Increasing Students' Achievement and Interest in Reading

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ABSTRACT

Teachers of literacy have two major goals; to help their students become able readers and to help instill in their students the desire to read. This article reports a one year study in a fourth grade classroom to help students in both areas. The reading program in this fourth grade classroom included silent reading time, choices of reading materials, sharing of literature, and appropriate adult modeling of reading. Results included increases in reading rates, comprehension, vocabulary, and amount of reading accomplished by the students. Recommendations for teachers are provided based on findings of the study.

Aliteracy, having the ability to read but lacking the motivation, is a widespread concern in the United States. This problem is found even in elementary schools where negative attitudes toward reading begin very early in children's lives. In the report *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985), the Commission on Reading reports that our nation's fifth graders rarely read for pleasure.

> *50% of the children read books for an average of four minutes per day or less, 30% read two minutes per day or less, and fully 10% never reported reading any book on any day. For the majority of the children, reading from books occupied 1% of their free time, or less. (p. 77)*

Researchers express concerns about reading attitudes in our classrooms where a general lack of interest prevails. They point out that those considered hesitant readers are not just the poor readers, but also include many capable readers (Clary, 1991; Turner, 1992).

Other diversions compete for the interests of children; unfortunately, reading appears to be low on the list of activities children choose to do in their spare time.

A major goal in the teaching of reading is to develop in children the desire to read so they will become life-long readers. Trelease (1989) elaborates on this ideal:

> At a time when 80% of the books published for adults in the U.S. are financial failures and TV Guide is the best selling newsstand weekly periodical, when 60% of our prison population has severe reading problems and 80% of our 21 year olds cannot comprehend a college textbook, it is time to stop fooling ourselves. Teaching children how to read is not enough; we must also teach them to want to read. (p. 205)

Although instruction in reading strategies and skills is important, teachers must remember to provide time for students to enjoy good books and have positive reading experiences. This may be especially crucial for those readers who experience difficulty in learning to read.

Motivated readers, those who participate in self-initiated reading, become better readers as a result of this increased exposure to literature (Allington, 1977; Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988). Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni (1996) maintain that highly motivated readers are in control of their own literacy development:

> Students who believe they are capable and competent readers are more likely to outperform those who do not hold such beliefs. In addition, students who perceive reading as valuable and important and who have personally relevant reasons for reading will engage in reading in a more planned and effortful manner. (p. 518)

The goal of teaching reading is to develop efficient and self-motivated readers. Therefore, educators should promote positive reading attitudes through enjoyable reading experiences. Realizing that when children spend time reading their ability to read improves, teachers need to find ways to encourage children to read more in school and at home. Leading educators (Allington, 1977; Anderson, et al., 1985; McCracken & McCracken, 1979; Routman, 1991; Trelease, 1989) have suggested four methods that are particularly effective in inviting hesitant readers into the world of books: allowing time for silent reading, offering a choice of reading materials, sharing of literature read with and by children, and providing appropriate adult modeling of reading.

IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAM IN THE CLASSROOM

These four methods of encouraging students to read are simple, inexpensive strategies that elementary teachers can use to help develop students' desire to read. To examine possible effects of these strategies, we put them into practice in a fourth grade classroom. Fourth graders enrolled in a traditional-schedule elementary school in the Rocky Mountain region were selected for participation because they were students in the classroom of one of the authors. Since this was a stable school population, these students remained in the same classroom throughout the school year.

Description of the Program
The language arts program in this fourth grade class consisted of approximately two hours daily. This time included instruction in all of the language arts: reading, writing, spelling, and handwriting. The first major block of time focused on reading and the second on writing.
For the first 10 to 15 minutes of the school day, the classroom teacher discussed literature of various sorts with the class. At times the sharing consisted of the teacher reading a picture book or doing a book talk on a chapter book. At other times, the teacher read newspaper articles or gave examples of his own writing to the students. Following this teacher sharing, he presented a mini-lesson on a topic related to literature study. Sample topics included vocabulary development activities (e.g., figurative language, synonyms, antonyms), word identification topics (e.g., compound words, prefixes, word patterns), comprehension development (e.g., story mapping, predicting outcomes, main ideas and details) and reference material use (e.g., use of indexes, dictionaries, graphs and charts). Texts from the district-adopted basal reading program were used for paired reading. Paired reading was done in various ways: the two students read the text simultaneously or one student in the pair read orally from one of the selections while the other student listened. Occasionally during this time, the class engaged in repeated reading (Samuels, 1979). Students individually read and re-read the same selection, trying to reach a faster rate than before. This activity was designed to increase not only rate of reading, but also students' sight vocabulary and comprehension.
Fifteen minutes was then spent on literature study each day. The teacher had 33 classroom sets of literature for use in literature study. At the beginning of the school year, the class as a whole selected a title that they wanted to read. Students read and discussed the book together as a whole class, with the teacher modeling strategies that would later become independent for the students, allowing for small group and partner reading of books. As the year progressed,

