

Motivating Adolescents to Read

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Abstract

Motivating today's adolescents to read is a challenge. This article discusses the kinds of literacy instructional practices that leverage what we know about adolescent motivation. It also reviews several evidence-based literacy interventions designed to engage and motivate adolescent readers that can potentially lead to improvements in student reading motivation and academic outcomes.

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Motivating Adolescents to Read

Encouraging America's students to read is becoming more and more of a hard sell. Analysis of national surveys over the past five decades indicates that the percentage of twelfth graders reporting reading a book or magazine almost every day declined from 60% in the late 1970s to just 16% in 2016 (Twenge et al., 2019). The average number of books reported read per year by twelfth graders decreased from just over 5.15 to 3.24 over the same period. By 2016, a third of students did not read a single book for pleasure in their final year of high school (Twenge et al., 2019). A 2018 national survey in the U.S. found a continued decline since 2010 in the percentages of students reporting that they read frequently and that reading was fun (Scholastic, 2019). The decline is most pronounced between the ages of eight and nine (57% vs. 35% reporting they read 5-7 days a week) and carries into adolescence. Not surprisingly, students' time spent on social media, texting, and other internet use has grown dramatically. Research has shown that motivation contributes significantly to reading achievement (Retelsdorf et al., 2011; Schiefele et al., 2012) and that improvement in reading is hard to achieve when students lack the motivation to engage in reading (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Motivating students to read more is a critical first step for increasing their academic success and getting them ready for adult responsibilities.

The problem of low reading motivation and achievement is even more pronounced in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, where many adolescents enter high school with underdeveloped reading skills that often lead to academic failure, motivational roadblocks, and pervasive disengagement in high school. The achievement gap between students from high- and low-income groups remains, even if the gap in school readiness rates has narrowed somewhat

(Reardon, 2011; Reardon & Portillo, 2016). Lack of success in the past makes students less likely to want to read, which leads to a continued downward spiral. How do we reverse these trends?

Finding ways to help struggling adolescent readers without sacrificing a standard high school English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum has proved challenging for most schools. Although students may flounder in a standard ELA course, excluding them from that curriculum will hinder their ability to catch up to their peers. How can we find more ways to supplement and accelerate learning? One of the five recommendations in the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide for Improving Adolescent Literacy focuses on the need to “increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning” (Kamil et al., 2008, p. 26). In this article we discuss instructional practices that improve reading motivation and characteristics of promising adolescent literacy interventions that could help increase student motivation to read and improve their reading outcomes.

Increasing Reading Motivation in the Classroom

Secondary school practices such as less reading instruction, lack of choice, poorer personal connections with teachers, lack of real-world connections, and complex text may explain why adolescents have lower levels of reading motivation compared to elementary school students (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). However, increasing reading motivation is not an impossible task. Research shows that there are several instructional practices that, when included in a reading program, could support the growth of reading self-efficacy, frequency, engagement, and motivation for reading. Not surprisingly, these instructional practices address students’ needs for autonomy, belong, and competence, sometimes described as the “ABCs of Motivation” (Anderman & Leake, 2005).

When students are given opportunities to exercise their autonomy and make choices while learning, their intrinsic motivation increases (Guthrie et al., 2004) and they take ownership in the choice and will try harder than students who are not provided choices (Beymer & Thomson, 2015). Providing choice leads to outcomes such as effort, task performance, perceived competence, and preference for challenge (Patall et al., 2008). The opportunity for choice relates strongly to secondary students' reading behavior, engagement, and achievement (Davis et al., 2020).

Further, creating a sense of belonging in the classroom and encouraging student collaboration in learning can increase students' reading motivation. Research shows that through discussion of comprehension questions with their peers, students can draw meaning from complex text (McKinstery & Topping, 2003). Students are mentally interacting with the text as they search for references or inferences to defend their answers. They also gain a deeper meaning of the text when they hear others' reactions to the text and make comparisons. On post-reading comprehension measures, students who participated in collaborative learning experiences outperformed those who worked individually (Klingner et al., 1998; McKinstery & Topping, 2003; Stevens et al., 1987). Adolescent students who rate themselves as pro-social during reading activities also report higher levels of reading behavior, frequency, and reading achievement (Davis et al., 2020).

Another way to increase reading motivation and self-efficacy involves increasing students' reading competence by teaching them how to use reading strategies independently. When students become proficient and independent users of reading strategies, they become more confident in their reading skill (Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Schunk & Rice, 1992). Students with high confidence for reading will persist at difficult reading tasks and work to complete those

tasks (Schunk, 1989, 2003), use a greater variety of cognitive strategies for processing information (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990), place a higher value for tasks at which they succeed (Wigfield, 1994), and gain higher grades (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990) than students with low confidence. Self-efficacy has been shown to relate highly to reading behavior, engagement, and achievement for secondary students (Davis et al., 2020).

