"Do You Have Any Other Good Books?"
What Does It Take to Engage Readers?

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Abstract: This article examines research surrounding the components of literacy practices that have a positive effect on student reading engagement. The research suggests three instructional practices that promote such engagement: student choice of texts, time to read, and social interactions around texts. In addition to explaining the research and instructional practices that lead to an increase in reading engagement among students, I also share current issues with reading engagement and the benefits toward reading achievement.

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One of the most memorable moments of my teaching career occurred after my students were dismissed at the end of the day. That June, our district gave reading teachers a small amount of money to start classroom libraries. That summer, I devoured books such as Miller's *Book Whisperer*, Kittle's *Book Love*, and Atwell's *The Reading Zone*, all life-changing books for me. I then filled the shelves of my new library with high-interest books my students would love. Besides spending the entire budget allotted by my district, I drained my Scholastic Book Club bonus points and accrued a hefty sum on my personal Amazon Prime account. However, by the end of the summer, I had the beginnings of a pretty amazing classroom library and was ready for the start of a new year.

Fast forward to a crisp October day, after the final bell had rung, and I was on the floor reshelving books in the library. One of my students, a 7th-grade girl who started the year reading below grade level and struggling to choose and finish books, approached me with excitement. She wanted to tell me about the book she'd just finished, one that I had recommended from our new library. She then asked if I had any other "good books to read." I tried to contain my excitement as I started grabbing titles out of the bins and

giving quick summaries to her. That is when she admitted, "You know what? I never used to like reading class, but this year I do." This moment, this flip in a student's desire to read, is one of the most memorable moments I have had as a teacher. It was this transformational change that caused me to wonder how I could engage *all* of the readers in my classroom in the same way. As I began to search for answers, I found an expanding amount of research shedding light on the types of instructional practices shown to increase students' reading motivation and engagement. The purpose of this article is to summarize the research on reading engagement and provide three research-based instructional practices that teachers can begin employing to maximize the reading engagement of students.

Issues with Reading Engagement

Past and current educational reform efforts place a heavy emphasis on improving reading achievement. Furthermore, a large number of resources provide advice about reading achievement disparities or close the achievement gap among students in the United States. Research has clearly shown that reading engagement is associated with improving reading achievement. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997), for example, find that "Children who read more, and more broadly, are likely to continue to do so, whereas children reading less frequently are less likely to increase their reading" (p. 429). Therefore, it is concerning to note that studies suggest that adolescent engagement in recreational reading is in decline (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Merga, 2014). Another concern is that institutionalized structures and literacy curricula may not be responsive to students and may in fact foster negative attitudes about reading that may lead to decreased reading achievement (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Despite these findings, and a link between reading achievement and engagement, pleas to make engaged reading a critical component of literacy instruction and curricula are still commonly overlooked or even ignored (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Benefits of Reading Engagement

Research shows that greater student reading engagement is correlated to an increase in reading achievement. As noted above, Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) cite research conducted by Stanovich and Cunningham (1992), which reveals that the amount that students read across a variety of subjects contributes to their motivation, achievement, and performance. Thus, students with high levels of motivation and engagement read nearly three times as many minutes per day as those with low levels of reading motivation. Therefore, they concluded that student reading engagement leads to an increase in the amount of reading, which in turn leads to an increase in reading achievement. Furthermore, Guthrie and Klauda (2014) conducted a study with 615 seventh-grade students in order to examine the effects of classroom practices on reading comprehension and motivation. The researchers implemented Concept Oriented

Reading Instruction (CORI), an approach that incorporates informational text instruction with motivation and engagement supports such as student choice, relevant materials, and peer collaboration. A meta-analysis of CORI showed a large effect size (0.73) for informational text comprehension. When comparing the effects of CORI on comprehension to traditional reading instruction, they concluded that the increase in comprehension was due to the engagement components of CORI that were absent from the traditional instruction.

Research also reveals that greater reading engagement increases student agency and self-efficacy. Wilhelm (2016) states that students don't just consume what they read, they transact with books and make them their own. In other words, they don't passively receive them but instead actively make meaning that is relevant to their current experiences and life challenges. Ivey and Johnston (2015) noted that increased engagement with books and discourse about them with others helps students recognize possibilities for shaping their lives. Through recognizing these possibilities, adolescents transformed their interactions with their social environment and gained agency with respect to their own development. In addition, students claimed to be more personally open, to understand themselves better, and to have deeper relational bonds with others.

Three Instructional Practices that Promote Student Reading Engagement

Free Choice. The first practice is to allow students choice in what they read. Teachers can foster intrinsic motivation by engaging children with high interest activities relating to their reading. According to a study on children's motivation for reading, the way to do this is to give children choices about which books to read and reading activities to engage in (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004). In 2006, Guthrie and co-authors also found that reading tasks associated with student choice based on relevance led to high motivation, engagement, and an increase in reading comprehension. In addition, a survey conducted by Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that more than 40% of middle school students have access to these materials, which increases reading motivation and engagement. They also found that the students not engaged in the

assigned reading books and those without a choice in their reading commented that they didn't understand the purpose of the reading exercises or that they found the material boring. Overall, their findings reveal that, according to middle school students, a critical component of student reading engagement is control over what they read.