small groups or partners chose books to read and discuss together. They normally culminated their reading with the creation of a final project that was shared with the rest of the class. The final 30 minutes of this time block was spent in sustained silent reading (SSR) where students selected books to read independently. At the beginning of the year, some students found it difficult to read for the entire 30 minutes, but most students consistently used their SSR time well.

After this reading period, the students had a block of time focused on writing development. The first ten to fifteen minutes was spent in spelling instruction. The teacher created a spelling program that focused on students practicing words they frequently misspelled during their writing, as well as high frequency words. After this brief spelling period, the students completed Daily Oral Language activities, including sentence building, dialogue and sentence expansion activities. The teacher then presented a short ten minute mini-lesson that covered such writing topics as correspondence or letter writing, persuasive language, stylistic devices (such as, imagery, personification, and alliteration), propaganda devices, sensory writing, life stories, collaborative writing (the whole class creates a story following guidelines of the writing process), partner editing, alternate writing (each student begins a story, then passes his/her unfinished pieces to another student who continues the story), script writing, sentence building, alliteration, descriptive writing, and editing of one's writing. The topics for these mini-lessons came from the teacher's work with the students and his observations of their needs.

Following the mini-lesson, students wrote in their journals for approximately 5 minutes. Instead of assigning a writing topic for their journals, the teacher allowed them to write on any topic they wished. The journals were strictly for the students with no teacher or peer response. Journal writing was followed by about 30 minutes of sustained silent writing (SSW). Students generally wrote about topics of their own choice and completed their work over a period of time. During this time students not only composed, but also engaged in all aspects of the writing process: topic selection, drafting, conferencing, revising, editing, and publishing.

As referred to previously, the research literature suggests that four features in a classroom could contribute to increased motivation to read for elementary grade students. Each of these four strategies — providing time for reading, allowing students choice in what they read, sharing literature, and adult modeling of reading — was included in the program outlined above.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As reflected in the literature, four classroom strategies are recommended to increase motivation to read among elementary students. We implemented these four strategies to examine their possible effects

on the two major purposes for reading instruction: first, the develop-
ment of students' ability to read, and second, the development of stu-
dents' motivation to read.   We wanted to explore the following
questions: 1) Does implementation of these four practices lead to in-
creases in students' scores on reading achievement tests? 2) Do stu-
dents who are consistently exposed to these four practices increase
their reading fluency and accuracy? 3) Do they read more? What
kinds of books do they read?

DATA COLLECTION

To measure changes in students' interest and reading achieve-
ment, we used both formal and informal measures. During the first
two weeks of the school year, the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test,
Level D, Form 1 (MacGinitie and MacGinitie, 1989) was administered
to all students to measure their reading achievement. This test mea-
sures reading achievement by grade level and includes both compre-
hension and vocabulary subtests.

We also prepared an informal oral reading test, adapted from
Marie Clay's Running Record guidelines (Clay, 1994). This informal
test was used to assess each student's oral reading, including fluency
and accuracy of reading. A one-page text was selected from a fourth
grade basal reader not used for reading instruction during that school
year. Each student silently read the passage one time before the test
to become familiar with its content. During the evaluation, the student
read from the text orally for one minute. What the student read orally
was scripted by the teacher, so that all deviations from the text were
recorded. Scores for oral reading accuracy were based on the per-
centage of words read correctly. A simplified form of oral miscue
analysis was used to determine which miscues (deviations from the
text) interfered with the student's comprehension of the passage. For
oral reading fluency, we recorded the number of words per minute
students read.

We collected many other forms of data, including records of
books read by students during their silent reading period, teacher
anecdotal records of classroom observations, and teacher records of
books read by him to the students to identify changes in students' in-
terest and participation in reading.

