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Motivating students with Accelerated Reader

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Motivating students with Accelerated Reader

Abstract

Excitement was obvious at Wells-Carey Elementary that day. If you did not know better, you might think it was picture day, the day of a field trip or maybe even the day of the Halloween parties. The students were busy as bees going about their daily morning routines. Smiles proliferated and nary a squabble could be seen. What was happening? What could be the reason for the excitement and unusually well-behaved students? Why, it was the opening day for the Accelerated Reader incentive store!

MOTIVATING STUDENTS WITH ACCELERATED READER

A Graduate Research Paper

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by

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Introduction

Excitement was obvious at Wells-Carey Elementary that day. If you did not know better, you might think it was picture day, the day of a field trip or maybe even the day of the Halloween parties. The students were busy as bees going about their daily morning routines. Smiles proliferated and nary a squabble could be seen. What was happening? What could be the reason for the excitement and unusually well-behaved students? Why, it was the opening day for the Accelerated Reader incentive store!

Students had been earning points for reading books since school began. The students had inspected the Accelerated Reader incentive store display case enthusiastically. The anticipation of spending their points on rewards of their own choosing made this day extremely significant to them. The number of absences was low and the number of parents in the building was high.

When it was finally our third grade class' turn to go to the store, the students waiting anxiously in the line to be helped reminded me of children waiting for their turn to sit on Santa's lap at the mall during the holiday season. Comments from anxious shoppers as they tried to wait patiently included:

* "I hope I have enough points to buy one of those for my sister."

* "Wow! How many points did that cost?"

* "Were there any Goosebumps books left? What about Garth Brooks CDs?"

* "I think I might save my points and try to get enough for a stuffed animal next month."

Students in the class read throughout the month as though their turn at the store was tomorrow and they were personally going to buy it out! The Accelerated Reader incentive store is a new thing at Wells-Carey Elementary School this year.

The store is part of a school-wide extrinsic motivation program. The program is possible due to grant monies received. Wells-Carey qualifies for a variety of grants that are distributed based on the school population's socioeconomic status. Our school is among the top five schools in Iowa having the greatest percentage of students receiving free and reduced-cost lunch.

The Accelerated Reader incentive store has had an extremely positive influence on our school. The quantity and quality of reading that occurs daily has improved, attendance has improved, and parent involvement has increased.

Problems with Extrinsic Motivation

The Accelerated Reader incentive store is one form of

extrinsic motivation. The age-old debate between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation continues today. With intrinsic motivation the reward is the pleasure and learning derived from reading. Intrinsic motivation is popular among educators. It is easy for them to identify with as they typically have gained useful information from their own reading experiences. In contrast, extrinsic motivation involves an external reward. Extrinsic motivation did not fit well with my personal beliefs and what I learned in college. However, I believe that there is a time and a place where extrinsic motivation is appropriate, even beneficial.

Intrinsic motivations are goals that are internal to the learner (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Intrinsic motivations spring from personal interests and private experiences; these interests and experiences combine into reasons for reading, such as: involvement, curiosity, social interaction, and challenge (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). I feel that intrinsic motivation is the most naturally fulfilling method of being rewarded for reading. A teacher who fosters intrinsic motivation to motivate students to read will typically spend less effort, time, and money on the task than the teacher who uses extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivations sustain long-term literacy learning (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). Lifelong, voluntary reading is closely tied

to intrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated students develop strategies for finding books, maintaining a place for reading, preserving large amounts of time for reading, and coping with distractions. Students who are intrinsically motivated to read have a better chance of being motivated to read throughout their lives. Since intrinsic motivation is longer lasting and supports sustained thinking, it is vital to higher order strategy development (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992). Such higher order strategies include: summarizing, self-monitoring, and drawing inferences.

I believe that once students understand the intrinsic rewards for reading, it is something that cannot be taken away from them. This is not true of extrinsic reading motivation, which is only available as long as someone provides the external rewards.

Alfie Kohn opposes the idea of giving students prizes for reading. Kohn claims that research demonstrates that performing a task for a reward eventually destroys motivation (in Heller, 1997). Kids could get the message that reading must not be something they would normally want to do since adults bribe them to do it (Heller, 1997). I agree with Kohn, but only in cases where there are no intrinsic motivations accompanying an extrinsic motivation program.

