Motivation and Autonomy in Reading

Insights from Recent Research on Children's Literacy Development by Professor Emeritus Alec Webster, Bristol University, Graduate School of Education, December 2022

We know, from recent surveys of children's time spent reading and writing at home and school, that it is an 'increasingly stark' picture (Clark et al, 2020). In this study of more than 60,000 children aged between 5 and 18, only 25% said they read daily in their free time, whilst 1 in 13 never read at all. Key issues here are that children who enjoy reading are three times more likely to read above the expected level for their age, whilst children who read daily are twice as likely to read above expected levels. Motivation is thus the focus of much recent research.

In the studies by Ryan et al (2020), Troyer et al (2019) and Wigfield et al (2016) distinctions are drawn between 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' motivation, in relation to children's time spent reading, understanding of text, and how this engenders self-confidence and self-determination. By 'extrinsic' is meant those tasks set by adults such as worksheets or set exercises with no negotiation, relevance or obvious purpose, and completed in isolation with little modelling, guidance, reflection or adult support. In contrast pupils are 'intrinsically' motivated when they are helped to act independently in tasks that are meaningful to them and which they gain satisfaction from completing.

'Autonomous motivation' is another term used to describe what drives pupils' incentive to read in class (Tegmark et al, 2022). In 14 lower- and middle-age groups in secondary schools, the majority of literacy activities were deemed to involve little that was self-directed across the curriculum, whilst highly 'controlled motivation' - decided, paced and directed by the teacher - was commonplace and highly predictive of poor literacy achievement. These issues are encapsulated in Kohn's (2018) work which criticises the manipulation of children (and adults) by the use of grades, rewards or other incentives. His idea of 'working with', rather than 'doing to' is portrayed by 'the 3 Cs': making sure 'Content' is interesting and relevant to the individual; 'Choice' is available for pupils to decide on ways of working, content and reporting; 'Collaboration' is encouraged so that children can work cooperatively rather than in competition with others.

A recent and ongoing (2015-2022) Open University project in the UK, working with teachers from some 20 Local Authorities (ourfp.org), has outlined comprehensively, how to develop robust reading pedagogy, with a number of foci on the social fabric and texture of literacy environments. When reading instruction is oriented towards component skills such as decoding, high in teacher management and direction, children's engagement and enjoyment is low. Reading teaching allowing choice, child ownership and based on the child's own agenda, increases enjoyment, motivation, time spent reading and self-direction.

'Adaptive teaching' is another term that encapsulates being sensitive to the individual needs and competencies that children bring to literacy, seeing the problems faced as windows through which can be viewed the kind of help required (Hardy et al, 2019, Parsons et al, 2018).

Lastly, in a study of 616 students in the first grade of Finnish secondary schools, Ruotsalainen et al (2022) analysed the relationship between accuracy and fluency in reading, and different types of teaching activity. Routine code-focused activities, phonics and spelling, were associated with lower than average reading skills when teaching was directed at a whole group. A mixed economy was associated with higher reading skills when a variety of methods, including small group assignments, was implemented. The main driver of development, borrowing a term from scaffolding, is said to be the 'role of proximal processes…acknowledging the child's active role in the learning situation'.

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