



# NSW Centre for Effective Reading

Middle Years



## Motivation and Engagement – Background Information

### Introduction

**ALL** struggling students need direct and explicit instruction in:  
Vocabulary,  
Comprehension, and  
Motivation and Engagement.

**SOME** struggling students need direct and explicit instruction in:  
Advanced Word Study, and  
Fluency (to promote comprehension).

Many students with reading difficulties soon become disengaged readers and demonstrate low motivation for academic tasks. They think they don't have the ability to succeed and frequently give up and avoid difficult tasks.

Although the words motivation and engagement are often used interchangeably, they are not always synonymous. Whereas motivation refers to the desire, reason, or predisposition to become involved in a task or activity, engagement refers to the degree to which a student processes text through the use of active strategies and thought processes and prior knowledge (Kamil et al., 2008). It is possible to be motivated to complete a literacy task without being engaged because the task is too easy or too difficult.

Evidence suggests that motivation to read school-related texts declines as students progress from elementary to middle school (Gottfried, 1985). The strongest decline is seen among struggling students (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992). This can lead to impaired comprehension, difficulty developing effective reading strategies or to learn from what they read, and thus limiting their exposure to important content-area information, world knowledge, and vocabulary (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007).

Teachers can increase their students' motivation to read by incorporating several key components into instruction. However, increasing students' reading motivation does not singlehandedly improve reading skills. Attention to motivating students should occur within the context of a comprehensive reading program in which necessary reading skills and strategies are taught (Boardman, et. al., 2008).

The table below summarises features of successful readers and students with reading difficulties in the area of reading motivation.

Successful Readers	Struggling Readers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interact with text in a motivated and strategic way.</li> <li>• Have improved comprehension and reading outcomes when engaged with text.</li> <li>• Read more and thus, have more access to a variety of topics and text types.</li> <li>• Are interested and curious about topics and content in texts and read to find out more.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May engage in reading as a passive process without effortful attention given to activating prior knowledge, using reading strategies, or employing other strategic thought processes.</li> <li>• Often have low comprehension of text.</li> <li>• Fail to access a variety of wide reading opportunities. Given the choice, prefer not to read.</li> <li>• May not be interested or curious to find out about topics or content by reading.</li> </ul>

Adapted from Guthrie & Wigfield (2000) by Boardman et al (2008)

## Why do some students in the middle years lack motivation and engagement in learning?

Students in the middle years may lack motivation or may not be engaged in instruction for many reasons, including:

- uninteresting or irrelevant text,
- deficient reading skills, including:
  - decoding/word reading
  - vocabulary knowledge
  - comprehension,
- adolescent students who struggle in reading do not expect do well in class,
- some students may think that textbooks are boring and beyond their ability to understand,
- factors outside of school (e.g., distracted by issues with family, friends).

## How do we increase engagement for all learners?

Universal Design for Learning Principles (CAST, 2011) suggests that there is not one means of engagement that will be optimal for all learners in all contexts and it is important to provide multiple options for engagement.

These multiple options involve:

### **1. Have alternate ways to recruit learner interest that reflect the individual differences amongst learners.**

These can include:

- Optimise individual choice and autonomy – in an instructional setting it is often inappropriate to provide choice of the learning objective itself, but it is often appropriate to offer choices for achieving the objective, in the tools or supports available.
- Optimise relevance, value and authenticity – individuals are engaged by information and activities that are relevant and valuable to their interests and goals.
- Minimise distractions – teachers need to reduce distractions in the learning environment.

### **2. Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence.**

These can include:

- Heighten salience of goals and objectives – for some learners it is important to build in periodic 'reminders' of both the goal and its value in order for them to sustain effort and concentration.
- Vary demands and resources to optimise challenge – all learners need to be challenged, but not always in the same way.
- Foster collaboration and communication – all learners must be able to communicate and collaborate effectively within a community of learners.
- Increase mastery-orientated feedback – mastery orientated feedback guides learners toward mastery rather than a fixed notion of performance and emphasises the role of effort and practice.

### **3. Provide options for self-regulation.**

These can include:

- Promote expectations and beliefs that optimise motivation – learners set personal goals that can be realistically reached, as well as fostering positive beliefs that their goals can be met.
- Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies – learners require scaffolds that can provide support in choosing and trying an adaptive strategy for managing and directing their emotional responses to external events.
- Develop self-assessment and reflection - to develop better capacity for self-regulation learners need to learn to monitor their emotions and reactivity carefully and accurately.

# How do we increase the motivation and engagement of students with reading difficulties?

Motivation to read is distinct from the more generalised motivation to learn. Kamil et al. (2008) identify four ways to increase student motivation and engagement specifically for students with reading difficulties.

## 1. Establish content learning goals

Meaningful and engaging content learning goals can be established around the essential ideas of a content area and the specific learning processes used to access those ideas.

To use content learning goals with their students, teachers can:

- establish the content learning goals themselves or allow students to set their own with teacher input.
- involve students in creating and tracking content goals.
- provide explicit feedback on progress of meeting goals.
- make content goals interesting, relevant, and personally meaningful.
- verbally praise students for their effort to learn (not only performance). This can lead students to develop content learning goals and enjoy explorations and challenges.  
(Boardman et al., 2008; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004)

## 2. Provide a positive learning environment

When students choose what they read, what activities they engage in related to reading and with whom they work, their motivation improves and the time they spend reading increases.

Specifically, teachers can:

- create a supportive environment where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities.
- provide opportunities for students to select which text they read by offering a list of appropriate readings from which students can choose. Students who can select their own reading material use more effective reading strategies and demonstrate better comprehension after reading the self-selected text.
- allow students to choose aspects of the task, such as where to work in the classroom, what type of product to produce (e.g., written text or powerpoint), and which topics to pursue.
- provide opportunities for students to select partners or groups or to work alone.

To address reading motivation and engagement it is important that teachers consider increasing motivation and engagement during the planning and implementation of reading activities. They can select from the strategies suggested above and combine them during reading instruction. For example, to increase reading motivation and understanding, teachers might first provide a stimulating hands-on activity, provide explicit instruction in generating questions and answering specific types of questions, then have cooperative learning groups generate questions related to the activity, and finally have students find answers to their questions by reading relevant texts.

### 3. Create relevant literacy experiences

Select appropriate and interesting material, whether the teacher is choosing for the student or the student is choosing with teacher input.

Teachers can:

- choose texts in subjects about which students possess background knowledge. Knowing something about a selection's content makes the text more interesting and engaging.
- choose texts that are visually pleasing and that appear readable. Texts that students perceive they will be successful at reading are more interesting and motivating.
- choose relevant texts that interest students; this is often an individual matter. While some texts are interesting to just about everyone, others are interesting to students when they support individual content goals.
- provide access to text through the use of assistive technology.
- provide stimulating tasks related to reading topics prior to reading in order to generate interest.

### 4. Build in instructional conditions that increase reading engagement and conceptual learning.

Teachers can:

- allow students to collaborate by reading together, sharing information, and explaining and presenting their knowledge to others during reading and reading related tasks. Adolescents are motivated by working together. Collaboration also increases the number of opportunities struggling readers have to respond.
- build connections between disciplines, such as science and English, taught throughout conceptual themes. For example Secondary Connected Outcomes Groups Integrated Learning Stage 4 – Healthy Lifestyles.
- use collaboration to foster a sense of belonging to the classroom community.
- support students' access to curriculum content through the use of assistive technology.

## References

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