Motivating and engaging students in reading

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You can certainly ignore motivation if you choose. But if you do, you may be neglecting the most important part of reading. There are two sides to reading. On one side are the skills which include phonemic awareness, phonics, word recognition, vocabulary, and simple comprehension. On the other side is the will to read. A good reader has both skill and will. In the “will” part, we are talking about motivation to read. This describes children’s enjoyments, their wants, and their behaviors surrounding reading. A student with skill may be capable, but without will, she cannot become a reader. It is her will power that determines whether she reads widely and frequently and grows into a student who enjoys and benefits from literacy. So we think you should care about motivation because it is the other half of reading. Sadly, it is the neglected half.

What is motivation?
Many teachers think of a motivated reader as a student who is having fun while reading. This may be true, but there are many forms of motivation that might not be related to fun and excitement. What we mean by motivation are the values, beliefs, and behaviors surrounding reading for an individual. Some productive values and beliefs may lead to excitement, yet other values may lead to determined hard work.

We talk about three powerful motivations that drive students’ reading. They operate in school and out of school, and they touch nearly every child. Some students may have all of these motivations and some may have only one. For some students, these motivations appear in the positive form driving students toward reading. For other students, the motivations are negative and push students away from books. When we talk about reading motivations we refer to (1) interest, (2) dedication, and (3) confidence. An interested student reads because he enjoys it; a dedicated student reads because he believes it is important, and a confident student reads because he can do it. We discuss each of these in this essay with an emphasis on dedication.

Research says that skill and will (motivation) go together. Usually, students who are gaining in skill are gaining in motivation as well; a student whose motivation increases because she is inspired by a terrific teacher will grow in reading skills. Research also says that these three motivations are independent. A student may be interested and read for enjoyment, but not dedicated and not seeing the importance of hard work in reading. A student may also be interested and want to read but not be confident in her ability. So confidence can be a problem when other motivations are not a problem for a student. Research also says that motivation comes from the teacher in the classroom. Of course, motivation may be stimulated by home and may be influenced by peers, but the teacher is the main actor influencing a student’s development of reading motivation.

What can a teacher do?
We offer six motivation practices that teachers can implement daily in the classroom. These practices can be brought into every lesson and directed to every student. Teachers do not have to wait for motivation to come from the outside. They can make it happen any time they want to implement one of these six practices. Research undergirds the impact of these practices on students becoming avid readers and on students becoming achieving readers. We provide examples of these practices from the literature and from our own experiences in our research and teaching.

Motivations to read—interest, confidence, dedication

Interest
When we think of motivation our mind first turns to interest. Motivation is enjoying a book, being excited about an author, or being delighted by new information. Researchers refer to interest as intrinsic motivation,
meaning something we do for its own sake. On a rainy day, we might rather read our favorite mystery than do anything else. We are not trying to get a reward when falling into a novel.

Motivation also brings to mind the reward for success. Who doesn’t like to win a trinket for hitting the target with a dart at the State Fair? Who doesn’t want to earn serious money for working hard in a career? These are extrinsic rewards because someone gives them to us. We do not give them to ourselves, and these rewards do propel us to put out effort, focus energy, and get up in the morning.

Yet, extrinsic rewards do not motivate reading achievement in the long term. Students who read only for the reward of money, a grade, or a future job are not the best readers. The reason is that if you read for the reward of a good quiz score, what happens after the quiz is that you stop reading. If the test score is the only thing that matters, it is OK to take shortcuts, not really understand, or cheat. It encourages students to become more interested in the reward than the learning. None of these generate long-term achievement. Sometimes a reward, such as candy or early recess, will jump-start a group of students to read in this moment for this purpose. But if the motivation is not intrinsic, it will not increase achievement in the long term.

For some individuals, grades represent their quality as a student and a reader. Being a high achiever is a symbol of how they are doing. A high grade is an icon of success and these students strive to feel successful. One student told us that he read as practice to improve as a reader and get better grades. He said, “Reading a lot helps you read better ‘cuz at first I wasn’t a very good reader but now I’m doing real good.” This point came up again and again. Another boy said, “If I keep reading then like you can do better in high school and then you’ll get good, better grades.” Readers who identify with school see grades as an emblem of their success and a reason to have confidence.

Interest comes in two forms—situational and enduring. Situational interest is fascination with a detail in the here and now: a picture in a book, a link in a Website, a funny comment by a character, or an amazing fact about animals will all excite situational interest. This does not last until tomorrow or next week. Situational interest does not generate achievement because it is locked into the local event. Situational interest can become enduring if it recurs with teacher (or other) continuing support. If a student finds one type of novel he likes, such as realistic fiction, and is helped to find more and to understand them fully, he may, over time, grow an enduring motivation for reading fiction. But the situational motivation is not sufficient to assure the full maturation of intrinsic motivation. One of our goals in schools is to foster intrinsic motivation, the enjoyment and fulfillment in reading.

Confidence as a reader
Belief in yourself is more closely linked to achievement than any other motivation throughout school. The reason is that confidence, which refers to belief in your capacity, is tied intimately to success. This link occurs for simple, daily reading tasks. A student who reads one page fluently thinks he can read the next page in the same book proficiently. The link is also forged for reading in general. A student who reads fluently and understands well is also sure of himself as a reader. In and out of school, people like the things they do well.

