

The Effects of Students' Reading Levels on their
Intrinsic Motivation to Read

By Shannon Spada

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a correlation between students' reading ability and their intrinsic motivation to read. The study participants included a group of 21 second graders and used data from both the Fountas and Pinnell Running Records levels as well as the Reading Attitude Survey. There was not found to be a strong connection between the two variables, but more information was found to help the researcher understand what helps keep students motivated to read.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

In this study the relationship between students' reading levels and their motivation to read was explored. The study takes into account the students' Fountas and Pinnell reading levels in the beginning of the school year as well as a survey highlighting the students' interest in reading both inside and outside of the classroom, and for multiple purposes.

As a second grade teacher, the researcher found this topic of interest because of its potential impact on a student's reading ability and progression. Through experience and research, the researcher has come to understand that motivation plays a key part in the amount of time a student spends reading for pleasure or outside of the classroom. The students who are intrinsically motivated to read historically tend to outperform their peers on reading assessments (Applegate & Applegate, 2010). In order for students to increase their reading fluency, they must practice at home and in the classroom. If students are unmotivated to read or distracted by external stimuli, they will not get the full exposure to text that is necessary for reading achievement. Reading motivation also helps increase a student's confidence both in reading and in other academic areas.

There are countless consequences of poor motivation in readers. When students have a low interest level, their motivation drops, and this can hinder their achievement in multiple academic areas. A low motivation level can also impact students as they get older. Students' motivation tends to decline with age (Applegate & Applegate, 2010) which is why it is important to spark their motivation and build their confidence level at an early age.

There are many ways to improve a student's reading motivation. Research shows that there is a gender gap among readers and that boys tend to be the more reluctant readers (Senn, 2012). This is due in part to gender roles and cognitive development. An intervention suggested to increase motivation in both genders, but specifically for boys, is to provide hands-on activities in the classroom and opportunities for movement. Ideas for motivating readers include performing a reader's theatre or developing a post reading project to show comprehension skills. Other interventions to improve self-concept, and in turn motivation, are to give students differentiated assignments at their appropriate level in order to help them achieve success and increase their confidence level (Medford & McGeown, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students' reading levels affect their motivation to read or attitude towards reading. The results of this study will be used to determine whether there are certain groups of students who are less motivated to read and also what educators can do to help close that gap.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis in this study is that students with a higher intrinsic motivation toward reading will have a higher reading level. The study includes students of various economic and cultural backgrounds as well as different genders. All students included in the study are between seven and eight years old.

Operational Definitions

Intrinsic motivation is defined in this study as a student's innate desire to read. This can be influenced by personality, gender, or self-concept.

Extrinsic motivation is defined in this study as a student's desire to read based on a desired outcome, such as a reward or praise.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this review is to explore the correlation between students' reading motivation and their reading achievement. The first section of this review discusses the different types of motivation within students. The following section highlights the various factors involved within students' motivation to read, including gender studies. The fourth and final section provides a summary of the findings.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation can be defined as students' natural interest in reading something as opposed to extrinsic motivation, students reading something because they will earn an outside reward or incentive for doing so (or avoid punishment) (Medford & McGeown, 2012). Many of the articles examined agree that intrinsic motivation is much more effective in student performance than extrinsic motivation, and studies often cite extrinsic motivation as being "controversial." The consensus is that students will be more motivated to read if they have an innate desire to do so and not because there is a tangible prize involved. Although studies agree that intrinsic motivation is important, there are different theories about what factors may impact students' intrinsic motivation.

One popular theory is that students' cognitive ability to read acts as an "energizer" for their intrinsic motivation. This theory states that a students' self-concept, that is how they perceive themselves as readers, plays an important role in intrinsic motivation. In this study, a high level of self-concept was found to be linked with a higher level of intrinsic motivation to read where repeated instances of difficulty in reading was linked to a decline in reading motivation (Medford & McGeown, 2012).

Another study found that a student's interest in what he or she is reading is what lead to a more elevated motivation to read. The study also cited teacher involvement as a way to spark reading motivation. In the study, a survey was given to teachers in order to learn more about their motivational practices. Most of the teachers involved cited hands-on activities and stimulating tasks as the highest motivator in their classroom. Some of the hands-on activities mentioned in the article included role playing or creating a project (for example a cereal box or television commercial to advertise the book) after reading a book. The argument made in this study is that when students are engaged in what they are reading, they will better comprehend the text (Guthrie et al., 2006). The authors of this article also cited choices in reading as ways to boost engagement, and therefore increase intrinsic motivation, in students.