In a study by Ivey and Johnston on efforts of increasing reading engagement, the researchers focused on the instructional goal of changing the rules governing reading. The modified instructional practices allowed for students to make individual choices relating to personally relevant books. In the process, Ivey and Johnston (2015) found an increase in student choice based reading engagement seemed to transform the classroom community by increasing the knowledge each student had of others and of themselves. This increase in engagement, the researchers noted, altered the relational properties of the classroom in a positive way.

Furthermore, Assor, Kaplan, and Roth found that teachers who allow for student choice in reading and intentionally foster the importance of students' relevant choices, create a space that allows students to realize personal goals and interests. The authors of the study found that allowing students to make relevant choices about what they read increases autonomy and engagement (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). Wilhelm (2016) also asserts that research convinces us that teachers need to grant students more choice in reading. Wilhelm points out that his study shows even though readers were given choice in what they wanted to read, the readers were still using all of the complex reading strategies of expert readers required by the next generation standards. Therefore, Wilhelm maintains that educators need to trust students' choices and realize what can be learned about how to best nurture and teach students by looking at their personal reading choices (Wilhelm, 2016). Johnston and Ivey (2013) also found that when students were not limited to teacher regulated or assigned reading but could instead choose their text, they made choices based on personal relevance, often despite of text difficulty. The desire to read books of their choice enabled student persistence through challenging texts. A study conducted by de Sousa and Oakhill (1996) found that for students who had poor reading comprehension ability, the effectiveness of comprehension monitoring was dependent upon the child's level of interest; monitoring

for these students was more effective with texts of high interest and engagement levels. This finding led the researchers to conclude that poor comprehenders may have motivational problems which can be overcome by making reading more interesting and engaging to them. Thus, de Sousa and Oakhill propose poor comprehenders be taught with personally relevant texts that engage their interest; therefore, more emphasis should be placed on teaching children under conditions of high interest and allowing for student choice in reading materials.

Free Time. The second practice is to allocate more time to read during class. Numerous research studies on student reading engagement have shown the importance of creating time for students to read during school. Ivey and Johnson contend that an increase in reading time allows for purposeful and prolonged absorption in books (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). A survey conducted by Ivey and Broaddus (2001) on what middle school students value specific to their engagement in reading class found that 63% most value free reading time. In the same study, students also reported feeling that silent reading time gives them a way to make more sense of the text and that it frees them up to concentrate, comprehend, make meaning, and reflect without being disturbed or distracted by other reading tasks. Furthermore, students indicated that spending time alone with the text aided their understanding (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Ivey and Johnston (2013) also noted that when students are deeply engaged in their reading, their reading extends well beyond the typically allocation of 20 minutes a day.

Social Interaction. The third practice is social interaction among peers reading a common text. Ivey and Johnston report that encouraging students to engage dialogically with books is associated with higher reading achievement, for discourse leads to a sense of relatedness and of feeling appreciated and understood by others (as cited in Nystrand, 1997). Furthermore, Ivey and Johnston's (2013) research found that students feel the need to engage in important common cultural conversations around what they are reading. In another study, Ivey and Johnston (2015) found that, when fully engaged,

students' silent reading was not disrupted by conversations among other students, and that readers preferred being able to solicit conversations with other students when needed. In fact, students even developed strategies for how and when to solicit conversations only with willing peers. Merga's (2015) study on the effects of peers on student reading engagement finds that adolescents who deem reading as socially unacceptable were less likely to engage in recreational reading. Merga states the importance of raising the social capital of books in the classroom and advises that reluctant readers could be encouraged to become connected readers by increasing the communication around books in the classroom. She further suggests that students should engage in more talk about books in the classroom and on online book forums in order to "situate book reading as a fun and beneficial pastime that can compete with other recreational activities" (p. 480).

Closing Thoughts

"Do you have any good books to read?" asked Bailey, a sixth grade girl who was not even in my class in November. A buzz had been created in the hallways that I have an awesome classroom library filled with the latest and best books, so Bailey kept borrowing them throughout the remainder of the school year. During the last week of school I was organizing the classroom library, getting it ready for the summer break, and Bailey came over to help. "You know," she said, "I have read more books this year than I have ever read any other year. You have so many good books to read."

It is apparent from the many personal stories students share with me, as well as the extensive academic research, that the combination of providing access to interesting texts, allocating greater time in the classroom for reading, and providing plenty of opportunities for social involvement related to reading make a powerful trio for building student reading engagement. In turn, this engagement promotes growth in student agency and self-efficacy. Indeed, it can create a buzz so powerful that students seek out great books they will enjoy from a well-assembled library and carve out time to read and discuss the books with teachers, parents, and peers. It can be the genesis that sparks a lifelong love of reading. I encourage you to employ these strategies with passion and celebrate the moments when students, maybe even formerly reluctant readers, ask you if you have another good book to read.

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