Extrinsic motivation occurs when a teacher, parent, or some

other party originates them. Examples of frequently stated goals that operate as extrinsic motivation for reading include: compliance, recognition, and getting good grades (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). Extrinsic rewards vary from teacher to teacher; some use a pat on the back, a gold star, sitting at the teacher's desk, a toy, a new book, or a trip to a special place.

Extrinsic Motivation Is Effective

Extrinsic motivation controls behavior (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). Extrinsic motivation can be a powerful tool. Immediate effort and attention can be induced by the use of extrinsic motivation. For example, a teacher can command a student's effort and attention by saying, "You will earn two points if you answer all of the Accelerated Reader quiz questions correctly."

Few would argue that emphasizing some basic skills to elementary school students is important. Extrinsic motivations should be incorporated into a skill-centered curriculum (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). Ample practice is necessary for students to acquire basic skills. Skills-based instruction requires teachers to set goals for excellent performance and to cover a predetermined set of objectives. An emphasis on performance incentives is compatible with skills-based language arts teaching.

A questionnaire about students' reading motivation indicates that there are different dimensions for those motivations (Metsala, Wigfield, & McCann, 1996). Recognition for reading and competition in reading are two dimensions that were noticed. Students reading for recognition are gratified in receiving a tangible form of recognition for their reading success. Students who are competitive in reading are the ones whose desire to outperform others motivates their reading. The recognition and competition dimensions of motivation both concern social aspects of reading. Reading can be a social activity, which can be motivational in and of itself.

Extrinsic motivation and positive reinforcement could be viewed as inseparable. Extrinsic motivation can be something as simple as a thumbs up or a high five. Many educators provide students with a similar simple form of extrinsic motivation. Talented and struggling students alike thrive on simple forms of positive reinforcement that can be considered extrinsic motivation. Boosting a student's self-confidence during a simple reading experience is motivating to students (Hebert, 1999; Metsala, Wigfield, & McCann, 1996; Gambrell, 1996). I believe that many teachers use this type of extrinsic motivation without even realizing it.

Motivation can be extrinsic or intrinsic and is enhanced by

students' active involvement and ownership of the learning process (Fulk, 1994). Places exist for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in every classroom (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996).

Piecing Together the Reading Motivation Puzzle

I believe that motivating students to read is a highly worthwhile venture. Reading is pleasurable and a helpful mode of gaining new information for me personally. I challenge myself to motivate students to read as often and in as many ways as I can. Motivating students to read is something I believe can occur throughout the school day and beyond.

Motivation can occur in one of three major ways. They are: teachers as models, classroom cultures that motivate reading, and parental and community support for reading.

Sharing my enthusiasm for reading with students comes naturally for me. I model good reading habits to students daily. In addition, I share tidbits of new information that I learn from my own personal reading. I often mention how things I read make me feel or how they might change the way I feel about something. One time recently I shared a portion from my copy of *The Mayo Clinic's Complete Book of Health* on juvenile papilloma. My son was found to have growths on his vocal cords and throat which have to be

surgically removed. The students found it interesting that I would need to look something up in a book. In addition it helped them to understand why their teacher had been gone for several days when my son was hospitalized. Several students found pictures and diagrams in my book interesting, which motivated them to read related sections of the book. When we share appropriate passages from our own personal reading, students are more likely to see us as real readers who find pleasure and learning in reading. Students who witness teachers in this way have an increased opportunity to voluntarily become lifelong readers (Gambrell, 1996).

The classroom can be a perfect setting for promoting reading. Simply providing time for reading is an easy and effective method of motivating students to read. If we ever have extra time in our classroom, such as when a guest speaker arrives late, we read. Advantage Learning Systems, the company that produces Accelerated Reader, strongly encourages teachers to provide sixty minutes of reading time a day. Students in the my class have at least thirty minutes of uninterrupted time to read materials of their own choosing each school day. The class generally demonstrates their disappointment when their reading time is over by groaning. This uninterrupted time is not for selecting books, sharpening pencils, taking Accelerated Reader quizzes, or even for using the restroom;

during this reading time students read. Some days we read on our carpet cushions, with our shoes off, or sitting by a book buddy; however, we always keep the focus on reading. In addition, parents/guardians of students are encouraged to provide thirty minutes of reading time at home each day. Most students in the class do not take home homework assignments per se, which helps in *providing thirty minutes of time to read at home each day.*

Providing reading materials is a vital part of motivating students to read. Within the author's classroom there is an extensive collection of books (over 300 titles) available to students. The books are pleasantly displayed and easily accessible, as they are arranged in plastic tubs which are placed in various locations around the classroom. There is a wide variety of books, ranging in difficulty, genre, and length. There are also books that have multiple copies to encourage students to read and work on reading projects with a partner or small group of students. The students also have daily access to the school library which has an even more extensive collection of books. This library is supervised by a library clerk who is especially skilled at helping students to find books that are of interest to them.