Conversely, students who struggle begin to doubt their abilities. They expect to do poorly in reading, writing, and talking about text. The real dilemma is that lower-achieving students often exaggerate their limitations. Believing they are worse than they really are, they stop trying completely. Retreating from all text interactions, they reduce their own opportunity to do what they want to do more than anything—to be a good reader. Their low confidence undermines them even further in a cycle of doubt and failure. By middle school, breaking this cycle is a formidable challenge for teachers.

Partly due to their long history of difficulty, middle school students need a safe environment. As Nicole Connolly, a middle school teacher, said about her struggling readers:

I know from a teacher’s perspective, the first thing that you do in the classroom is that you have to create a safe environment, an environment where they feel comfortable, they feel safe, they feel respected and they feel heard. Absolutely under no circumstances is any child ever going to be laughed at for saying anything wrong or that seems off the mark. Especially teaching Reading/Language arts, sometimes the poetry can be a little deep and for example, today the poem was about suicide and you know there are raw feelings that start to come out so you have to set that environment. By this point, I am a quarter of the way through the school year so that environment is set in my room. It’s very trusting right now, but that’s the first thing you have to do is just make it a safe environment. When the relationships start to build, you are really giving each child a voice that only comes from confident relationships. It’s not easy.

For many students, a trusting relationship with their teacher makes all the difference in building confidence.

Dedication
Although intrinsic motivation is desirable because it is gratifying for the student, and because it energizes
students to achieve, this type of motivation is not always possible in school. There are assignments that are not desirable to a student, yet are part of the curriculum. There are books that do not appeal to some individuals, yet at a given moment in a given school, it is necessary to read them. What motivation enables students to read in this situation? The reason to read in this case is the students' belief that reading is important, the students' persistence in reading whatever the assignment, and the students' organization that enables them to put forth effort effectively. We call this dedication.

Every student has the potential to be dedicated. Skill may be hard for some students to develop, but dedication is related to will. It is up to a student to decide whether to be dedicated or not. Students are either avoidant, dedicated, or somewhere in between the two. In this section, we will describe avoidant and dedicated behaviors in the words of middle school students. These signs are showing their value of reading, being well organized, and making efforts to be successful in reading. Essentially, dedicated students persist, plan, and place a priority on their reading. These are the three key signs of dedication in students.

Signs of dedication
The primary signs of dedication are persisting, valuing and planning.

Persisting. One of the most important distinctions between dedicated and avoidant students is that avoidant students do not make the connection between their efforts and the outcomes. A seventh grade teacher, Tarysha Gateau-Barrera, told us that “Dedicated students know that they don't improve by mistake. They make continued efforts to try hard and be well-organized because they want to be successful in school.”

Avoidant students make up excuses, avoid eye contact, or lack organizational skills. In our interviews we asked students to give an example of a time when they avoided a reading assignment:

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<th>Interviewer: Can you give an example of a school reading assignment you and your friends avoided?</th>
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<td>Student: I didn't want to do it because it was kind of hard. And so, I kept on walking around the classroom trying to avoid it. I didn't want to do this because it was fifteen minutes of class and I didn't have time to finish it so I didn't do it.</td>
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<td>Interviewer: Can you think of another example of a reading assignment that you and your friends tried to avoid?</td>
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<td>Student: Uh-uh. Because after that we failed.</td>
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For these students, avoidance had unfortunate consequences. Avoidance is a particularly powerful sign because it stops all learning abruptly. If a student wants to read and tries to read well she may learn. If another student refuses to interact with text, all hope for gaining skill, knowledge, or experience from text is dashed.

Valuing the practical and personal. The centerpiece of dedication to reading is believing in its importance. In our interviews with students, many talked about the practical importance for reading. But they also they talked about the role of reading in helping them form an identity. One struggling reader said:

Reading is important 'cause basically you need it for everything really. You need it like if you're going shopping, in a restaurant, obviously in education, when you're reading the newspaper, or reading a book or in everyday life you will need it. I guess that's why I love acting now because to get by as a youngster, I played the part of a reader and in that way I developed a coping strategy. In secondary school, everything changed because it was more competitive. I got bullied because I had to get the teacher to come and read to me. Recently I had the experience of being Mary Warren in the play The Crucible. I was honored I had been chosen to read the part, but petrified I couldn't come up with goods. I allowed myself to embrace the character, even using my fear of reading to empathize with the character's fear of being in the courtroom. I love reading and the feeling it gives me and I hope I will always feel like this, willing to accept bigger reading challenges (Barden, 2009, p. 298).

Valuing knowledge—from reading. Dedicated students read to attain information that expands their knowledge of their perceived world. Reading is a vehicle to take them to the knowledge they want. Unlike the kids who are reading for practice, these students seek information for its own sake.

One middle school student said:

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<th>Interviewer: Does reading information books help you?</th>
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<td>Student: Well, it informs us because we read about the Titanic, and it happened on April 12. It's not boring, it's more like fun because they give you information and stuff about the past.</td>
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This high-achieving, dedicated student valued the knowledge learned from many different information books over an extended period of time:
Interviewer: Do you learn anything from information books in school?
Student: It actually teaches you things and makes you really think about life that's going on on this earth.

Interviewer: Can you think of some reading assignments that you had to do where you actually learned something new? Something you didn't know before?
Student: In science [we read about] this bacteria that I didn't know about and it's called hiking disease. When you're hiking and you get some water from the pond and it's this little bug that if it hits you too long it can make you very sick.

Interviewer: Okay. How about another class where you learned something new?
Student: In social studies because we had to talk about South Africa and countries.

