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Reading motivation and engagement in the primary school classroom: theory, research and practice

By Sarah P. McGeown

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Chapter 1

What is reading motivation and why is it important?

Introduction

Being able to read is important, not only for academic success, but as a general life skill that is necessary in a literate society. Therefore identifying ways to improve children's reading through engagement in reading activities is crucial. Within the research field, there has been more focus on the development of cognitive (e.g., language, decoding) skills to support and improve children's reading rather than a focus on enhancing motivation to read. However, researchers are increasingly recognising that children's motivation to read is important for their reading development.

Over the past three years, colleagues and I within the Department of Psychology at the University of Hull (and now within the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh) have been researching children's reading, with a specific focus on the relative importance of cognitive and motivational factors for reading, but also investigating whether reading motivation may be more important for some groups of readers than others. The purpose of this minibook is to support teachers in fostering motivation for reading, through reference to up to date research in the field. By promoting motivation for reading, we almost exclusively refer to encouraging motivation to read books, as book reading is more closely associated with reading skill compared to other types of text (Anderson *et al.*, 1988; Clark, 2011; Spear-Swerling *et al.*, 2010). In addition, the book focuses primarily on the later years of primary school education; however practical suggestions provided are relevant for the whole primary age range.

Overview

Chapter 1 considers how motivation to read is commonly understood and defined, by looking at different theories of reading motivation. In addition, suitable assessments to measure children's motivation to read are described. This chapter concludes with a discussion about why reading motivation is important and what impact it has on children's reading skills.

Chapter 2 discusses the evidence concerning gender differences in reading motivation, differences between high and low attaining readers, and age related changes in children's motivation to read. After each of these three sections, practical suggestions are provided to target reading motivation interventions most effectively.

Chapter 3 offers practical suggestions for teachers to improve children's motivation to read within the primary school classroom. These suggestions are taken from theories of reading motivation, questionnaires and interviews carried out with teachers and children, published results from research studies, focus groups with children, discussions with teachers and school observations.

Chapter 4 provides a short summary, some concluding points and highlights the importance of integrating research and practice.

Skill and will

As reading is an effortful and purposeful activity that often involves choice and perseverance, motivation is crucial for children to develop their reading skills. In fact, there is a vast literature illustrating that children's motivation to read is related to their reading attainment (e.g., Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Furthermore, research illustrates that it is not only children's cognitive skills (e.g., language, decoding skills) that are important for their reading attainment, children's motivation to read is additionally important after taking into account these cognitive abilities (Anmarkrud & Braten, 2009; Logan *et al.*, 2011; Medford & McGeown, 2011; Taboada *et al.*, 2009). In other words, to become successful readers, children need the 'skill' and the 'will'.

Theories of reading motivation

Two main theories which have been proposed to explain why children are motivated to read are the intrinsic-extrinsic theory of reading motivation and the expectancy-value theory of reading motivation.

Intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation

The intrinsic-extrinsic theory differentiates between internal and external reasons to explain why children read. For example, if a child chooses to read because they find reading inherently interesting or enjoyable, this is regarded as an internal reason (commonly known as intrinsic motivation). However, if a child reads to get better grades or to gain recognition or praise from their parents, then this is regarded as an external reason (commonly known as extrinsic motivation).

Intrinsic reading motivation	***Extrinsic reading motivation***
Curiosity A child's desire to learn more or new things through reading	**Competition** A child's desire to outperform others in reading
Involvement A child's level of engagement or involvement when reading	**Recognition** A child's desire for their reading achievements to be recognised by others
Preference for challenge A child's desire to work with or master complex reading materials	**Grades** A child's desire to achieve good marks in reading
	Compliance A child's conformity to an external requirement to read
	Social A child's engagement in social interactions involving books and/or reading

Figure 1 Intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of reading motivation, (adapted from Wang & Guthrie, 2004)

The eight dimensions of reading motivation proposed above provide quite different reasons or explanations about why children are motivated to read. Teachers interested in studying children's motivation to read from this perspective can use the Motivation to Read Questionnaire (MRQ) (see Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997 and Wang & Guthrie, 2004 for two different versions). The MRQ has a number of questions to measure each dimension of motivation. Examples of statements that children are asked to agree or disagree with are:

I like to read about new things

If a book is interesting I don't care how hard it is to read

I like to get compliments for my reading

I like to read to improve my grades

These four examples measure the constructs of curiosity, challenge, recognition and grades respectively.

In general, children's intrinsic reading motivation is positively associated with their reading skills (e.g., McGeown *et al.*, 2012b; Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Therefore, children with better reading skills are typically more intrinsically motivated to read (or alternatively, children who are more intrinsically motivated to read generally have better reading skills). On the other hand, children's extrinsic reading motivation is generally unrelated to their reading skills (Logan & Medford, 2011) or negatively associated with their reading skills (Becker *et al.*, 2010; Mucherah & Yoder, 2008; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

This difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has led some to conclude that fostering intrinsic reading motivation is particularly beneficial for children's reading. It is thought that children who are intrinsically motivated to read (e.g., are reading out of curiosity to learn more, or out of a desire to develop their reading skills) will be more engaged in what they are reading. As a result, intrinsically motivated children will gain a richer or deeper understanding of what they have read.

On the other hand, children who are extrinsically motivated (e.g., are reading to get a better grade or to receive recognition from their parents) are commonly thought to read with very little interest or engagement in what they are reading, and as a result, will acquire a surface level of understanding. However, it is important to recognise that children can be motivated to read for numerous reasons, both intrinsic and extrinsic. It appears to