Reading materials other than books are also available to students in the author's classroom. I encourage students to read

things in which they have a personal interest. A favorite free time activity of many students is to read magazines. Subscriptions to several children's magazines make the following available to students: *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, *National Geographic World*, *Nickelodeon*, *Zillions*, and *Ranger Rick*. Many students enjoy reading poetry, joke/riddle books, information on children's web sites (for example: enchantedlearning.com and eric-carle.com), catalogs, CD-ROM reference materials (such as Dorling Kindersley and Houghton Mifflin's *The Way Things Work* and Grolier's *Multimedia Encyclopedia*), song lyrics, and directions for craft projects. It is simple to set up learning centers that encourage reading a variety of materials. The students really connect with the practical side of the reading experiences and continue them well after they have left this classroom, as reported by parents.

Allowing students to select their own reading materials is motivating to many of them. When a student personally chooses a book there is already a strong connection between that student and the book. Students who are allowed to select their own reading materials expend more effort in learning and understanding the material (Schiefele, 1991). Occasionally, self-selection can lead a student to challenge herself/himself more than a teacher would ever dream of, which could mean greater gains.

Another method this author uses to motivate students to read is through sharing reading experiences. The students and the teacher have an opportunity to share their reading experiences with others in the classroom each day. On one occasion I shared a craft idea (pipe-cleaner skeletons), which I read about in *Parents* magazine. The students liked the idea so much that I set up a reading directions center for them to make their own skeletons. Students share books with one another by reading favorite sections, showing illustrations, discussing confusing elements, discussing feelings, and sometimes even sharing dislikes about books. The teacher shares with students (as described in detail earlier). Several theories of motivation assert that students' social interaction regarding books they have read facilitates learning (Gambrell, 1996; McCombs, 1989; Oldfather, 1993).

I emphasize that reading relates to almost everything that we do. Students catch me "sneaking" reading into all the subject areas covered in third grade. Sometimes in more obvious ways than others. Amy Axelrod's books about a family of pigs are wonderful to use when studying a variety of math concepts. In science and social studies students voluntarily bring in reading materials related to the specific content being studied.

The environment outside the school's walls is also a good place

to motivate reading. Below are listed several easy ways the author attempts to encourage reading outside of school.

Occasionally, special guest readers such as a high school student, the principal, a factory worker, a fireman, the mayor, a mom, a McDonald's employee, etc., come to read to our class. They usually share their favorite book and explain how they use reading every day. In this way, students are encouraged to look to their own future to see how useful reading will be. They also began to realize how much reading they do without even thinking about it, for example: food packages, information on television, and street signs.

The Parent Teacher Association at our school buys books from organizations such as Troll, Trumpet and Scholastic book clubs. Buying the books in bulk allows them to offer the books to students at a great discount, a dollar each. Many students spend their allowance on books. Teachers make special efforts to make it possible for all children to purchase books at the PTA bookstore, either by giving coupons to the store for special accomplishments or for helping a teacher. It is easy for me to share my excitement for books with individuals and small groups in this informal setting each week as we go to the bookstore. Students see me purchasing books, which encourages them to recommend certain books to me, plead with me to allow them to read the books first, and ultimately

causes them to bring money to buy their own books at the PTA bookstore.

Extrinsic Motivation Programs

Extrinsic motivation receives few, if any direct support or compliments from educators. However, there are a number of extrinsic reading motivation computerized programs available and other extrinsic reward programs in which large numbers of teachers partake. A variety of computerized reading programs involving extrinsic motivation are now available. One such program is *Reading Counts!*, a CD-ROM program published by Scholastic with a database that includes more than 12,000 books and monitors student progress with quizzes and provides teachers with reports. *The Electronic Bookshelf* is also a similar computerized reading motivation and management system. Scott Foresman has a web site with computerized quizzes over books. This is available, free of charge, to schools that have purchased Scott Foresman's reading series. A local bookstore also has a web site where students can take tests and earn tangible rewards.