RESULTS

Results are reported in several ways. First, results of teacher and
student records are reported to provide an indication of students' in-
terest in reading. Second, whole class results of the Gates-MacGinitie
Test of reading achievement (comprehension and vocabulary) and the
oral reading tests that provided fluency and accuracy scores are re-
ported. Third, comparisons are made of students' achievement on the

formal tests from the perspectives of gender and reading ability differences. Students from the upper, middle, and lower thirds of the class, as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie test, are compared with one another. Finally, the influence of adult modeling on student reading practices are reported.

Whole Class Results of Teacher and Student Records
        Student reading records showed that during the school year of the study the class of 26 students read over 2,100 books in a seven-month period, from the beginning of school until the end of March. The average number of books read was 81 books per student; the girls averaged 86 books and the boys 72 books. Several students read between 200-250 books, while others read only 25-30 books. Approximately 60% of the books read were picture books, while the other 40% were chapter books.
        Classroom observations at the beginning of the school year showed that a majority of the students read eagerly during sustained silent reading, while only a few students resisted reading. For example, during the first week of school, six students (five boys and one girl) were easily distracted and exhibited behavioral problems and had to be reminded to read. They sometimes pretended to read by merely flipping pages and they frequently searched the bookshelves for a book instead of reading at their seats. However, three months later we observed very little reluctance toward reading on the part of any student, including the six who were originally resistant.
        Each week, the teacher provided new collections of reading materials. With each new collection of books, the students showed increased excitement towards reading. The teacher provided a wide selection of books from the city, school, and classroom libraries. These three resources provided students with nearly 2000 books from which to choose for self-selected reading. Approximately 50 books were checked out from the city library each month for use in the classroom. School library records showed that over 700 books were checked out for student use during a seven-month period, an average of over 100 books each month. The classroom library consisted of 400-500 books, including both chapter and picture books, as well as 33 classroom sets of children's books. These books were purchased with resources normally spent on textbooks.
        Recorded teacher observations showed a broadening of reading interest among the students. Interest in reading increased within the first few months of school, even for the most hesitant readers. Many of the students read books from only one or two authors or genres in the early part of the year. Several months later, they were reading books from a variety of authors and from a wide range of genres. Some of their favorite authors were Mary Downing Hahn, Avi, Lloyd Alexander, Caralyn and Mark Buehner, Mark Teague, Susan Cooper, Lynne Reid Banks, Betty Ren Wright, Louis L'Amour, and Bill

Watterson. They enjoyed genres such as historical fiction, poetry, informational books, fantasy, science fiction, and contemporary realistic fiction. They also enjoyed reading mysteries, comic books, sports stories, and humorous books. Students read widely in both picture books and chapter books. They also showed enthusiasm for book orders and book fairs, and many students mentioned that they were building personal libraries at home.

Student sharing of favorite books occurred often in this classroom. Students discussed books in small groups or with the entire class. This method of sharing excited most of the students and many books were exchanged among friends. Students told one another about the good books they were reading or had read and they helped one another to find interesting literature to read.

Results of Formal and Informal Tests

Pre- and posttests of both the formal and informal measures were used to examine growth in students' reading achievement. Formal measures were used to measure growth in vocabulary and comprehension. Informal measures were used to document changes in reading rate and accuracy.

Students read a one-page selection taken from a fourth-grade basal reader to determine their reading rates. Results of this pre- and posttest showed that students increased their rates of oral reading dramatically during the school year, averaging an increase of 48.3 words per minute (wpm) per student. By contrast, Lipson and Wixson (1991) report average oral reading rate increases for fourth graders is approximately 20 wpm over one school year. At the beginning of the year, the students' average reading rate was 117.9 wpm, increasing to 166.2 wpm by the end of the year. In terms of the data from Lipson and Wixson, these students began the year reading at a rate expected for third graders (in the 105 to 125 wpm range) and ended the year reading beyond the sixth grade level (the 140-160 wpm range).

We also evaluated students' accuracy of oral reading. This was calculated by using the oral reading miscue data. We found that students' average reading accuracy increased from 94% of the words read correctly at the beginning of the year (range from 81-99%) to 97% correct by year's end (range of 92-100%).

We administered the Gates-MacGinitie Test as a pretest in early September and as a posttest in March the following year to measure changes in vocabulary and comprehension abilities. Table 1 summarizes the overall results of that testing, including both vocabulary and comprehension scores. For the vocabulary test, we found that the students gained approximately one year's growth (1.1) over the seven month period of time. This rate of increase is about what should be expected for fourth grade students. However, students achieved nearly three year's increase in comprehension over the same time period with a class average of 2.7 years. Since this rate of growth was

greater than expected, we took a closer look at the data by analyzing the results by gender and ability level.