Interviewer: How long have you felt that you can learn something new from reading assignments?
Student: Before middle school.

Values for the future. Dedicated high school students think about their future. Here is one example:

Interviewer: Why do you think it's important for you to be a good reader?
Student: Well I guess if you are a good student and get a good education then you can go somewhere in life.

Interviewer: Can you tell me why – why do you say it's very important for you to read?
Student: Because by being a good student you get in good colleges, and that's what I'm trying to do.

Another dedicated, high-achieving student reported:

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about why you said being a good reader will help you in the future at school?
Student: Being a good reader will help you in the future because like if you got a job, you read a lot, like, even if you didn't like it. If you didn't read in school, you wouldn't know the meaning of it.

Some students have career goals that they link to school subjects. Here is a dedicated female:

Interviewer: Can you think of some examples of reading assignments that you had to do and you believed those will help you in the future?
Student: I sort of want to be a vet when I get older, so readings in science and learning about chemicals help me. Learning how to write things and all that stuff will help me later on.

Interviewer: And how long have you felt that reading things like that will help you in the future?
Student: For a while cuz my parents said they will.

We can all learn from a page out of the book written about Whitney High School in Cerritos, California. After languishing for years in poverty and low achievement, this school was transformed by a charismatic principal into the highest achieving school (highest SAT scores) in California. Every student graduated into college. Celia, a veteran of three years in the school, expressed the motivations of students at Whitney High. Asked to comment on the “best about life and learning at Whitney” she replied:

Basically, all the academic courses themselves? Unimportant. While they do play [some] part in academics in college I suppose, they won't stick with you the rest of your life. What is the most important, I think, is the discipline you have to learn when your teachers force you to do this assignment or read that book; it's the fact that you've had to do it that will be most important in college because when mom and dad aren't there strangling you and chaining you to your text, you will get the lock and chain out and force yourself to work (Humes, 2003, p. 139).

Celia went on to talk about the sources of her self-discipline when she was asked about what she thought influenced her:

I guess it comes out of knowing what your parents want and striving to please them, yet also knowing what you want and trying to stay true to yourself... In Whitney it was possible to find people who were like me, and liked me, rather than merely tolerated me. People who were interested in who I was... They were there when home life was rough, and held my hand walking forward in my life (Humes, 2003, p.141).
Planning for literacy. The two main signs of dedication, persistence and valuing, often become visible in students' planning and organization. Dedicated students plan for success. They are organized with their assignments and their time. They schedule their work and do not forget their assignments. Dedicated students prioritize because being a good reader is part of who they are and getting good grades in reading is an icon of their success. Within their agenda of social, electronic, extracurricular, and out-of-school pursuits, dedicated students prioritize reading as a necessity of life.

Connections of interest, confidence, and dedication

The motivations are synergistic. They work together to propel students forward. Interest and confidence feed into dedication which is the factor that directly improves achievement. For example, some students enjoy reading. Their enjoyment leads them to commit time, effort, and concentration, which produces good grades and high test scores. But this effort and valuing are the dedication part of motivation. So, interest leads to dedication and the dedication impacts achievement.

A similar pattern works for confidence. Students who believe in themselves are willing to tackle challenges. Their confidence leads them to work hard when they have to. Confident students commit time and energy to tasks because they expect to succeed. But again, the time and effort are part of their dedication, and it is the dedication which generates a high standing in the class. In conclusion, interest and confidence do not empower students to achieve highly unless the students are also dedicated. But when interest and confidence are harnessed to dedication, students will score highly on tests, get good grades, and be worthy citizens of the literate classroom (Cambria, Coddington, Guthrie, & Wigfield, 2010). This leads to a focus on dedication in the classroom.

Research base on dedication in reading

When we refer to dedication in reading we mean doing the reading because it is important. This meaning has two halves. On one side it is an action or a behavior. It is something students do. On the other side it is not a blind behavior, but is a deliberate decision to read because of values the student may hold deeply.

In doing the reading, a dedicated student does not work simply for a moment. He spends a long time when it is needed and puts forth supreme effort if there are obstacles or challenges in the reading. The dedicated reader finishes the work he begins. He is conscientious about simple but key school behaviors, such as handing in homework on time. In a survey of secondary students, Lens, Simons, and Siegfried (2002) reported that persistent students gave more effort to be a good student, invested long periods of time with close concentration, studied frequently during the week, and did homework on the weekends, as well as filling all their course requirements daily. Such persistence is positively correlated with achievement and with feelings of being capable of completing the work successfully (Wigfield, Klauda, & Cambria, in press).

Valuing

The main reason that the dedicated reader persists in working hard is because he believes that reading is important. For secondary students, this valuing is central to students' identity. Researchers show that dedicated students strongly agree that "My performance is important for becoming the person I want to be" (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004). In other words, for the dedicated student reading is useful because it will help accomplish a future goal (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Dedicated readers are likely to have a lot of self-discipline in general. They agree with statements such as:

- "I am reliable."
- "People can count on me to keep on schedule."
- "I am good at resisting temptation."
- "I am not easily discouraged" (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

Studies show that middle school students who strongly agree with statements like these are exceptionally high achievers and students who strongly disagree with them are low achievers (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006). Students who avoid work are likely to believe they can succeed by just behaving nicely, impressing the right people, showing that they like the teacher, being lucky, or getting other people to help them (Nicholls, Patachnick, & Nolen, 1985). In fact, self-discipline is even stronger than IQ in predicting grades in reading and other subjects (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). In other words, dedication to reading is actually the same as self-discipline applied to reading in school.

