

The Intermediate Grades

What makes intermediate-grade students want to read?

Jo Worthy

There is wide agreement among literacy researchers that students who read more become more proficient in reading fluency and comprehension, as well as general vocabulary and cognitive development (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Stanovich, 1986). When students do not read on their own, their general academic progress is in jeopardy. Educational researchers agree that "schools must deliberately and thoughtfully attract children to reading" (Morrow, 1991, p. 682). The question is "how?"

In the past few years, several research studies have gone directly to the source, asking intermediate-grade students to talk about what their language arts teachers can do to make reading more attractive in school. Students who are avid readers, students who say they "hate to read," third graders, sixth graders, and students in between have remarkably similar ideas about which aspects of the classroom environment are the most motivating (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Worthy, 1998, 2000; Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, in press).

It is important to mention something that, perhaps surprisingly, students did not consider motivating. School programs often use rewards as incentive to read, and many teachers believe they work, but students generally do not consider them to be important (Worthy,

2000). In fact, when points, grades, or other favors are offered for reading tasks, students are given the impression that reading is a chore not worth doing unless it is rewarded (Kohn, 1993). The factors that have been found to be especially relevant to students' reading attitudes and motivation fall into two general categories: engaging instruction and choice and variety in reading materials. In describing the categories, I include student quotes from reading motivation studies.

Engaging instruction

Students offered many suggestions to make reading more appealing in the classroom. In all of the studies reviewed, students asked for more teacher read-alouds and more time to read independently in school. While most students had their own interests and preferences, the majority wanted to hear about good books from teachers, to have teachers introduce books that students would like, and to read segments "to get us interested." They also wanted more time to read in school, "so we get a habit of it," as one student put it. Students commented that teachers' enthusiasm about reading is transparent. "If they show us books they like and they're, like, real excited, we get interested in reading, too." Teachers who treat reading as merely a school subject that "you gotta do," may

negatively influence students' feelings toward reading (Worthy, 2000).

Students also requested that they be given some time to read for enjoyment without required assignments such as worksheets or responses. One student asked, "Do we have to have journal entries every time we read?" Creative dramatics such as role-playing, Readers Theatre, and reading poetry aloud were mentioned by many students as motivating (Worthy, 2000).

Choice and variety in reading material

A common characteristic among avid adult readers is that they have had the opportunity to read materials of their own choosing (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988). Intermediate-grade students also like to choose their own materials and, like adults, their tastes are varied and individual. When students were asked what they would choose to read, the most common choices were magazines, comic books, mysteries or books with scary themes, jokes and humorous stories, materials about sports, series books, and books with relevant characters and themes. Younger students also liked picture books and books that were "easy to read" (Worthy et al., in press).

Students in several classrooms complained about the limited number of books and the lack of new, relevant books in their classroom libraries. One

student said, "She could get some new books in the room. Hers are from the 1960s!" (Worthy, 2000).

Many students listed books that their teachers had introduced or read out loud as some of their favorites. Based on this information, it might be tempting to fill a classroom library with the most popular publications along with more conventional school texts. However, it is important to note the wide variety of publications that students mentioned and to consider that each student is an individual with different experiences whose preferences and motivation may change with time and in response to a variety of factors. For example, when asked what he would read if he had unlimited choice, Chris (pseudonym) answered "Nothing. I hate to read." Indeed, he never checked out books from the library and rarely completed reading assignments. Chris had one major interest, wrestling, and he talked of nothing else. Because there were no materials on wrestling available in his school, he simply did not read. When he discovered wrestling magazines and information on the Internet, he began to devour them and, later, to try out other reading materials (Worthy & Sailors, 2001).

Carolina, a recent immigrant from Mexico, quickly learned to communicate in English, but she resisted U.S. culture and English literacy and turned up her nose at the series books other girls her age were reading. When she discovered books written by Mexican American authors, Carolina's world changed. She was enthralled with bilingual picture books and books that included Spanish words embedded in English text, which she would pronounce with a proud flair. She was particularly moved by books about visiting relatives in Mexico (Worthy & Sailors, 2001).

Many educators tend to think they must exert control over the materials that are available for school reading. While it is important for educators to ensure that students have access to high-quality, conceptually challenging

literature, it is also essential to address students' preferences in order to capture their attention and engagement and, thus, to foster learning. Fortunately, students seem to know what's good for them. The academic and affective benefits of using materials that students prefer include enhanced fluency, vocabulary, linguistic competence, confidence, and motivation (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988). Students who can proficiently read a wide variety of materials and formats will be better prepared for the real-world reading tasks they will encounter in their lives. If we want to reach students, it is important to offer them variety in reading formats and to listen to their preferences.

For many students, "young adolescence marks the beginning of a downward trend in academics" (Ryan & Patrick, 2001, p. 438). This situation is especially grievous for reluctant readers, minority students, and students from economically impoverished backgrounds, whose school libraries typically do not provide sufficient types or quantities of books that are necessary for academic growth as well as interesting and relevant to students (Neuman & Celano, 2001). This situation is made worse by the fact that few schools provide reading materials for classroom library collections.

Good news

The studies reviewed in this column suggest that students are savvy in their understanding of reading motivation. If we listen to students and attend to what they say about classroom instruction and reading materials, schools can have profound effects on students' motivation, engagement, and, ultimately, achievement.

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