Table 1

Scores of Fourth Grade Students on Gates-MacGinitie Vocabulary and Comprehension Tests

	N	Pre-test	Posttest	Gain
Vocabulary	26	4.6	5.7	1.1
Comprehension	26	3.9	6.6	2.7

Gender and Ability Comparison Results
    We also analyzed the data by gender and reading abilities of the students. Table 2 presents the results of the Gates-MacGinitie testing by gender. The girls began the school year more than one year ahead of the boys, as indicated by pre-test scores (4.7 years to 3.3 years). Both boys and girls consistently increased their comprehension test scores after seven months of instruction. The girls increased by 2.3 years, while the boys increased by 3.0 years.

Table 2

Scores of Three Fourth Grade Classes on the Gates-MacGinitie Comprehension Test by Gender

	N	Pre-test	Posttest	Gain
Female Students	13	4.7	7.0	2.3
Male Students	13	3.3	6.3	3.0

    Tables 3 and 4 indicate results by gender, as well as by ability level. For the girls (Table 3), increases in comprehension test scores were similar. Each group achieved approximately a two grade level improvement over seven months.

Adult Modeling Results
    The teacher acted as a positive reading role model in a number of ways as recorded in his field notes. During sustained silent reading and in his reading at home, the teacher read widely. For example, he read 55 chapter books, 10 magazines, and 160 picture books in eight months. This reading, although not shared systematically with the students, helped the teacher increase his awareness and appreciation of children's literature and played a part in his sharing of books with his students.

Table 3

Scores of Female Fourth Graders on the Gates-MacGinitie Comprehension Test by Ability Level

Ability Level	N	Pre-test	Posttest	Gain
Upper Ability	5	5.8	8.0	2.2
Middle Ability	4	4.1	6.4	2.3
Lower Ability	4	2.9	4.8	1.9

    Among the boys (Table 4), the lower ability level students made the greatest gains. Those boys increased their scores by four years.

Table 4

Scores of Male Fourth Graders on the Gates-MacGinitie Comprehension Test by Ability Level

Ability Level	N	Pre-test	Posttest	Gain
Upper Ability	5	4.7	7.3	2.6
Middle Ability	4	3.9	5.6	1.7
Lower Ability	4	2.4	6.4	4.0

    During the reading period each day, the teacher introduced children's books to the students and read during sustained silent reading. During the first seven months of school, he introduced over 280 books to the students. He also read aloud seventy books to the students during this period, seventeen of which were chapter books. From lists of the students' favorite books, 67% of the girls' favorites

and 83% of the boys' favorites were books he had either read aloud or had shared with the class. Clearly, the books read by the teacher to the students had a great influence on what the students chose to read. As a result of extensive reading both in and out of school, the teacher became more familiar with children's books, broadening his reading interests and leading him to discover new authors.

Parent volunteers also served as reading role models. Students read to or with these parents several times each week for a three month period. Parent volunteers also read books aloud to small groups during holiday parties at Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Valentine's Day. The purpose of using parent volunteers was to allow them to serve as reading role models and to assist students in improving their oral reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

An additional reading role model was another sixth grade teacher from the school who was in the process of writing a children's story about the experiences of his younger brother. That teacher spent several weeks reading his story aloud to the class after each lunch recess. The students were thrilled to hear the humorous events and eagerly anticipated seeing the book published.

The school principal was another reading role model. He read aloud his favorite picture book and shared some secrets he had learned about the illustrations. Throughout the year, he read and responded to class stories the students had written and displayed them on his office door for other students to read.

DISCUSSION

Although we cannot positively conclude that the methods used for reading motivation caused the increases in reading interest and ability demonstrated by these students, test results and our observations indicate that students were involved in dramatic, powerful changes in their reading habits, attitudes, and abilities.

Student Outcomes
A notable outcome of this study was the dramatic increase in reading comprehension among all students. Among all groups, growth in reading comprehension, as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie test, was over two years instead of the expected one year's growth. This increase was especially noticeable among the lower ability readers. For both boys and girls, the greatest gains in comprehension scores were among the lower reading ability students. At the beginning of the year, we felt that these readers had the ability to read, but lacked the desire. Later in the year, when they began to enjoy reading books, their reading abilities increased markedly. We were particularly impressed that those students who had the least interest in reading at the beginning of each school year were among those who had made the greatest gains on the reading achievement tests.