Distinctions between dedication and intrinsic motivation

It is important not to confuse dedication and enjoyment in reading. A person who reads all the time for pleasure and enjoyment is intrinsically motivated. Such a person may put in high amounts of time and effort in reading, but it is for the benefit of enjoyment such as solving the mystery, following the character, or gaining information about a favorite topic. In contrast, the dedicated student reads whether it is interesting or not. She does the reading because she values the benefit it provides her. These benefits may include growing into the kind of person she wants to become, attaining high achievement to show success as a student, or satisfying family expectations that she has incorporated into her
own value system. Therefore, reading for enjoyment and reading for dedication are two different things. Students can be one but not the other. One student could be dedicated but not interested, whereas another could be interested but not dedicated. A few students may be both dedicated and interested. Researchers have found that in the elementary grades, students who are both dedicated and interested, achieve far higher, and read more proficiently than students who do not have both of these motivations working for them (Guthrie, Coddington, & Wigfield, 2009).

**Dedication impacts achievement in grades K to 12.**

When children enter school some are more interested in reading than others. Whether their parents read to them daily, they acquired a curiosity by being exposed to attractive books, or reading came easily to them. Motivated first graders gain rapidly in reading achievement. In this case, motivation is usually interest and enjoyment in reading. It is not a one-way street. Children who grow rapidly in learning to read during the primary grades also grow in motivation. So skill in reading and motivation to reading are hand in glove and operate reciprocally in the primary grades (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007).

As students enter the intermediate grades of three to five, some students become dedicated as well as interested. They see reading as a contributor to who they will become. It has been shown that interest alone does not assure that a student will be a high achiever in the intermediate elementary grades; however, dedication alone does not assure high achievement either. When outstanding students can integrate their interest (reading what they like) and dedication (reading what they must), their test scores and grades show positive effects (Guthrie, Coddington, & Wigfield, 2009). As students enter middle school, their dedication to reading takes the form of identity as a student. During grades six to nine, students who believe that being a good student is part of who they are and those who embrace the goals of learning through text are the highest achievers. Dedication takes over as the most reliable motivation to fuel achievement. Some of these students may also be intrinsically motivated and enjoy reading (Otis, Grouzet, & Pelletier, 2005), but that is not the primary driver of their achievement across subject matters and through time.

At the high school level, dedication to reading may take the form of attempting to understand texts as deeply as possible. This aspiration to comprehend fully is termed *mastery goals* by Pintrich and his colleagues (Pintrich, 2000). These students want to piece together the different sections of a text and integrate them fully with what they already know about the topic in the information or the character in literature. Not only do these students read conscientiously, but they seek deeper meanings and relish the challenge of complexity in books. Students who retreat from mastery goals and seek only to avoid getting low grades will obviously be the lower achievers.

Across the grade levels, confidence in one's ability to read is a key attribute of success. Overwhelmingly, at all grade levels, the lowest achievers believe that it is futile to hope that they can read like many of their classmates. They feel helpless. In their overwhelming sense of incompetence, these students cannot put forth effort even when it is possible to succeed. Thus, resilience is pervasive for achievers, and discouragement is the hallmark of low achievers across the grade span of K to 12.

**Motivational practices in the elementary classroom—CORI**

There are five motivation practices that are well supported in research. These practices foster all of the motivations we mentioned including interest, dedication, and confidence. Found in the classrooms of many outstanding teachers in primary and intermediate classrooms, these practices are not revolutionary, yet they are all too rare. To investigate how to generate and sustain motivation, we developed Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction focused on grades three to five. Over 10 years, we performed 11 experiments with 75 statistical comparisons of experimental and control groups (Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007), and other researchers have also documented their effectiveness (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Currently, we are documenting the impacts of CORI in middle school. These practices are not restricted to special events or grand occasions in which students have rare opportunities, such as a field trip to a museum. These are daily actions that motivate long-term achievement including the following: success, thematic units, choice, relevance, and collaboration or teacher-student interaction. We next address each of these.

**Success**

In some schools with some curricula, some administrators claim that they support struggling readers by giving them special instruction or collaboration with peers to help them decipher the texts. But this is not sufficient. Texts have to be user friendly to the student. By user friendly, we mean that students can read a text aloud with 90% accuracy. Another standard for readable text is summarizing. Students should be able to write a coherent summary of a paragraph or a page in the text used for instruction. Selecting readable texts is a challenge and often means that multiple texts are needed in the classroom. In CORI, we provide a class book for whole class instruction in a reading strategy; however, for guided reading, text-based writing, and
other independent reading activities we provide trade books of multiple levels. A reasonable rule of thumb is that the range of reading skill is the same number as the grade level. For example, in Grade 5, there are five or more years of reading level difference between the lowest and highest students. It is unthinkable that students in Grade 5, who read at the third-grade level, can make sense of a text that is appropriate for a fifth grader reading at the eighth-grade level.

Much more differentiation of text, books, Internet sites, and materials within the classroom instructional framework is necessary to insure the success of all students. Without success, the students never gain confidence or they lose the resilience they had when they came to the classroom. Though the benefit of a readable text is enjoyable to imagine, the disaster of an overly difficult text is a measurable consequence for deepening the dilemmas of struggling readers.

