

# SEVEN RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

## What's Most Important to Know About Motivation to Read

*Linda B. Gambrell*

Why is it so important for teachers to consider the role of motivation in literacy learning? Consider the finding of the report of the Program for International Student Assessment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010) that interest in reading predicted students' reading comprehension. Across all 64 countries participating in the Program for International Student Assessment, students who enjoyed reading the most performed significantly better than students who enjoyed reading the least. Perhaps of most concern was the finding that 37% of students reported that they do not read for enjoyment at all. These findings are startling. Clearly, instruction that provides students with decoding and comprehension skills and strategies is not sufficient. If students are not motivated to read, they will never reach their full literacy potential. A study conducted by Guthrie, Schafer, and Huang (2001) revealed that students with high reading engagement but lower parental education and income had higher reading achievement than students with lower reading engagement and the same background characteristics. This research suggests that reading engagement is more important than students' family background.

The International Reading Association (IRA) has consistently recognized the significant role of motivation in reading development. An IRA position paper published in 2000 emphasized the importance of "the development and maintenance of a motivation to read." This position statement, as well as a substantial increase in the research on reading motivation over the past two decades, acknowledges the important role of reading motivation in reading development (Malloy, Marinak, & Gambrell, 2010).

Motivation to read can be defined as the likelihood of engaging in reading or choosing to read (Gambrell, 2009, 2011). The *engagement perspective* is linked to motivation and has strong implications for practice (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Tracey & Morrow, 2006). This perspective articulates the differences between *engaged* and *disengaged* readers and focuses on the characteristics of the motivated or engaged reader. In keeping with this perspective, engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to

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read for a variety of personal goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text. Therefore, promoting intrinsic motivation to read should be given a high priority in the reading curriculum. Seven research-based rules of engagement are described next, along with practical classroom tips for supporting and nurturing students' motivation to read.

## Seven Rules of Engagement

### ***1. Students Are More Motivated to Read When the Reading Tasks and Activities Are Relevant to Their Lives***

One way to enhance reading motivation and achievement is to help students find value and meaning in classroom reading tasks and activities (Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, Humenick, & Littles, 2007; Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). When students make connections between the material they are reading and their lives, they become more involved and engaged in comprehending text (Deci, 1992; Guthrie et al., 2007; Hulleman et al., 2010). Motivation is enhanced when instructional practices focus on connections between school reading and the personal lives of students. In a recent study, students who were asked



to write about how material they were learning was relevant to their lives were more motivated and more interested than students who were asked to just write about the material (Hulleman et al., 2010).

#### **Classroom Tip for Helping Students Become More Aware of the Relevance of Reading Tasks and Activities.**

Have students keep a “reading diary” of what they read during self-selected reading time. Encourage them to reflect on what they have read and write for 3 minutes about how the material connects to their own lives. This technique can be used for informational as well as narrative text

and in content area reading lessons as well.

### ***2. Students Are More Motivated to Read When They Have Access to a Wide Range of Reading Materials***

Motivation to read and reading achievement are higher when the classroom environment is rich in reading materials and includes books from an array of genres and text types, magazines, the Internet, resource materials, and real-life documents (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993; Guthrie et al., 2007; Kim, 2004; Neuman & Celano, 2001). It stands to reason that increasing the number of books and other reading materials in the classroom will have a positive effect on the amount and quality of the reading experiences of the students. Providing a rich variety of reading materials communicates to students that reading is a worthwhile and valuable activity and sets the stage for students to develop the reading habit.

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Researchers and educators caution that although having many books in the classroom library is essential, it is not sufficient for improving reading motivation or achievement (Byrnes, 2000; Kim & White, 2008). Access to books also implies that teachers should invite children to read by raising interest and curiosity about books and other materials.

**Classroom Tip to Increase Student Access to a Wide Range of Reading Materials.**

There is no doubt that reading aloud to students is a powerful and important way to motivate them to engage in reading for pleasure. Most teachers read books aloud to students on a regular, if not daily, basis. In addition to teacher read-aloud, consider doing a weekly “teacher book-selling session” in which you do a quick sharing of about 10 to 12 books—piquing children’s interest and curiosity about the books. Doing so will significantly increase the number of books that students know about, and students are far more likely to choose a book that they know something about.

**3. Students Are More Motivated to Read When They Have Ample Opportunities to Engage in Sustained Reading**

According to Hiebert (2009), one source of students’ lack of motivation to read can be traced to an insufficient amount

of time spent reading in classrooms. Classrooms where students have ample opportunities to engage in sustained reading provide the necessary foundation that is essential for supporting students in becoming motivated and proficient readers. Simply put, reading practice helps students become better readers. Studies have documented that time spent reading is associated with both reading proficiency and intrinsic motivation to read (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993; Mizelle, 1997; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990).