A third study on the topic also found that students who were engaged in what they were reading were more intrinsically motivated to read and thus outperformed their less enthusiastic peers. This study refers to the "expectancy-value theory" which states that motivation is dependent upon two factors: an individual's expectancy of success or failure and the overall appeal of the task to the individual (Applegate & Applegate, 2010). When pairing these studies together, a link between student interest in text and task and intrinsic motivation can be clearly seen.

Gender Differences in Reading Motivation

The articles in this section were chosen because they look at the motivational differences between boys and girls in the classroom. Many of the articles recognize a breakdown in the motivation of boys, and some give suggestions of how to build intrinsic motivation in boys. The articles chosen for this section also explore reasons for these gender differences.

Guthrie et al. (2006) cite engagement as a key factor in a student's intrinsic motivation). Marinak (2013) mirrors these thoughts by explaining that girls value reading more than boys and spend more time reading for leisure than do boys. This would mean that girls are more engaged in what they are reading and are, therefore, more intrinsically motivated to read. Marinak also cites research that shows that girls and good readers score in interest and self-efficacy as it relates to the "expectancy-value theory" mentioned above.

Marinak and Gambrell (2010) wrote an article related to gender differences in reading motivation. In their research of third grade boys and girls, they discovered that although there is no significant difference in the self-concept of boys and girls as readers, there was a drastic difference in how the two genders value reading (girls over boys). This research seems to play down self-concept as a leading factor in reading motivation, but it is also important to note that the readers used in this study were all of an average reading level. Alternatively, in an article that gives reasons for a boy's lack of motivation and suggestions for raising it, Senn (2012) states that boys do indeed tend to have a lack of confidence when it comes to reading.

It is indeed recognized in studies that boys who struggle to read are less motivated to spend time reading (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). This may be because boys learn differently than girls. Senn (2012) explains that boys in the elementary grades tend to have a shorter attention span than their female counterparts and are more action-oriented where girls are more communicative. Senn also argues that boys can become bored more easily than girls and, as a result, become disruptive in the classroom. Research cited in the article shows that boys' brains may not develop as quickly as girls and they may not be ready for what is being taught to them (Senn, 2012).

So what do we do to keep boys interested in reading? Senn (2012) suggests giving boys a choice of what to read and making it relevant to them. Boys are more motivated to read expository text or text that can be related to their lives as opposed to the literature that is found more appealing by their female counterparts.

Another way suggested to increase motivation in males is to support them with strong male role models who also love to read. Senn (2012) suggests that inviting adult volunteers of either gender to read with students can be a helpful way to raise a student's motivation to read and that fathers should read to their children as much as mothers in order to show their children that reading can be valuable to everyone.

Above all, it is important to encourage boys to read and give them positive reinforcement so that they feel confident when they are reading. All of the articles mentioned above agree that, on average, boys need the extra push to become motivated readers in the classroom. This includes providing boys with genre choice as well as with stimulating, action-based activities to keep their interest up. It is also mentioned that giving higher order, thought-provoking questions to encourage thoughtful responses to reading can motivate both genders (Applegate & Applegate, 2010).

Other Factors Influencing Reading Motivation

The articles in this section examine the outside factors that may affect reading motivation. These factors include teacher student relationships, student age, and students' self-concept. A common theme of these articles is that students have a belief about what they are capable of (self-concept), and the studies focus on the correlation between that self-concept and the motivation of students.

One factor that was brought up in several of the articles highlighted is student age. Research has shown that motivation to read tends to decrease as students get older, particularly when they reach middle school age (Applegate & Applegate, 2010). As students' interests change, they become more and more involved in sports and technology which further drives the point mentioned above of the benefit of giving them choices in activities and genres when reading.

One article suggests that, along with genre choice, hands-on learning and movement activities are key motivators. Guthrie et al. (2006) found that a classroom with more stimulating tasks related to reading had higher motivation levels and comprehension levels of students than a classroom with a lower level of stimulating tasks. This study suggests that situational interest in reading can also increase a student's motivation to read in both genders.