To make reading strategy learning interesting for students, strategy instruction should use conceptual themes (Perkins & Unger, 1999) and driving questions (Blumenfeld et al., 1991) that “provide a natural context for teaching and understanding” (Guthrie & Cox, p. 290). Having deep interest in a topic helps motivate students to learn difficult skills, such as reading comprehension strategies (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010; Kaldi et al., 2011). Research indicates that strategy instruction based within a content approach, through deep discussion around a specific content, is more effective than learning strategies only through direct instruction (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009).

We also support student motivation when we provide them interesting texts on their reading level. As texts become more formidable in secondary school, struggling adolescent readers disengage from the reading (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Matching materials to reading levels brings students success and increases their self-efficacy (O’Connor et al., 2002).

Promising Adolescent Reading Interventions

How do we translate this motivation research into practice in reading instruction? According to a recent research review (Baye et al., 2018), the most effective adolescent reading interventions particularly emphasize student motivation and relationships in the classroom. These researchers found that programs with the largest positive effects on student reading involved one-on-one tutoring, individualized/personalized learning, or cooperative learning.

Effective adolescent literacy interventions highlighted in both this review and the What Works Clearinghouse include Achieve 3000, Read 180, and Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention (STARI). We discuss each of these as well as a newly evaluated reading intervention below.

Achieve 3000 is a supplemental online reading program that engages students individually in non-fiction texts at their reading level and provides opportunities for students to respond to the text in different ways. Teachers receive professional development that equips them to use Achieve3000 data on student progress to respond particular student weaknesses in literacy areas, including vocabulary and comprehension skills. The recommended dosage is 80 lessons per year. Studies have shown potentially promising effects on reading comprehension (WWC, 2018). The program is available through the Achieve 3000 website.

READ 180 is a widely used year-long intervention, delivered in a 90 minute block period, designed to supplement regular ELA instruction (WWC, 2016). Designed to engage students effectively, it involves a combination of whole group and small group instruction and individualized computer-assisted instruction and practice in grammar, writing, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. The intervention also includes professional development and a learning management system for teachers. Several studies have found significant positive effects on reading achievement, while other studies had indeterminate effects (WWC, 2016). The package is distributed commercially through Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

The Strategic Adolescent Reading Initiative (STARI) seeks to address reading motivation directly through engaging and relevant texts and instructional strategies that meet students at their reading level, encourage student voice, and emphasize student collaboration (Kim et al., 2017; Vaughn et al., 2022). The full-year course serves as supplemental reading instruction to the regular ELA course. The impact study demonstrated that the intervention's effect on reading

outcomes was mediated by student engagement in the instructional activities, and that there was a significantly positive effect on several reading outcomes. STARI is available from the SERP Institute website.

ALFA (Accelerating Literacy for Adolescents) Lab is a recently evaluated one-semester elective designed to boost reading achievement, motivation, and frequency among struggling 9th grader readers who also take the regular English course (Schoeneberger et al., 2023). ALFA's multicultural curriculum materials include high-interest readings and associated activities for three units (Feisty Felines, Heroes, and Galaxy). Similar in some ways to READ 180 and STARI, ALFA involves both whole class instruction and rotation of small groups of students to four stations during each 90-minute lesson (which can be divided into two class meetings in schools with shorter periods). ALFA's small group components include Main Station (teacher-led guided reading activities), Collaboration Station, Wordology, and Media Madness (where students respectively collaborate to construct and apply knowledge from a text, master key vocabulary and use it in writing, and employ media to research unit-related information and produce a capstone project). Professional development includes summer training for teachers and assistants, and monthly coaching and implementation supports.

The external evaluation found positive (though not statistically significant) overall impacts of ALFA on reading achievement, motivation, and reading frequency (Schoeneberger et al., 2023). But the impact of ALFA on reading frequency for male and Hispanic students – groups that may struggle more than others with reading motivation -- was large and statistically significant. There is some evidence that the positive effects of ALFA on reading achievement were at least partially mediated through its effect on reading motivation and frequency. Given that the evaluation's promising results occurred during the pandemic period, continued attempts

to assess ALFA's effectiveness appear to be warranted. Curriculum materials (teacher manual, lesson plans, and student materials and activities) are available at no cost online

(<https://alfa.every1graduates.org/>).

Conclusions

Motivating today's adolescents to read is a challenge. Literacy interventions designed to engage and motivate adolescent readers can potentially address this challenge and lead to improvements in academic outcomes. We encourage school leaders to try out evidence-based literacy programs such as those we have highlighted above. And as the cultural milieu continues to evolve for adolescents, developing additional relevant and engaging literacy programs remains a top national priority if we are to raise up a new generation of readers.

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