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LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

Motivating Readers

BY SAM SEBESTA

Where does reading motivation begin?

Most teachers would agree that some problems don't yield to a simple solution. For instance, to transform an unmotivated reader into an avidly motivated reader takes more than a label and an overnight antidote. To some, this complexity of motivation may seem a shame. To others, it is one of the welcome challenges of teaching.

It's well to remember at the outset that there are well-motivated readers in just about every classroom. Studies may show that some students do little or no voluntary reading (4.6 minutes per day in the study by Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988) or that interest in reading declines as students move through the grades from 1 to 6 (McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth, 1995). But it is important to remember that those findings are based on medians. They mask the substantial numbers of

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children and young adults who do read, who love to read, and who know and share the benefits of reading. Hence the job of motivating readers doesn't begin at zero; it requires building on what is already there. In fact, recommended practices, which I'll review in this article, may boost the reading health of everybody, the unmotivated and the motivated alike.

What are factors in reading motivation?

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) researched children's motives for reading. Highly motivated readers, they found, possessed:

1. self-efficacy, confidence in their ability to do the reading task at hand,
2. intrinsic motivation, belief in the interest value, attainment value, or utility of reading, and
3. belief in heightened social outcomes resulting from reading.

On the other hand, G. Kylene Beers (1996) studied aliterates, young people who could read at some level but who did not choose to do so. The title of her report "No Time, No Interest, No Way!" suggests a variety of causes of nonmotivation. Her suggestions for motivating the dormant, uncommitted, or unskilled reader include book clubs, personal choice, nonfiction, movie tie-ins, read-alouds, art activities, and magazines as starters. Not a bad beginning!

What else? In some classrooms, busy with tasks of how to read, such information may seem secondary. "Teach them their skills and then they'll want to read" may be the assumption. Yet, as Morrow (1991) has documented, "Skilled readers are not necessarily voluntary readers. Even though a child demonstrates academic ability when tested, voluntary reading habits may not develop" (p. 683f). Apparently, then, it takes more than skills lessons to develop motivated readers. The factors cited above—self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, social outcomes, and a host of engaging materials and activities—may contribute understanding to characteristics of the motivated reader, but they don't tell us how to develop these characteristics. As the perplexed first-grader quoted in *Priceless Proverbs* (Stark, 1982) observed, "You can lead a horse to water, but how?" Here are some suggestions for addressing that how.

Expose readers to an array of genres

The potential reader needs a voice in choosing what to read. But for the unmotivated, choice may be random: the shortest book, the book displayed at eye level, or no book at all (Reutzel and Gali, 1997). To combat this randomness, promote informed choice. Acquaint children and young adults with the array of literature types, or genres, available to them.

How can poetry be used to develop motivated readers?

Kathy Perfect (1999), a classroom teacher, asserts that poetry "is a genre especially suited to the struggling or unmotivated reader" (p. 728). Kutiper and Wilson (1993) add: "The larger the diversity of poems and poets encountered, the greater the possibility for interests to develop and bloom" (p. 34). It is not only the funny poems of Jack Prelutsky, Shel Silverstein, John Ciardi, and Ogden Nash that are chosen, but also the reflective, sometimes poignant, personal poems of Pat Mora, Nikki Grimes, Janet S. Wong, Joyce Carol Thomas, Mary Ann Hoberman, Patricia Hubbell, Arnold Adoff, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

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Often the poems of choice are brief, compared to other genres. Their rhymes, if rhymes are present, and their rhythms and repetitions encourage self-efficacy in the hesitant reader. The voice of the modern children's poet is a personal one, capturing universal experience and interest. What is more, teachers often encourage the social aspect of poetry through practices recommended by experts (Shapiro, 1985). These practices include oral interpretation by the teacher before the group, active participation by children such as rereading the poem aloud, and the treatment of poetry as an exploration of feelings rather than as an analysis of the poem.

Finally, in high-motivation poetry sessions, readers are presented with a cluster of poems surrounding a theme so that they may relate one poem to another and choose a favorite for extended activity.

How can stories be used to develop motivated readers?

The term *story* covers a lot of ground! Here it refers to fiction—made-up narratives with a sequence of events, a goal or problem, and a structure or theme to show the significance (Sebesta, Calder, and Cleland, 1982). There is, of course, great variety in story; all readers should experience this variety, including but not confined to

realistic-fiction chapter books. A helpful survey is in *Children's Literature, Briefly* (Tunnell and Jacobs, 2000), with chapters on traditional tales, modern fantasy, contemporary fiction, and historical fiction.

