accepting of boys' unique taste in books and reading materials, involving others in the efforts to reach boys, and explicitly teaching important literacy strategies.

**Boys need male role models.** Finding ways to motivate reluctant boy readers can be difficult for female teachers. Senn (2012) and McFann (2004) both reiterate the importance of the male role model in helping to motivate boys to read. One way to help motivate the boys is to start a guest reader program where male role models are invited to read a favorite book of their choice to the class. These guest readers can be parents, athletes from local universities or high schools, or other men who can help boys see the importance of reading. The bottom line is that the boys need to see the value of reading so that they will read.

**Make reading relevant.** Students need to understand the purpose for the work they are asked to complete in the classroom setting. Boys are more engaged in reading a text if they may learn something from it or if after reading the book they will write a book review for their classmates. Allowing boys to read about topics relevant to their lives and interests is essential to their motivation.

**Be accepting and perceptive.** As I mentioned earlier, boys learn and develop as readers differently than girls. Teachers may need to re-evaluate what they consider to be appropriate. Boys need to read books involving action, adventure and possibly violence (as long as it is age appropriate) and teachers need to allow boys these sorts of reading experiences.

**Involve others.** Parents can be a teacher's greatest allies, but parents also need help and support in knowing and fully understanding what their role is in supporting their child's education. Teachers can support parents in their role by sharing information with them. This can include encouraging fathers to read to their children as much as mothers do. Teachers can also support the literacy of families by sending home literacy bags that contain books and writing materials based on a theme.

**Strategy instruction.** Many students, especially struggling and reluctant readers, need teachers to explicitly teach them reading strategies. This explicit teaching requires authentic text and proven decoding and comprehension strategies without the need for a worksheet. In conjunction with this explicit teaching, students need to be involved in motivating activities

that make them want to participate and learn from what they are doing in the classroom setting. Asking open-ended questions that require higher-order thinking skills is another way to help keep students motivated and wanting to read and learn more in the classroom setting. These questions also help to promote close reading that requires deeper thinking. The easiest thing that teachers can do to utilize classroom happenings to promote better reading attitudes is to take advantage of teachable moments. This requires teachers to stay in the moment with their students so that they can take advantage of the little things that students do that can be used to help them learn more about reading and the things that they are doing correctly in the reading context.

### Concluding Thoughts

As described in the opening scenarios, classroom activities can serve as a way to both encourage and stifle student motivation to read. Ben became engaged and motivated to read when he was able to find something of interest. He benefited from his teacher taking the time to learn more about him as a reader and helping him to find a book of interest. His experiences illustrate the importance of teachers helping children find books of interest as well as a positive literacy environment.

Children who have a good attitude toward reading and are motivated to read will spend more time reading, which leads to higher achievement. The hope is that these readers will also become lifelong readers (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). Working to engage all learners will help to lead to the ultimate goal of promoting lifelong learners.

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