Students' confidence or self-efficacy is increased by their experiences of success in reading. When teachers locate texts at students' levels, and enable students to realize that they are reading them fluently with understanding, students gain confidence. Although it may sound utopian, success is the royal road to confidence. There is no alternative. Having a football star come to school and say that the kids are all stars in reading is entertaining. But it does not fool students into actually believing in their capacities. The football star may increase students' energy to read for a day. But students' success in specific reading tasks with praise from the teacher will fuel their reading for the long term. As Schunk (2003) and other researchers have reported, helping students perform competently, set their own goals, use teacher feedback, and gauge their own skills are the key ingredients in nurturing self-confident readers.

**Thematic unit**

Alongside success, the practice of providing a thematic unit is a powerful tool for developing students' confidence. Thematic units may be literary, topical, or discipline based. For example, in CORI in elementary school, we provide thematic units on survival in plant and animal communities. We bring in information books on ecology and how animals live together. We also integrate stories, legends, and novels such as *Julie of the Wolves* by George, *Hatchet* by Paulsen, or Caduto and Bruchac's *Keeper of the Animals: Native American Stories and Wildlife Activities for Children*. In teaching the theme we emphasize the broad conceptual topic with individual questions for the week and individual questions for each day. We emphasize how answering today's question relates to the general topic and how answering it relates to yesterday's question. We help the students identify which portions of text are answering the questions for each day and how the readings across time are expanding their knowledge of survival.

A thematic unit across time has the benefit of nurturing students' confidence in reading. When the students see the topics, key questions, and essential portions of text linked together, they gain a sense that they can read. They expand their belief that they can answer the questions and perform the reading activities that enable them to be functioning members of a class discussion or a team project.

**Choice**

A favorite motivator of many teachers is choice. There is nothing more gratifying than seeing a student who has found the perfect book or has discovered an author she can call her own. Beyond selecting books for reading, we promote many forms of mini-choices that can be applied in every lesson. For example, students can choose which piece of a text to read. In a novel, a student may select one character about whom to specialize. She becomes expert on what this character does, thinks, and feels. It is her character. While she may know all the characters, the plot, and the theme, she nevertheless claims ownership of a significant slice of the novel. In an information book reading activity, students can select a significant concept in which to specialize. In a lesson on non-fiction, a teacher may assign which page to read in a short section of a book. Students can read to explain their section to the team or the class. To show their understanding, students can choose three of five questions posted on the overhead projector to answer in a discussion or in writing. On another occasion, students may show their learning by choosing whether to answer three teacher questions or to write a summary of a small section of text.

As one teacher reflected:

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I have been in education for 15 years and I have always known that choice was huge. But after going through CORI and giving some of those reluctant readers those opportunities for choice about books and partnerships, it was so empowering for them. I've actually done some things to transfer that to what I continue to do in my classroom.
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**Relevance**

Teachers practicing the art of relevance enable students to connect the books of instruction to their lives. In CORI for elementary school, we provide a simple, hands-on activity to generate interest in reading. For example, one hands-on activity we used was dissecting an owl pellet. As many teachers have experienced, the students scream with delight when they discover a skull of a mouse in the pellet from an owl. When they piece together the bones with the skull and decide that this owl had eaten a mouse, they see animal survival in a
totally vivid way. After this 20-minute experience, students read avidly for 5 to 10 days about how animals live, find food, and defend themselves from predators. Providing the owl pellet experience is providing relevance for reading. Not only do books about owls and mice come to life, but the broader issues of predation, competition, and food webs are suddenly interesting. A student has looked at his own owl pellet, has had a personal experience of excitement. This excitement transfers to a text with photographs of plants, animals, and predation. In middle school CORI, we are providing similar relevance through videos of hunting in the Serengeti or symbiosis on a coral reef. For these middle school students, the video experience generates intense interest in reading.

Practices of relevance in the classroom can take many forms. For example, providing historical narratives about Central American Indians for Hispanic students from Central America is generating relevance for text reading. Some forms of culturally relevant teaching may generate relevance, but not all of them do. Having African American students read biographies of Booker T. Washington and Harriet Tubman does not automatically generate relevance simply because the texts are about African Americans. If the students do not feel connected to those African Americans in the biographies, relevance will not be generated. Cultural relevance can be an especially powerful motivational practice for minority students if they frequently feel little kinship and possess little background experience with traditional texts peopled with European American populations (Tatum, 2005).

Beyond locating books that students can connect to, teachers can create tasks that enable students to build relevance for text. For example, in the “bubble project” for fourth graders, teachers encouraged students to provide a social critique of advertisements (Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinar, 2009). After locating ads for clothing to perfume to sports events, students studied the texts. They questioned the meanings, authors’ intentions, and gender biases in the text. They wrote replies to the ads in the form of a bubble spoken by a character. The students experienced humor, social critique, and sheer enjoyment in this literacy event. Students saw that the text was relevant not only to their material interest, but to their thoughts and attitudes about popular culture. Such activities enable students to see that reading is important to their interests and their interactions with others.

**Collaboration and relationship-building**

At the elementary school level, social relationships are paramount for students’ development as readers. In CORI, we provide partner reading, team summarizing, group posters, and peer conferencing. Each is carefully orchestrated to assure full participation and accountability, for individual work as well as for group products.

In both primary and intermediate levels, research supports the power of motivational and emotional support for building motivation. A nationwide observational study of primary classrooms showed that when teachers were sensitive to student interests, invited student input into classroom decisions, and avoided harsh criticism, students gained in reading achievement. The effect was strongest for at-risk students and low income populations (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). For example, Mrs. Warren has morning meetings in her elementary classroom. She allows students to have friendly interactions and she greets each one by name daily. They share recent experiences and build a repertoire of songs, games, and poems that encourage a sense of belonging (McTigue, Washburn, & Liew, 2009).