You might begin with picture stories. All the subgenres of the story can be found in picture books—they lost the label *for-small-children-only* long ago. This format helps the novice reader with unfamiliar settings, e.g., *Sam and the Lucky Monkey* (Chinn, 1994) or *The Great Ball Game: A Muskogee Story* (Bruchac, 1994).

Some, such as David Wiesner's *Sector 7* (1999), are almost guaranteed to build self-efficacy in the observant older child. It is impossible to say which story type is most intrinsically motivating. One child's can't-put-it-down may be another child's can't-pick-it-up. Eve Bunting's *Train to Somewhere* (1996) can transport a reluctant reader into the realm of child-centered historical fiction, while others opt for modern fiction displaying "a roomful of themselves." Through activities such as oral reading, buddy reading, and even peer tutoring (Kreuger and Braun, 1998–1999), all ways to increase social payoff, teachers can motivate readers to make informed choices of stories.

In a word, the voice of modern nonfiction is accessible, an invitation to explore and find out.

Which genre wins at motivating readers?

The surprising answer to this question may be nonfiction, which includes informational materials and biographies. Ever since Margery Fisher's ground-breaking classic *Matters of Fact* (1972), children's nonfiction has been having a face lift and a rising reputation. Now its authors rank high on lists of children's favorites. After all, these lists include Joanna Cole, Franklyn M. Branley, Patricia Lauber, Faith McNulty, Jean Fritz, James Haskins, George Ancona, Carmen Lomas Garza, Russell Freedman, Kathryn Lasky, and Joanne Ryder!

One reason for the popularity of nonfiction is the respect and response to children's "eager curiosity about the world of past, present, and future," as Fisher noted (p. 9). Hancock (2000) documents readers' reactions to informational books and biography (pp. 278–284), finding motives of pleasure (aesthetic) as well as utility (efferent) in children's responses. The topics of interest aren't limited to immediate experience; they extend to dolphins, dinosaurs, moon travel, eyeballs, orphan trains, wonders of the ancient world, and paintings. In biography, they run the gamut from Paul Revere to Wilma Rudolph, from Kate Shelley to Lou Gehrig and Langston Hughes. Here, the world of motivation is wide open.

Three qualities of recent nonfiction should be noted because these give clues to its motivational power:

1. Structure Much informational nonfiction is nonlinear. Instead of narrative or story form, it may be structured as a category followed by examples, questions, and answers, or evidence leading to a conclusion. Once it was believed that primary-age children could not comprehend these structures; that their early reading should be confined to "stories." Now it is found that such structures are quite comprehensible once they are introduced through nonfiction examples. For many early readers these structures are prime motivation.

The structures of informational nonfiction have one other advantage, if we will permit it: reluctant readers need not start at page one and read sequentially through the entire book. Instead, they can be encouraged to dip in anywhere to whet their interest.

2. Graphics In the best of informational nonfiction and biography, illustration isn't an afterthought; it's integral to the presentation. Readers, including those who are reluctant to tackle linear text, will find eye-openers in modern graphics, including rebuses, pictomaps, diagrams, pictographs, flow charts, and cartoons.

3. Voice Voice on the written page may be hard to define, but it is not difficult to demonstrate. Try reading

aloud the nonfiction of some of the well-known authors such as those listed earlier. The voice that emerges is not that of an authority preaching to the young but of an information sharer addressing a reader whose interest and enthusiasm are assumed. In a word, the voice of modern nonfiction is accessible, an invitation to explore and find out. Under such circumstances, Dreher's (1998) advice is sound: "Read to the children every day and be systematic in including nonfiction books, magazines, and other materials" (p. 415). And it seems appropriate that extensive lists of good literature for children include a balance of fiction and nonfiction (Manning, Manning, and Long, 1997).

Consider reader response theory in developing motivated readers

Some people read passively. Poetry, story, nonfiction—the material hardly ripples their consciousness. At the other extreme are readers so immersed, so motivated, that they stop reading only to come up for air. The difference may be explained by reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995), which also gives us ideas for improving motivation for reading.

First comes evocation, the reader's transaction with text. The best way to understand evocation is to think of your own reading experience. When were you so immersed in reading you didn't notice the time or page numbers? When did someone read to you so that you got lost in the experience? Such times may be most closely associated with poems and stories, but evocation embraces nonfiction too. The six-year-old absorbed in measuring dinosaur tracks (Schlein, 1991), the eight-year-old "living through" the journey of Charles Lindbergh (Burleigh, 1991), and the ten-year-old devouring the sports page are also experiencing evocation.

What types of reader response activities can help with motivation?