In 1995, Pizza Hut's Book It! had a gala celebration marking the program's first decade (Anonymous, 1995). This program continues to be available; it encourages students to read books by rewarding

them with buttons, certificates, medals, and personal pizzas. The program is a success with my students. My students and I set reading goals each month related to the number of Accelerated Reader points the students should strive to earn. During the months of the Book It! program students and parents make extra effort to provide reading time at home.

McDonald's fast food restaurant had an incentive program during the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 school years. This program enabled elementary students to earn a burger, fries, and a pop for every ten books that they read. Students recorded the titles of the books and had an adult sign the coupon to verify that the books had been read. This was also a popular program among parents and students. I particularly liked this program because it got the parents more involved. This program also made it easier to encourage students to read non-Accelerated Reader books (the books that otherwise might collect dust, since our school does not own Accelerated Reader quizzes for all the books in the library).

In 1995, House Speaker Newt Gingrich influenced a nonprofit group to dole out more than \$200,000 to young readers. "Learning by Earning", a plan at an elementary school in Washington, D.C., paid students two dollars for each book that they read (Hawkins, 1995).

Some extrinsic reading reward programs challenge students

and parents to read a specified number of books, pages, or hours. The real goal of reading can easily get lost in the strive for quantity. Using the Accelerated Reader program to manage quizzes and points earned aids in extending the focus to the quality of reading as well. More points are earned by those students who respond correctly to the questions.

The National Education Association (NEA) has successfully sponsored two highly acclaimed Read Across America celebrations. Prior to the second annual celebration on March 2, 1999 the NEA provided interested teachers with ideas to consider when participating. The suggestions included holding a "green eggs and ham party". This type of party can most certainly be described as an extrinsic motivation for reading. The article, *Worms, green eggs and ham, and more* (Reading Today, 1999), included a section regarding Earl Wiman, principal in Jackson, Tennessee. Mr. Wiman challenged the students at Alexander Elementary School to read 10,600 books by March 2, last year's kick off for Read Across America Day. If the students read 10,600 books, Mr. Wiman would eat worms. Mr. Wiman ate four worms rolled in sesame seeds and flour and cooked in teriyaki sauce and oil, during a ceremony attended by the mayor, the superintendent of schools, the sheriff, many parents, and CNN. Wiman's challenge generated an interest in reading and he maintains

that the issue is getting kids excited about reading. There was some opposition to this article as noted in a letter to the editor from Marley Cassagrande, a reading specialist and assistant principal in Herndon, Virginia. Cassagrande was surprised by the article and questioned the message that is sent to children when we reward their reading in a way that is not at all connected to reading.

Intrinsic motivation should be the ultimate goal of reading programs. Earl Wiman, the worm eating principal, believes that children enter school accustomed to extrinsic motivation and that educators must help students develop intrinsic reading motivation.

Advantage Learning System's Accelerated Reader was first purchased by the Keokuk Community School District during the 1998-1999 school year. The program remained something of a mystery to most teachers for about a year. During in-service days prior to the 1999-2000 school year all elementary teachers went through Reading Renaissance training. This training taught us about management aspects of the program, as well as things teachers can do to encourage students to read for sixty minutes a day.

Some extrinsic motivation programs can be time consuming as they tend to involve intense record keeping. This is a major advantage of using the Accelerated Reader program. Once the system is in place and the teachers and students understand how to

use it, record keeping is simplified. A teacher can print out a number of reports. Some reports are helpful to students, such as reading record reports that show the students' entire reading record including the title, author, possible point value and reading level of the books read and the points earned by correctly responding to questions. One report ranks students in a particular class according to the number of points earned. This report can be used to encourage students to challenge one another to earn more points. Other reports are useful at conference time to provide evidence to parents of their student's reading progress. The teacher management options are a definite plus of the Accelerated Reader program.

The district recently purchased a number of additional Accelerated Reader quizzes and expresses a serious interest in continuing to purchase Accelerated Reader upgrades. It is not surprising that the district wants to see every student using the program.

The other elementary schools in Keokuk chose to do their reading rewards programs differently. These schools established levels that were associated with various point totals. For example, students who earn forty points would be Advanced Level Readers. In addition, each quarter of the school year they have a reward for all students who earn a predetermined point level. Some schools

required higher point totals as the year progressed because they continued from quarter to quarter; other schools started each quarter with zero points. Rewards at the schools included extra recess time, swimming at the YMCA, a pizza party, an ice cream sundae party, pop, hot dogs, chips, and a roller skating party.