This collaborative emphasis may be especially valuable for African American students. In a study of 10- to 11-year old African American students, Dill and Boykin (2000) showed that collaborative learning environments had advantages over individual learning environments. A collaborative (or communal) learning setting increased the recall of stories that were read during collaborative interactions compared to individual reading. More centrally, enjoyment of the learning activity, and the desire to participate in similar activities in the future, were accelerated by the collaborative learning structures for the African American students. One source of such a benefit may be elaborated discussion.

Evidence suggests that African American students respond to collaborative learning opportunities by discussing text in relatively elaborate ways. In an experimental study, Webb and Farivar (1994) showed that African American students who were taught communication and helping skills in small group work during the reading of story problems had more elaborate and rich discussions than comparison groups. On the other hand, European American students did not benefit from the training in communication skills. Thus, African Americans were more cognitively responsive in social interactions around text, and thus, gained cognitive competencies in these settings.

Further evidence that teacher-student relationships in the classroom may be important to engagement and achievement in literacy was presented by Decker, Dona, and Christenson (2007). They examined the associations between the teacher-student relationship and outcomes for African American students who were behaviorally at-risk for referral to special education. Students were identified by their teachers as having behavior problems. Participants were 44 students and 25 teachers from two suburban and three urban elementary schools in a mid-western state. A multi-rater, multi-method approach was used. As both teacher and student reports of teacher-student
relationship quality increased, there were also increases in positive social, behavioral, and engagement outcomes. Additional analyses of teacher-student relationship patterns showed that as the relationship pattern improved, there were increases in positive social, behavioral, and engagement outcomes for students. Especially intriguing was the finding that as kindergarteners increased in their reporting of wanting to be closer to their teachers, their letter naming fluency increased. Thus, cognitive effort in reading and social interactions with teachers and classmates are intricately connected.

Teaching practices for middle school classrooms
How do middle school teachers foster the motivation of struggling students? Outstanding teachers who motivate all their students offer a wide platform in the classroom. They nurture confidence, dedication, and interest through many avenues. We next tap into the experiences of other educators who recommend the following: (1) creating relationships, (2) building success, (3) assuring relevance, (4) fostering awareness, (5) affording choices, and (6) arranging social goals.

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Creating relationships
As Nicole Connolly, a middle school teacher, said:

I think the number one influence for student motivation is relationships. Relationships, especially at the middle school level, are key. It's not so much what it is that you teach the students, but what counts is the students knowing that you care about them and that you are willing to show that you care about them. Then they are willing to do what they need to do for you. So for me, definitely number one is relationship building with the students.

This is accentuated for lower achievers. Students who struggle need to connect with their teachers before they will put forth the effort necessary for school success. According to Santa (2006), the principal of an academy for "students who don't do school," the content and teaching techniques play second fiddle to human relationships. She says:

Students tend to work harder for teachers they like and put little effort into classes where they feel disconnected and misunderstood. Strategic instruction within classroom contexts where students feel they belong plays an integral role in learning. Students put more effort into learning when they have a relationship with their teachers; they don't want to let their teachers down (Santa, 2006, p.472).

The research literature on the roles of teacher-student relationships and students' social motivations in achievement is abundant. For example, students who seek to cooperate with the teacher and help other students academically, consistently get better grades than students who are less socially adept. Obviously, a classroom with many students who are antisocial, disruptive, and abusive to other students will be much less productive academically than other classrooms. As a result, teacher time invested in creating an atmosphere of trust, respect for others, compliance with rules, and personal responsibility toward social norms will be handsomely repaid in student comfort and learning (see Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009).

Building success
The first step in ensuring success is making certain that students can read the book in the curriculum with relative ease. It is crucial to have books be like Goldilocks' porridge: not too hard, not too easy, but just right. One middle school teacher said:

I had a little guy, Anthony, who was struggling in choosing books. I took the time to let that student know that I cared about how he was going to choose and helped him find a good readability level for him. It was a good match; it was a good fit and he finished a 220-page novel, which was huge for him. It was really cool. The father came in and wanted to meet me because his son in seventh grade had never read a novel.

Difficulty of books is the largest, single barrier to middle school students' confidence in reading. When students encounter a story that is beyond their comprehension, or an information text with vocabulary that is utterly impossible for them, they not only reject the book but turn off from all reading. Our interviews with discouraged struggling readers reveal one overwhelming theme:

- "The books are too hard."
- "They are really confusing."
- "I can't read the words."

Teachers often believe that challenging books are good prods for student learning and the students need...
to be working hard to gain skill. That may be true for high-achieving, confident readers. However, students with a history of not being able to read the texts in the classroom have lost their confidence, have little resilience, and may have developed many strategies of avoidance, like procrastination.

The single largest factor contributing to low reading achievement is avoidance of books, especially information texts, in all subject matters of literature, science, social studies, math, and others. Students who initially find reading a little tough tend to avoid the book whenever possible and put in minimum effort. Obviously, this prevents them from gaining skill and they enter a cycle of failure to read and avoidance. The most powerful way to break this cycle is to locate books that are within the readability level of the learner.