The increases in students' rate of reading was impressive. Students on average increased their rate of reading by approximately three years, based on guidelines from Lipson and Wixson (1991). When readers increase their rate of reading, they usually also increase their sight vocabulary and their comprehension (Samuels, 1979). The increase in students' comprehension scores on the Gates-MacGinitie test and their increase in reading accuracy, as measured by the informal oral reading test, support Samuel's argument. Students in this study achieved marked gains in rate of oral reading, reading comprehension, and oral reading accuracy.

The amount of independent reading the students completed during this year was tremendous. When given time to read and provided with a wide variety of reading materials, students read a great deal. The 2100 books that these fourth graders read in seven months exceeded our expectations. Because the students read more and were exposed to a greater variety of books, they all became able to identify favorite titles and authors. We observed students sharing book titles with each other. Students obviously enjoyed taking suggestions from their peers. On many occasions informal, unplanned book swapping occurred among students, and they held impromptu discussions about books they had purchased or checked out of the library. A consistent result was that students chose to read many of the books that the teacher had read to them. Some of their favorite books were ones that had been shared in class. Although this finding was not a great surprise, it was exciting to witness.

Picture books seemed to hold interest for all of the students, particularly the lower ability readers. This was so, perhaps, because students could read enjoyable material at their level and finish reading the book at one sitting. By feeling that picture book reading was permissible, they likely had more practice reading than if they had been required to read only "challenging" books on grade level. After they had become more able as readers, these lower ability students voluntarily chose to read books that were more difficult.

We learned that it is critical for the teacher to thoroughly know his/her students' reading interests. An examination of students' reading records revealed a wide range of reading material used by the students, so satisfying the reading appetites of all students was a challenge. Providing students with a wide choice of reading materials and sharing books regularly with students seemed to help maintain their interest in reading. Since only a small percentage of books read by the students were national award-winning books, teachers need to be familiar with the reading interests and reading abilities of their students, as well as with children's literature. Relying only on award-winning books to satisfy student interest may not be effective. Teachers must be knowledgeable about a variety of books appropriate for children. When teachers read extensively in children's literature,

they become better able to recommend books that children will enjoy reading.

Another satisfying outcome of the study was the frequency with which students began to read and discuss books on their own with no assignment or class activity expectation. Teacher observation showed clearly that students spontaneously talked to each other about what they were reading. Conversation and conferences with parents revealed that reading at school and at home became a much greater part of the lives of these students. Books and authors became natural topics of conversation.

Adult Influence

Although we knew from the literature that the teacher represents a major influence in the classroom, we were pleased to find that the students' favorite books to read independently were very frequently books that the teacher had read to them or shared with the class. Among girls, 67% of the books they reported reading independently were books the teacher had shared with the class, while for the boys the percentage was 83%. If teachers will read regularly to their students, they might be able to help their students find books that interest them.

A few times during each school year, the teacher failed to read during the entire silent reading period, dealing instead with management concerns or other pressing needs. He learned quickly that actions speak louder than words. Several students in class mirrored his actions, quickly finding other things to occupy their time during the sustained silent reading period.

We also found that the parent volunteers who came into the classroom to read with the students influenced their reading. Comments by the students and the parent volunteers in the form of unsolicited thanks, as well as comments from parents and feedback provided at student-educator-parent conferences, indicated that the practice of adults reading with children increased the likelihood that the students would read independently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and experiences of this study, we have found that there are specific actions that a teacher can take that may increase students' motivation to read, as well as increase their reading comprehension, rate of oral reading, and accuracy of oral reading. As a result of this work, we have developed the following recommendations that teachers can follow to motivate readers in the elementary classroom and to increase some crucial reading skills: 1) Read aloud to students daily; 2) Provide for daily sustained silent reading; 3) Model personal reading enjoyment each day; 4) Provide for formal and informal book sharing; 5) Regularly provide students with a

collection of reading materials from the school or community library; 6) Arrange for effective use of community volunteers to encourage recreational reading.

Each of these six recommendations is relatively simple and inexpensive to implement. However, making time in the school day for them is a major concern. When we consider the many benefits that result from implementation of these few, simple practices, we feel that students will benefit, and that they may become life-long readers and learners. Although we implemented this program to increase students' motivation to read, we found not only that they read more and were more excited about books they read, but they also increased their reading ability.

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