In a study of classrooms where 90 minutes or more was devoted to reading/language arts instruction, Brenner, Hiebert, and Tompkins (2009) found that students spent an average of only 18 minutes actually engaged in the sustained engagement with text. Foorman et al. (2006) examined time allocation during reading instruction in 107 first- and second-grade classrooms and found that the amount of time allocated to text reading was positively associated with growth in reading proficiency. Only time devoted to text reading significantly explained gains on posttest reading measures, including word reading, decoding, and passage comprehension. No other time allocation factors, including time spent on word, alphabetic, or phonemic awareness instruction, contributed to reading growth.

Other studies have investigated the effects of time spent reading in school and out of school on reading achievement. Taylor et al. (1990) reported that time spent reading in school was highly correlated with reading achievement. In a subsequent study, Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, and Cox (1999) found that the amount of time spent reading in and out of school predicted reading comprehension. According to Hiebert (2009), given



the evidence that time spent reading, particularly during the school day, is strongly associated with reading proficiency, it is surprising that the time that the amount of time students spend in sustained reading of text during the school day has not increased substantially over the years.

**Classroom Tip for Increasing Sustained Engagement With Text.**

Some students who have low motivation to read do not read over the summer months when they are out of school. These students need to develop and build the habit of sustaining their engagement with text. At the beginning of the school year, instead of starting off with a period of 20 or 30 minutes of self-selected reading time, start with a shorter period of time—10 minutes, for example. Gradually increase reading time over a period of several weeks until students are able to sustain their engagement in reading for longer periods of time.

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#### ***4. Students Are More Motivated to Read When They Have Opportunities to Make Choices About What They Read and How They Engage in and Complete Literacy Tasks***

Choice has been identified as a powerful force that allows students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning (Rettig & Hendricks, 2000). Studies indicate that motivation increases when students have opportunities to make choices about what they learn and when they believe they have some autonomy or control over their own learning (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In a recent study, students who were allowed to choose their homework assignment from a number of acceptable options reported higher intrinsic motivation, felt more competent, and performed better on unit assessments than students who were assigned homework (Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010). The researchers concluded that providing choices is an effective way to support the development of intrinsic motivation.

Guthrie et al. (2007) explored fourth-grade students' motivation and reading comprehension growth and reported that autonomy was supported when students selected their own books, as compared with having books chosen for them by teachers or other adults. In addition, autonomy was supported when students acquired strategies for choosing books they could read and for finding interesting books and acquired books for personal ownership. It appears that students who are allowed to choose their own reading materials are more motivated to read, expend more effort, and gain better understanding of the text (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2007; Schiefele, 1991; Spaulding, 1992).



#### **Classroom Tip for Increasing Student Opportunities to Make Choices.**

Struggling readers often make poor choices about texts to read for pleasure, most often selecting books that are too difficult. These students need help in learning how to choose appropriate reading materials. During teacher–student conferences, teachers can support these students by selecting four or five books related to the students' interest that are at the appropriate reading level and letting these students select which of these books they want to read. This is called *bounded choice* because students still get to choose what they want to read; however, the range of materials is narrowed to text at the appropriate reading level.

#### ***5. Students Are More Motivated to Read When They Have Opportunities to Socially Interact With Others About the Text They Are Reading***

*Social interaction* is defined as communicating with others, through writing and discussion, about what has been read (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Social interaction includes talking about books with others,

reading together with others, borrowing and sharing books with others, talking about books with peers in class, and sharing writing about books with others (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Von Secker, 2000).

Social interaction supports motivation to read in a variety of ways, according to Turner and Paris (1995). First, peer comments can pique a student's curiosity. Second, student observations of their peers' progress may increase their confidence in their own ability to succeed. Third, working with others promotes student interest and engagement. A number of studies have documented that instruction that incorporates social interaction about text increases students' motivation to read and reading comprehension achievement (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, in press; Guthrie et al., 2007; Ng, Guthrie, Van Meter, McCann, & Alao, 1998).

#### **Classroom Tip for Increasing Social Interactions About Text.**

After self-selected reading time, take 3 or 4 minutes for students to turn to a partner to do a "quick share" about what they have just read. Set a timer so that each partner gets a minute to a minute and a half to



talk, and then let the other partner have a turn. The only rule is that students must talk about what they have just finished reading.

### **6. Students Are More Motivated to Read When They Have Opportunities to Be Successful With Challenging Texts**

One feature of effective reading instruction is offering reading tasks and activities that advance, rather than overwhelm, the reader (Turner, 1995). If the text is too difficult, the reader is more likely to give up. On the other hand, if the text is too easy, the reader is more likely to become bored. The most motivating reading tasks and activities are moderately challenging, requiring the student to put forth some effort—but with effort comes some level of success. Success with challenging reading tasks provides students with evidence of accomplishment, resulting in increased feelings of competence and increased motivation (Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Research indicates that students who *believe* that they are capable and competent readers are more likely to outperform those

who do not hold such beliefs (Paris & Oka, 1986; Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997).