Competency beliefs and goal orientation were two factors brought up in Gerbig's (2009) article. These are defined as students' beliefs about themselves as readers and whether or not they desire to be a good reader. The notion of competency beliefs is an idea similar to students' "self-concept" as brought up in other articles. This "self-concept" is thought to be a main indicator of a student's motivation to read (Medford & McGeown, 2012). If students believe themselves to be good readers, then they will likely be more motivated to read compared to students who do not feel any success when reading. This seems to ring true in the classroom as students become upset and frustrated when they struggle to read, and these students have a tougher time wanting to read on their own. Gerbig mentions teacher involvement and praise as ways of increasing students' "competency beliefs".

Teacher and parent involvement are also key indicators of reading motivation in young students. Teacher involvement can be defined as students' beliefs that their teachers care about

them and their success (Guthrie et al., 2006). This involvement can have a major impact on students as they are very self-conscious at the school age and need consistent positive praise to keep them intrinsically motivated to read and perform in the classroom. As the articles above have mentioned, this positive praise outweighs extrinsic motivators such as prizes and rewards.

Summary

Motivation is a key component in a student's academic achievement. As mentioned above, evidence shows that students who are engaged in reading have better comprehension than when they are not engaged (Guthrie et al., 2006). Because of this, it is important to keep students' motivation levels raised and their interest in reading piqued. The articles mentioned in this review not only give insight into the reasoning behind the breakdown of motivation, they also give suggestions on how educators can raise motivation levels in their classrooms.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The goal of this research was to determine what, if any, impact students' reading level has on their reading motivation.

Design

The second-grade students involved in this study participated in a reading interest survey to gauge multiple facets of their feelings about reading. These feelings include how they feel about reading at home, reading in school, and when the teacher is reading aloud to them. Each student's reading level was then determined using the Fountas and Pinnell Running Records kits. Upon review of both sets of data, the teacher completed a graph to assess any positive correlations.

Participants

The school in which the study took place is in Northern Anne Arundel County. The school services approximately 724 students, out of which 67% receive free or reduced lunch services, and 9.8% receive special education services. Of the 724 students enrolled at the study school, 26% are African American, 5% are Asian, 29% are Hispanic, and 33% are White. The school services grades pre-K through fifth grade and has an attendance rate of more than 95%.

The 19 students in the study are enrolled in a second-grade class of average ability. Of the 19 students involved in the study, 63% are male and 37% are female. The cultural demographics of the class are 37% African American, 42% Caucasian, 16% Hispanic, and 5% American Indian.

Instrument

The instruments used during this study were the Fountas and Pinnell Running Records kits and a Garfield-themed Reading Interest Inventory.

Procedure

First the researcher, a second-grade classroom teacher, gave each student a reading interest survey in order to measure the students' intrinsic motivation toward learning. This inventory was given as a whole group, with the teacher explicitly giving directions and reading each section aloud. Students were told to circle the picture that they related most to in each situation.

Afterwards, over a span of four to five weeks, students' reading levels were measured using the Fountas and Pinnell Running Records Assessment. During this assessment, the administrator (in this case, the researcher) gave the students a book on a certain level and listened to them read the entire book, or a portion of the book, aloud. With a printed copy of the books, the administrator marked any errors the student made and scored students' fluency using a formula in the kit. After the student read, the administrator asked a variety of questions provided in the kit that cover material both within the text as well as beyond the text. The answers that the student gave were then measured on a scale of 0-3 points. Using the fluency and comprehension scores, the administrator decided whether the student would then read a book a level above, below, or at the instructional level for that particular student. The instructional level for each student is used as the "Guided Reading Level" for that student.

Once the two measures, the students' reading inventory and their reading levels, were scored and established, the researcher developed a data table with a point system in order to track a possible correlation between intrinsic motivation and reading levels.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students' reading levels affect their motivation to read or attitude towards reading.

