Literacy Motivation and Engagement: Policies, Trends, and Practices

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Today's teachers and administrators face challenges that are characterized as unprecedented in complexity, particularly in the area of literacy education. They must constantly juggle the conflicting demands of instruction, assessment, and policy (Shanahan, 2014). The current standards movement in the U.S. is one catalyst affecting the need for literacy leaders who are well prepared to implement effective programs of instruction and assessment to ensure that students have the opportunity to become proficient readers and writers. U.S. states have either adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or are developing their own state standards for English Language Arts (ELA) that represent a shared and consistent vision of what our students should know and be able to do (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of State School Officers, 2010).

ELA standards are designed to foster higher achievement in reading and writing, thus allowing our students to compete more successfully in our global society. The goal of having students meet these standards is critical if we are to enable them to develop the 21st century literacy skills needed for college and career readiness. Research continues to show the importance of literacy development to students' future academic and economic success (Shanahan, 2014). According to Ritchie and Bates (2013), second-grade reading achievement predicts what students' incomes will be when they reach adulthood.

In the current movement to develop and implement standards to increase college and career readiness, the role of motivation in learning is often overlooked; however, motivation to learn is vital to increasing literacy learning for our students. As we pursue the admirable goal of teaching to standards that will increase student success in college and careers, we must avoid the possibility that in successfully teaching to the standards, we fail to develop highly motivated literacy learners. Students who are motivated to read and write will continue to be strategic and engaged readers, even when they are not in school. If students meet the ELA standards, but do not choose to read and write, they will never reach their full literacy potential. Thus, it is incumbent upon literacy leaders to promote and support classroom practices that encourage motivation to read and write.

Research suggests that the following classroom practices are associated with increased motivation to read and write.

- Literacy tasks are authentic and related to the real world (Brophy, 2004; Cunningham & Allington, 2011; Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, Igo, 2011; Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007).

- Literacy tasks provide students with choice and goal-setting opportunities (Cambourne, 1995; Guthrie et al., 2007).

- The classroom environment provides models, support, time, and materials necessary for literacy learning to flourish (Gambrell et al., 2011; Guthrie & McPeake, 2013).

Clearly, students' literacy motivation will be influenced, for better or worse, by the culture of the classroom. We suggest that literacy educators use the following questions to assess aspects of classroom cultures that support and nurture motivation to read and write.

- Is the classroom rich in appropriate reading/writing materials?

- Are students provided with opportunities to choose the books they read and the topics they write about?

- Is adequate time allotted during the school day for independent reading and writing?

- Is sufficient time devoted to teacher and peer sharing of reading and writing?

In working to assure that our students meet the challenging ELA standards, we must implement them in ways that promote a love of literacy and the development of lifelong readers and writers. An awareness of motivation research can provide information for creating classroom cultures that foster motivated and engaged literacy learners.

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