Before students will try and try again to tackle new challenges, they need to believe in themselves. This belief in oneself propels students toward higher achievement because they expect to succeed. Putting forth effort in reading depends mainly on whether you have succeeded in reading tasks in the past. A volume of research shows that teachers who enable students to succeed grow the confidence of their readers (Schunk, 2003). Teachers can promote this confidence building by providing small steps for success. First, teachers can set goals for reading words, sentences, or paragraphs, and then students take the role of setting their own goals. But many students do not quite know whether they achieved a goal, such as understanding a paragraph, or not. Accurate feedback from the teacher is crucial. The feedback should be specific to the students’ task achievement rather than a general “good job.” A teacher might say, “Wow! You put yourself in the character’s situation and figured out how he may feel,” which is more effective than simply saying “nice reading.” As students learn to set goals and recognize their achievements, their resilience expands. They bounce back from failure. They sustain their concentration for longer times. Becoming actively persistent is the essence of becoming dedicated in reading. However, this persistence cannot come from a void. It is grounded in the belief that reading is important.

Assuring relevance
Students do not become dedicated to reading unless it is important to them. Obviously it is not the sounding out of words or the piecing together of paragraphs that creates relevance. It is the content and substance of books that they must value to grow in dedication. Students’ first reason for being a dedicated reader is that the texts are relevant to them.

In one survey, teachers found that African American students overwhelmingly selected literary texts in which they could connect to the characters. For example, one student stated that he liked the book Gettin’ Through Thursday by Cooper because “They go through almost the same thing we go through. That’s why I chose this story instead of the other one. It’s a good book to me because they had to pretend they were having a party because the mom didn’t have any money” (Gray, 2009, p. 477). It was not the genre nor having African American characters in the book nor having a particular theme that mattered. It was connecting to the character that was the most important criterion used by students to select books.

Making reading relevant for your students can be a challenging task. As Cheryl Nuhfer, a middle school teacher, said:

It’s hard to take a child whose parent has been a farmer all his life and that’s what they are going to do. Why do they have to know Shakespeare? Why do they have to know Chaucer? Why do they have to know literature? There isn’t a real strong connection there. They have to know how to read a bill of sale and more functional types of reading. I think there is a disconnect between ‘the curriculum with the classics’ and the need to know.

As this teacher continued, “The irrelevance is probably the biggest factor in students’ avoidance of reading.”

One poignant way to make books relevant in the classroom is through videos. For example, a brief video of 2 to 10 minutes can set the historical scene for a novel set at the turn of the 19th century in Europe. If the topic of global warming is the subject of an information text that students will be reading, a brief video of icebergs melting in the Arctic or glaciers disappearing from high mountains will galvanize students’ attention. As a resource for relevance, The Discovery Channel has more than 50,000 1 to 30 minute videos that can be viewed in any classroom in which the district has an “inexpensive” subscription. When students observe a video, they have had a vivid, personal encounter which they can take to text, bringing the print to life. When students candidly say that the text connects to them, they recognize the benefit of literacy and value its role in their lives.

Fostering awareness
For many students, the benefits of reading to their reading today or in the future are simply not obvious. As one teacher said, “It’s difficult for a middle school child to think too much past Friday’s next dance.” However, teachers can help students create an awareness of the contribution of reading to their lives through a range of activities. In middle school, students are seeking freedom and are keen to read about people’s experiences of freedom. In secondary school, students can explore...
freedom by reading a book such as *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis about Parvana, a 12-year old girl living in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The novel depicts Parvana when she poses as a boy in order to earn money for her family by serving as a reader to illiterate soldiers in the local marketplace. She enjoys a measure of freedom by making her femininity invisible. Through open discussion of multiple perspectives on such a novel, students gain insights not only to their personal dynamics, but to the roles of reading in expanding their horizons (Bean & Harper, 2006).

When some students encounter information text in elementary school they quickly awaken to the benefits of reading. In classroom surveys in an elementary school in a low income neighborhood, students who read information books were primarily motivated by the knowledge gained from reading. As kids said:
- “I like dolphins. I think they are cool because they live in the ocean and I like oceans.”
- “It was important because I like different cultures.”
- “I liked it because it was about an Indian and I am interested in Indians.”

In choosing expository text with guidance from teachers, students came to the realization that they were able to pick up cool information about their favorite topics (Edmunds, 2006). Although it was not measured in this survey, it was highly likely that such an activity will spur students to realize that reading and books are valuable to them, which will fuel their longer-term dedication to reading.

Teachers have used a range of simple activities to foster awareness of reading’s benefits. For example, one teacher provided a simple t-chart with observations in a column on the left and inferences in a column on the right. As students read a narrative or an information book, they mark observations (which are literal meanings from the book) in the left-hand side under the observation column. On the right-hand side, under the inference column, students write information from their own knowledge and experience that enables them to connect parts of the texts to each other, or portions of the passages to their background experiences. As the students draw the observation-inference chart, they can easily be led to the realization that the book is bringing information to them and they are bringing information to the text. With the twin recognitions that they are an active learner and the book is an agent of knowledge growth, children see reading as important and value the literacy experience (Nokes, 2008). In these concrete situations, a particular book has helped a student on a specific day with a concrete task of mind expansion.

As students grow in awareness of how reading connects to them, their valuing of reading expands in breadth and depth. With awareness-expanding discussions with the teacher, students can expand their recognition that reading impacts their school success, their prospects for further education, their career potentials, and their prospects in the world of gainful employment. Such awareness gives a rationale for their persistence in reading challenging texts for long periods of time. It enables them to sustain their energy in reading when their interest is not stimulated. Although reading for interest is desirable and enjoyable, it is not always possible. The complementary motivation of being dedicated can bridge the individual into achievement when the luxury of interesting text is not within reach. Thus, dedication which merges persistence and planning with the value system of the reader is an enduring motivation that can be fostered daily in classrooms from K to 12.