The reading levels of 19 second-grade students were compared to their attitudes toward reading as measured by the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. Reading levels are defined by the Fountas and Pinnell guided reading levels determined by administering the Running Records kit. At the time of administration, students reading at a level A through J were identified as below grade level, students reading at a level K were identified as on grade level, and students reading at a level L or above were identified as above grade level. Students were grouped by their reading levels when analyzing the results of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Reading attitude survey results for above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level readers

Survey Item	Group	Mean	N	Standard Deviation	F	Significance
Reading At Home	High	2.8	4	1.50	0.122	0.886
	Medium	3.1	8	1.36		
	Low	2.9	7	1.35		
Reading During Free Time	High	3.5	4	5.77	0.919	0.419
	Medium	2.6	8	1.89		
	Low	3.1	7	1.22		
Reading During Summer Vacation	High	2.8	4	1.26	0.978	0.398
	Medium	2.0	8	1.31		
	Low	2.9	7	1.22		
Reading In School	High	3.0	4	1.41	0.648	0.536
	Medium	2.6	8	.92		
	Low	2.1	7	1.46		
Reading In Class	High	2.8	4	1.50	0.414	0.668
	Medium	2.4	8	1.30		
	Low	2.0	7	1.29		
Teacher Read Aloud	High	4.0	4	0.00	1.245	0.314
	Medium	2.9	8	1.55		
	Low	3.4	7	.98		

The null hypothesis in this study, that there would be no difference in reading level and intrinsic motivation toward reading, was supported by the data in Table 1.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students' reading levels affect their motivation to read or attitudes towards reading. As shown in the results in Table 1, there was not a strong enough relationship to indicate a connection between students' reading levels and their motivation to read. A fairly equal number of students from each group responded that they did not enjoy reading at home or for free time. Also, students across the board in each reading level selected that they enjoyed being read to by the teacher. The data presented in this action research suggests that there is no connection, or little connection, between students' reading levels and their motivation to read.

Implications of Results

The implication of this study is for the educators to take the knowledge they have gained about each student and tailor their teaching to better fit the students' needs and to keep students motivated to read. If students enjoy hearing the teacher read aloud, maybe they would enjoy reading to someone else or reading with a partner. A student who is not motivated to read in school may be more motivated given choices in subject matter. Active students who have a low reading motivation may benefit from hands-on, follow up activities to do after their reading or from frequent small movement breaks during reading time. The educator should follow up with an interest inventory to help find ways to increase the students' motivation to read.

Threats to Validity

There are also several threats to validity that go along with this study. One of these threats is student attitude. If a student came into school with a poor attitude on the day of testing,

he or she may not answer the questions as accurately as on a typical morning. Also, there may be students who either didn't understand the questions or didn't take the test seriously. Timing is another threat to validity. The students responding to this test were in the beginning of their second-grade year. Their answers and opinions may change by the end of their second-grade year.

Connections to Existing Literature

After completing the Literature Review in Chapter II of this study, the researcher found it surprising not to see a strong connection between students' reading levels and their motivation to read. One article that was reviewed suggested that a student's cognitive skills, as well as his or her intrinsic motivation, are both important contributors to reading comprehension growth (Medford & McGeown, 2012). The reading inventory administered in this study does not show intrinsic motivation to be a contributing factor to a student's reading ability.

Another article that was reviewed states that "Motivation is an important element in reading engagement, which ultimately results in reading achievement." (Gerbig, 2009, p. #). The students in this study showed that even though they enjoyed reading and were motivated to do so, some were not reaching grade level expectations.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study focuses on the connection between a students' reading levels and their motivation to read. Analysis of the data and a thorough review of the literature led to several questions. One question that could be used for further investigation is whether there is a strong relationship between gender and reading motivation. Many of the articles reviewed in Chapter II point to there being a strong connection between the two. According to Senn (2012), male

students have a chemical makeup that makes them less likely to consider themselves “readers” than their female counterparts.

Another question that could be investigated is whether there is a stronger motivation to read in the beginning of the school year versus the middle of the school year. Are students more likely to be excited for reading coming off of summer break when the school year is fresh or later in the year when they are well into a guided reading routine?

Finally, a study could be conducted to find whether students who read at home on a regular basis are more or less motivated to read at school. If a student is reading each night at home, is he or she building confidence in reading or becoming tired of reading upon return to school each day? These are some unanswered questions that have arisen from this study.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the current study shows that students’ reading levels are not necessarily directly related to their intrinsic motivation to read. Literature reviews suggest that students’ genders have a more distinct correlation to their intrinsic motivation to read, more so than their actual reading ability.

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