Evocation isn't the only level of reader response but it is a necessary one. Without it, other levels are weakened or lost. So what does this mean for motivation? Start with material that has a good chance of evoking response. If it is a story, you may need to preview the goal or problem (but not the outcome) and help children connect it to their own lives. If it is poetry, you'd do well to read it aloud, hence modeling your own evocation. If it's nonfiction, try any number of activities—a quick skit to interview the finder of a Komodo dragon (Maynard, 1997) or a "guess-what" mime using imaginary tools (Morris, 1992). Use your imagination and tell students to use theirs to start the evocation process before reading.

An important component of evocation is what happens right after a selection is read. Since many children read in order to share (Hickman, 1979), it is often best to follow reading with open discussion and the sharing of response. It is probably better to defer judgment about the selection, better not to ask, "Did you like it?" But teachers can model their own responses, as Kathy Perfect (1999) notes in regard to poetry: "When I risk having my own spontaneous reactions, I'm giving tacit permission for children to have theirs" (p. 734f).

Readers differ in what they do with open response. Some want the security of reliving the experience by summarizing; some ask for clarification of items they didn't fully understand. Some choose to read a segment aloud, sharing their evocation. Some relate their reading to their own experience and even to other works.

Gradually, the evocation stage of response may broaden to interpretation and reflection. When reading fiction, readers often ask questions such as "Did characters act wisely? What would have happened if? What would I have done in this situation?" In informational nonfiction, unsolved problems may be described, and readers speculate over solutions such as: how to clean up oil spills (Carr, 1991) or how to rescue the Everglades from hurricane destruction (Lauber, 1996). But children's interest isn't confined to problems. Given the opportunity, they'll share newly learned information about tornadoes, icebergs, flytraps, and whooping cranes. In other words, don't sell curiosity short when it comes to reader response. Eventually, but not too soon,

interpretation, reflection, and curiosity can result in discussions that lead to generalizations about author's purpose and theme, the goodness (or badness) of the selections, and of the discussion itself.

It is likely that reader response is learned: it "matures within a cultural context that reinforces some patterns and discourages others" (Probst, 1991, p. 660). Whether you model and probe or whether you organize small response groups in your classroom to guide themselves, learning to respond is taking place, and its goal is to encourage involvement, understanding, and motivation.

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What kinds of activities can extend reader response?

It isn't all discussion and talk, talk, talk. There are myriad activities that can be used to extend response. Consider drama activities. Choose players to mime a folk tale or any high-action scene as it is read aloud. This is called Story Theatre. Make a script from dialogue, for instance, from the simple surprise story *The Rat and the Cat* (Marshall, 2000). This becomes a script for Readers Theatre. Divide a nonfiction item into segments to be read aloud interpretively by a cast of readers. This variation of Readers Theatre, sometimes called Chamber Theatre, brings striking results in comprehension and motivation (Young and Vardell, 1993). All of these drama techniques, or response extensions, are helpfully explained in *Creative Drama in the Classroom* (McCaslin, 1990). A little experimentation, even without such guidance, ought to be worth the risk.

But you still may wonder if extensions are worth the time. Morado and her associates (1999) combined drama, music, and movement to reenact stories eventually resulting in written scripts and "miniperformances." The team documented the effect on at-risk kindergarten, first-, and second-grade students; they found increased enthusiasm for reading and better understanding of setting, character, and plot. They concluded, "Miniperformances are small-scale productions with great impact" (p. 121). Encouragement comes from Shelby Anne Wolf (1994), who traced the effect of drama sessions on remedial third- and fourth-graders, noting that they "moved from a perception of drama as a free-for-all to a greater understanding of the bounded and negotiated nature of theatrical interpretation" (p. 42). The perceptive teacher ought to discern there the seeds of motivation.

Why would extensions using drama, visual arts, and other activities motivate reading?

These kinds of activities give an immediate use for reading; they give purpose to close reading and rereading. Hence, they promote competence as well as confidence, the self-efficacy possessed by the highly motivated. There is, moreover, a large measure of intrinsic motivation when a reader reads in order to do something, e.g., create a collage to show the struggle of Harriet Tubman to find freedom (McMullan, 1991) or a pictomap to trace the journey of *The Rooster Who Went to His Uncle's Wedding* (Ada, 1993). Finally, there are the social outcomes, the motivational gains from building response together through collaborative extensions.

How can a home connection help?

Moser and Morrison (1998) built a successful fourth-grade reading program on these four cornerstones: time, choice, sharing, and modeling. Try presenting these concepts to parents and caregivers as the basis for home programs to motivate reading: "The challenge for teachers in developing a successful partnership with parents is to help them understand that the reaction or response that a child has to a book is more important than the number of pages read" (Branston and Provis, 1999, p. 3).