Fostering students’ dedication cannot be accomplished only by encouraging effort. A lot of effort doing the wrong thing will not improve students’ achievement. Expert teachers also enable students to become aware of how they work as learners. Teachers have to help students work smart as well as work hard. Carol Santa, a remarkable teacher and past president of the International Reading Association reports from her school for unmotivated students saying:

We help our students understand what active engagement and learning effort look and feel like. We might say, ‘Read this page, then stop and respond in your journal.’ During a lecture we stop and ask students to summarize what they have heard to a partner. They read and respond by drawing, making a concept map, taking notes, or asking questions. Throughout this activity we engage students in conversations: ‘How are you going to persist actively in learning this information? What active strategies did you use to grapple with meaning? Why does learning take work?’ (Santa, 2006, p.472).

Santa expects students to combine planning with their persistence to be effective. As she continues:

Teachers who help students to work smart help them learn active strategies. When students rely too much on strategies, students may get turned off and disengaged from reading. But if students do not learn reading strategies, they lack the tools to read effectively and their persistence cannot be as valuable to them (Santa, 2006).

Massey and Heafner (2004) recommend well known tools for reading as follows: To persist effectively, students should use these strategies: (1) establish purpose for reading, (2) make connections to background knowledge, (3) understand the arrangement of texts, (4) make connections between texts, (5) monitor
comprehension through questioning, and (6) synthesize information across texts. With these tools, students will read for understanding and their effort at comprehension will pay off for them.

Too many teachers think of motivation for reading and strategies for reading as opposites. Either we are teaching hard, academic strategies or we are having a motivational day. Students benefit most when motivations and strategies are fused together. If students become excited about a book or a topic, they need strategies for learning from the book or enjoying it fully. Conversely, if students have a few effective strategies they will never use them if they are bored, avoidant, or otherwise unmotivated for reading. Therefore, teaching students to be dedicated readers requires helping them to work smart as they put forth high effort.

**Affording choices**

More popular than any motivational support is affording choices, which is widely supported in the professional literature (O’Brien & Dillon, 2008). However, misconceptions abound. For example, many teachers provide “sustained silent reading” time to give students a chance at self-selection. Yet, this technique is often misunderstood as the only way to give choice. Myriad little choices can be given during any lesson, which enable students to express small preferences that spur their reading. In a middle school classroom, one of us asked a small group of struggling readers, “What choices did your teacher give you today?” Students replied:

- “We could read with a partner or not.”
- “We could take notes or not.”
- “We got to choose which color card to write our question on.”
- “We could choose the word we thought was the key word in the paragraph.”

Then we asked the $64 million dollar question: “How did having a choice help you read?” Students erupted with sublime self-reflections, such as:

- “Having a choice whether to partner read made me feel better.”
- “I could read alone, which helps me concentrate.”
- “I could read by myself, which is faster for me.”
- “I liked finding my own key word on the page.”

Remarkably, these struggling readers were aware of how choice helped them think during reading. These mini-choices lent students a bit more investment into the hard work of learning to write good summaries. The total time for the choices was 2 minutes out of a 45-minute period, which was not excessive. Content of the lesson was not compromised. Teacher planning time was minimal. In other words, the benefits were palpable in the classroom. The costs were minimal to the teacher. Our nagging quandary is this: Why don’t more teachers make more use of mini-choices in teaching reading?

**Arranging social goals**

Just as a student will work hard to maintain a good relationship with a teacher, students seek to win the respect of their friends and classmates. In this light, students will be dedicated to their reading when reading has a role in their social interactions with classmates. One way to set up social goals among students is to create a project that will call for a student’s organization and persistence in reading. For example, one of the teachers we interviewed told us that she “will try to buddy them up so they will share the novels they are reading in a literature circle sort of thing, or even a book sharing recommendation.” For example, in CORI, students work cooperatively to build a group poster. The group selects a theme related to survival in nature, such as mutualism or predation. Each student reads and writes to create a contribution to the poster. They organize their work, create a timeline, and share their work with each other building toward the culminating point of explaining their poster to another team or to the class. This gives each student a social framework in which their dedication to reading will bring positive social interactions with their teammate.

When students see that teachers are supporting their active collaboration, they become more cooperative and dedicate themselves to reading more conscientiously than if they are continually required to toil in isolation. Many partnerships, team efforts, group projects, and peer cooperatives have been shown to motivate students, and some have been shown to increase reading comprehension directly (Murphy, Wilkenson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009).

**Professional development**

Teaching to the second side of reading, the will to read, like teaching to the first side, is a matter of teacher expertise. There is no formula or off-the-shelf program for motivating students. The good news is that teachers can rapidly learn to be more effective at encouraging engagement. With a short amount of professional development, teachers can learn to give choices that lend students a sense of empowerment (Reeve, 1996). In a slightly longer, but realistic amount of time, teachers can gain a grip on implementing all the CORI teaching practices for elementary school mentioned here. For secondary level, a book and guide for self-reflection about engagement is available (Guthrie, 2008). Our message for teachers and administrators is that a manageable amount of reading, thinking, and sharing...
among teachers, followed by trial in the classroom, will cultivate the culture of engagement in classrooms and schools.

References


**Children’s book references**