How Our Accelerated Reader Store Works

The Accelerated Reader incentive store at Wells-Carey Elementary School is what our school chose to do as our reading motivation program. The store has not only increased students' interest in reading and time spent reading. Students know that when they pass a quiz with 100% they earn more points. The potential to earn more points causes students to voluntarily reread selections and to take quizzes with greater caution than they might use otherwise.

Student attendance and parent involvement also improved with the addition of the Accelerated Reader incentive store. As a school, we had 27% fewer tardies for students during the first quarter of this school year when compared to last year's first quarter. The increased parent involvement can be easily be seen on an Accelerated Reader incentive store day as the parent volunteer's are the ones who run the store.

After deciding to have the incentive store, which was not in and of itself an easy decision, we had to decide how to purchase the items for the store. One of the committee members suggested the National Association for the Exchange of Industrial Resources (NAEIR). NAEIR is a company that redistributes merchandise for other companies that do not have use for their products. The committee members drive to Galesburg, Illinois three to four times a year to pick up assorted items for the store. In order to make this possible, staff members have really had to work together. Individual staff members have donated money, gas, use of vehicles, use of personal days (of which we only get two per year) etc. and a local business donated a truck and driver for a day. The items we get from NAEIR are amazing; we pay about eight to nine percent of what we would pay if we bought the items from a regular distributor. The uniqueness of the way NAEIR operates has truly brought our staff together for the common cause of stocking the shelves of our Accelerated Reader incentive store.

Organizing the store and getting all classrooms to participate has not been easy. However, I believe that the amount of time and effort that our staff has put into making this store possible has greatly improved our ability to work together. It has been truly inspiring to see individuals, even those who do not normally do

anything extra, dedicated to making the store available to our students.

There have been some heated discussions about the fairness of point values for differing reading levels. For example, a first grade student might read three books a day. First grade reading level books are generally worth half a point. So a first grader could earn an average of seven and a half points a week, where a fourth grade student may spend a week reading a chapter book whose total point value is only four points. When this inequality is pronounced, it becomes imperative that teachers set a Zone of Proximal Development range (one for fiction and one for nonfiction) from which students read books. Setting a Zone of Proximal Development range for students provides challenge and support as progress is made toward greater reading competence. This can be a management challenge for some, as the Zone of Proximal Development range of students demonstrating reading progress gradually increases.

Other Reasons for Having Our Accelerated Reader Store

Keokuk is a river town with a population of about 12,000. There are several large factories in town which employ the majority of the parents with students at Wells-Carey Elementary. These blue-collar parents have attitudes that take a little getting used to

for a teacher who was raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The fathers I am most familiar with work in office buildings as regular nine to five businessmen. Most mothers stayed at home cleaning house and donating their time to the school's Parent Teacher Association, with an occasional mother who was a teacher, nurse or secretary. The parents in Keokuk are used to working in factories where they are paid hourly for the work they do.

Richard Allington and Patricia Cunningham assert that blue-collar parents view homework as an invasion of their personal time as they are not accustomed to taking any of their work home with them (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). I dare to go a step further in asserting that blue collar parents who are personally familiar with monetary rewards directly correlated to the amount of effort spent working will support a program of extrinsic rewards directly correlated to the amount of effort the students put into reading. The parents of our students support this kind of program, which makes acceptance and participation easier for students.

Another very simple reason for having the store is that the money is available. At first, this may sound like a shallow reason for doing something. However, in my opinion it is a practical and honest reason for why our district provides extrinsic reading motivation. It does not take one many years in the teaching

profession to realize that available money is truly rare and should be utilized with special care. Wells-Carey Elementary has grant money just waiting to be spent in an effort to motivate students to read.

Summary and Conclusions

Many students who would not willingly choose to read books are now doing so because of our Accelerated Reader incentive store. Some students read the same quantity and quality as they did before the store existed, but others are making gains they might not otherwise be making. What better argument can be made for our incentive store? We know that, ultimately, extrinsic motivation to read should be nothing but a temporary scaffold on the way to intrinsic motivation. Our Accelerated Reader incentive store has provided us with that scaffold.

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