Reading awareness helps develop motivated readers

Are your students aware of why they're learning to read? Some studies of attitudes toward reading suggest that they may not be; yet reading awareness is a sure essential in motivation.

Years ago, Mikulecky (1982) looked for congruence between reading in school and the reading done by blue-collar workers in the marketplace. Workers, he found, read more, read greater variety, and read for more intense purposes than their younger counterparts in school. Students may be surprised to learn how much reading takes place in the world around them.

Effective teachers give choices, provide interesting tasks, create cooperative situations, and encourage activity-based reading in order to foster development of motivation for reading.

How do children's books present reader awareness?

First-graders can relate to the phonics problem in "Lilly Reads" (L. K. Brown, 1997) and to the I-spy reading game in *Arthur's Reading Race* (M. Brown, 1996). A read-aloud, the story of a single Texas fellow who adopts eight orphans and discovers that he better learn to read if he's to win his true love, is *Raising Sweetness* by Diane Stanley and G. Brian Karas (1999). It would be hard to resist *Wolf!* (Bloom, 1999), whose efforts to enter the reading circle of duck, pig, and cow lead him to where he'd never planned to go—the library. And there's the tender account of an elder who turns to children for help in *Jeremiah Learns to Read* (Bogart, 1997).

Even teachers, graduate students, and college professors need to reflect on the benefits of reading. My college students and I surveyed texts on children's literature to learn what the experts say about the values of reading:

1. Success If you survey successful job-holders and social participants in most communities, you find that they are readers.

2. Happiness It's hard to explain to an unmotivated reader, but you can try! Many people of all ages testify to the joy of reading: it is accessible, it offers the widest choice, it bothers no one, and you can choose when, where, and how fast or slowly to do it.

3. Empathy Rosenblatt (1995) speculates that empathy, the understanding and emotional involvement that results from reading, may be so strong that "nowhere in the world would there be children who were starving" (p. 176).

4. World Knowledge In reading, you may ride the camel through the desert, find yourself suddenly in a drafty medieval castle with very uncomfortable bathrooms, or settle on another planet. It's like a dream: sometimes you don't want to wake up, and sometimes, you're happy to emerge realizing it's not your life after all! Either way, though, reading brings world knowledge in depth and closeness not always otherwise available. It is free world experience.

Assessing Reader Motivation

"Effective teachers give choices, provide interesting tasks, create cooperative situations, and encourage activity-based reading in order to foster development of motivation for reading." Those are the findings, in summary, of an extensive study by Sweet, Guthrie, and Ng (1998, p. 219). Suppose that you do all these things and attend to the other practices mentioned in this article. How can you tell if they are working? Can reader motivation be measured? Yes, at least indirectly; after all, it's the results of reading motivation that matter. Here are some signs that your efforts at motivation are working.

1. Voluntary reading Improved motivation results in increased voluntary reading in and out of school. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) asked fifth-graders to keep logs reporting number of minutes per day devoted to free reading. To implement such a log,

devise a simple form. Discuss its use, emphasizing that results won't be tied to grading. When my students and I developed voluntary reading logs for all grade levels, we also asked for notes on what was read and where. We found that some children read in unusual places, including the mall, in front of the TV, and on the bus.

2. Attitudes A simple, well-documented Elementary Reading Attitude Survey of twenty items can be easily obtained and administered (McKenna and Kear, 1990). Read it aloud to help primary-age children answer it. Older students can do it themselves. Once again, explain that this survey will not be used in grading. We found that, with these provisions, students sought hard to answer the survey honestly. Since it takes only about ten minutes, you can easily administer it at the start, in the middle, and at the end of the school year. A positive change in student attitudes toward reading will indicate that your motivational efforts are succeeding!

3. Reader response. Categories of response in ascending order are listed in a hierarchy (Sebesta, Monson, and Senn, 1995) that can be used as a checklist and quality evaluation for reader response. This provides a way to determine whether your efforts to model, probe, and promote response extensions have actually improved depth and breadth of response.

Assessment is, of course, more than logs, surveys, and hierarchies. Observation and conversation are important too. Watch what students do during free time. Consider their behavior with books. Are they bricks to be stacked and ignored, or are they windows to be opened for discovery? And don't forget about conversation with parents and caregivers. What do you learn about motivation in the home through these conversations? Don't be surprised if you discover that your efforts to motivate children's reading spread to parent reading as well. That is further evidence of a complex problem well met in your classroom. How rewarding it would be to discover that your efforts to develop motivated readers have been successful beyond your classroom!

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