Struggling readers do not necessarily fail in reading because they lack motivation; they often fail because they do not experience progress and competence (Becker, McElvany, Kortenbruck, 2010). It is critical to reading development that teachers offer students the experiences of progress and competence in reading.

### **Classroom Tip for Helping Students Be Successful With Challenging Texts.**

All students want to be viewed as reading challenging text. That is why so many struggling readers select texts that are far too difficult for their pleasure reading. Instead of labeling classroom bookshelves as “Easy,” “Average,” and “Difficult,” designate the bookshelves as “Hard,” “Harder,” and “Hardest”—students do not mind selecting a book designated as “hard,” whereas they are more likely to avoid books labeled “easy.” This technique also works well for designating leveled learning stations.

### **7. Students Are More Motivated To Read When Classroom Incentives Reflect the Value and Importance of Reading**

The research is clear that constructive and supportive teacher feedback provides a powerful and motivating incentive to learn (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Deci, 1971; Wang & Holcombe,

2010). In a study of upper elementary students, Lepper and Cordova (1992) found that teacher praise provided verbal scaffolding, support, and direction to the students and led to increased student motivation to learn. In addition, the study revealed that specific, elaborated, and embellished teacher praise was more motivational than tangible incentives such as prizes. However, teacher praise is not always effective. If students perceive teacher praise to be dishonest or undeserved, motivation may decline because the students may feel that the praise is false or unearned (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). When teacher praise is given and interpreted as recognition of achievement, it can increase students’ feelings of competence and motivation (Fink, Boggiano, Main, Barrett, & Katz, 1992; Gambrell & Marinak, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Research is less clear about the effects of tangible incentives, such as prizes, on student motivation and performance. In general, tangible incentives have been found to undermine the development of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1992). Clear and replicable research findings on the effects of rewards reveal that offering students tangible rewards, such a money or prizes, for performing an intrinsically motivating activity leads to a decrease in intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1971, 1972, 1975; Lepper & Green, 1978).

Sincere and constructive teacher praise and teacher feedback are

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always closely linked to the desired student behavior, whereas tangible incentives (e.g., gold stars and stickers) are usually unrelated to the desired behavior. Marinak and Gambrell (2008) investigated the effects of incentives given to students for completing a reading task that were either related (books) or unrelated (prizes) to the desired behavior (reading). The major finding was that students who were given a book as a reward and students who received no reward were more motivated to engage in subsequent reading than students who received prizes as rewards. This finding is in keeping with Deci's (1992) research, which indicated that tangible rewards undermine motivation. However, the findings of the Marinak and Gambrell (2008) study suggest that when a tangible reward is *related to the desired behavior*, such as a book reward for reading, reading motivation is not undermined. The use of appropriate incentives that are clearly linked to the desired behavior of reading would include books, bookmarks, extra time for pleasure reading, and extra teacher read-aloud time. Such incentives may communicate the value and importance of engaging in reading.

### Classroom Tip for Classroom Incentives That Reflect the Value and Importance of

**Reading.** Students, like adults, like to read books and materials that are new and up to date. Although there is always a place for the classics in any classroom library, there are probably a fair number of books that should be hulled from the shelves. I like to think of the classroom library as being similar to many a teacher's clothes closet. How many of us have looked into a closet filled to capacity with clothes and said, "I can't find a thing to wear!" When children

are searching the classroom library shelves for something to read, they often can't find a book of interest because the shelves are filled with old and outdated books. If you can receive permission to give away these old and outdated books, they will become magic in the hands of your students. Label these books with colored tape or put them on a special shelf. When you have approximately 40 books on the shelf, pick a special day, such as Valentine's Day, the day before Thanksgiving break, or St. Patrick's Day, and tell students that they can pick any book from the shelf that they would like for their home library. This is a terrific way to show students in your classroom that books and reading are the best reward!

### Motivation Matters

We all hope that our students will become motivated and engaged readers. Highly motivated students who see reading as a desirable activity will initiate and sustain their engagement in reading and thus become better readers.

The seven rules of engagement provide key research-based practices for promoting students' intrinsic motivation to read. There has been a dramatic increase in research on motivation to read over the past decade; however, more research is needed that will help us better understand reading engagement and how we can support students in becoming proficient, persistent, and passionate readers.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- “Using Greeting Cards to Motivate Students and Enhance Literacy Skills” by Tara Barnstead

### IRA Books

- *Essential Readings on Motivation* edited by Jacquelynn A. Malloy, Barbara A. Marinak, and Linda B. Gambrell
- *Inspiring Reading Success: Interest and Motivation in an Age of High-Stakes Testing* edited by Rosalie Fink and S. Jay Samuels

### IRA Journal Articles

- “What Do the Kids Think?” by Andrew B. Pachtman and Karen A. Wilson, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2006
- “What Teachers Can Learn About Reading Motivation Through Conversations With Children” by Kathryn M. Edmunds and Kathryn L. Bauserman, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2006