

Investigating Student Motivation to Read: Community, Environment, and Reluctant Readers

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Abstract: This action research project, conducted by a classroom teacher and a university professor, investigated fourth grade students' reading motivation. The research project was supported by a professional development school (PDS) partnership grant to support literacy education. The focus of the study was on students who were capable, scored well, and generally met expectations on assigned reading tasks yet remained unmotivated during independent reading. Findings of the study revealed that understanding a student's reasons for being a dormant, uncommitted, or unmotivated reader equips teachers with knowledge that can guide interventions. When teachers understand the structure of a student's reading community and environment, they can determine what supports are needed.

KEYWORDS: *reluctant readers, action research, professional development school (PDS)*

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants

Reading instruction encompasses a vast and ever-changing landscape of literacy development, strategies, and pedagogy. Much of this focus is on developing early reading literacy and supporting students who need remediation at each grade level. Often, students who are capable of reading, test well, and complete their tasks are considered successful, especially in the intermediate grade levels. These students may even receive enrichment to support and challenge their abilities. However, unbeknownst to their teachers, they may still lack needed reading support.

In this action research project, Todd Spreer, a fourth grade teacher and first author, and Dustin Meritt, a university professor of practice and second author, worked together to investigate students' reading motivation in order to help improve Spreer's classroom practice. The research project was supported through a professional development school (PDS) partnership between their university and school district, which had recently received a grant to support literacy education. As part of the districtwide action research group, Spreer and Meritt joined with other educators to investigate classroom practice under the guidance of a university professor. The focus of their study was on students who were capable, scored well, and generally met expectations on assigned reading tasks yet remained unmotivated during independent reading. For these students, it was clear that just because students can read does not mean that they will read. Therefore, their study was inspired by the following question: Why were these students, who were by most measures considered successful readers, not engaging in acts of personalized reading?

Research Setting and Background

Since 1989, the Kansas State University (KSU) College of Education has entered into mutually beneficial partnerships and projects with local school districts to positively impact teaching and learning. The project that served as the research setting for this study included all PK-12 (pre-kindergarten through high school) schools in Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools in Manhattan, Kansas. Within this PDS partnership, the district hosts teacher candidates in rigorous, carefully sequenced field experiences; and network partners collaborate to conduct and disseminate research that examines critical questions facing educators today. University personnel also provide professional development and support for educators and play a key partnership role in district initiatives. Through this established PDS partnership, the school district asked for teachers to take on a different type of leadership role as researchers in their own classrooms. To support this effort, a districtwide action research group was formed. University faculty partnered with teachers to provide extended professional development through the process of classroom-based action research.

Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools serves roughly 6,500 students comprised of two early learning centers, nine elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. At the time of the study, the hosting elementary school served approximately 588 students in PK-6 (pre-kindergarten through sixth grade). The student population was approximately 67% white, 10% Asian, 9% Hispanic/Latino, 5% African-American, and 9% other, with 21% classified as economically disadvantaged. Spreer's fourth grade class was made up of 28 students, comprising 13 females and 15 males. Of the 28 students, two were identified as gifted with another student in the process of being tested for the gifted program. A total of four students received supportive services through speech or special education. The ethnic makeup of the students participating in the study consisted of 71% white, 15% Hispanic/Latino, 7% African American, and 7% Asian. Further, 14% of the students were identified as below grade-level benchmark, 32% on grade-level, and 54% score above the grade-level benchmark in the area of reading.

In this fourth grade classroom, the majority of students read on or above grade level. They were proficient readers. However, Spreer observed that many of his students only read when and what they were required to read. In other words, they did not read by personal choice. Recognizing that his students were literate but were developing aliterate patterns (i.e., unwilling to read, although able to do so) led to three questions: 1) What motivates students to read? 2) What leads them to choose to read versus reading only when they are required to? 3) How can the classroom teacher help a group of students who can read, but choose to read only because they are required to?

Because Meritt had been a special education teacher in the district before transitioning to KSU, Spreer and Meritt already had an established professional relationship. As part of the districtwide action research group, they paired as a classroom teacher and university partner and developed an action research plan to address Spreer's classroom observations and unanswered questions. Before beginning the study, a signed release to conduct action research was granted by the district office and the school's administrator. In accordance with procedure, guardian permission for students to participate was garnered through a signed guardian release form. All 28 students were granted permission to participate in the study.

Research on Reluctant Readers

A struggling reader has been defined in multiple and complex ways. It is not as simple as saying who can read and who cannot read. Much research has been devoted to struggling readers, or readers who experience difficulties while learning to read. This difficulty can lead students to be disinterested in reading for information and for pleasure. A report from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) identified that only 38% of fourth grade students read at the proficient level (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). As a result, many teachers focus on identifying struggling readers and begin an instructional intervention or differentiation process, putting into place extra instruction, peer to peer reading, and/or targeted comprehension and fluency strategies. But what about reluctant readers? These readers possess the ability to read; however, they choose not to read. Tovani (2000) stated that for these students “reading has lost its purpose and pleasure” (p. 9). As a result, the focus of instruction must change. Instruction becomes less about developing skills and more about developing positive attitudes in regard to reading, both in and out of the school setting.

There are several reasons that students might become reluctant readers. Beers (1998) provided three categories. Dormant readers are those who enjoy reading but can’t find the time to engage in the act of consuming text. The uncommitted reader wavers between positive and negative feelings about reading. These students read to accomplish tasks but have not developed a peer reading group or an enjoyment for reading. Miller (2012) described them as “readers, who possess the reading skills needed for academic tasks, see reading as a school job, but not an activity in which they would willingly engage outside of school” (p. 89). The third category comprises the unmotivated reader. These students have negative attitudes about reading and surround themselves with peers who feel the same (Beers, 1998).

When students have the skills to read, but not the motivation, teachers are charged with not only developing lessons to support these readers but also considering the classroom environment. Miller (2012) suggested various strategies for activating reluctant readers. First, educators should provide ample access to a variety of texts. When students are given options between varying genres, subjects, and forms of text they are interested in, students are more likely to engage in the act of reading for pleasure. Miller also suggested scheduling intentional time to read at school while offering students free choice over the books they read. Underlying these suggested strategies, it is important that educators cultivate an atmosphere that supports the sharing of books and reading, encourages a culture of healthy reading habits, and provides a safe and text-rich environment.

In conjunction, Beers (1998) supported the idea that teachers should develop a culture of reading in the classroom that values the voices and choices of student readers. Investigating communities of readers, Robinson and King (2008) further iterated the power of students participating in a community of readers. They shared that active involvement by students is, in part, central to knowing the joy and satisfaction of reading. Reluctant readers are often hesitant to find new texts, which is compounded when they cannot find text in which they have an interest in (Brinda, 2011). Teachers need to understand their students’ reading interests so that they can work to foster their interests, in addition to exposing them to other texts.

Brinda (2011) also addressed aliteracy and the concept that outside factors in students’ lives could be impacting and creating their aliteracy. Brinda’s literacy ladder showed that for

students to rise from aliteracy, reluctant readers need to be introduced and activated to a text before they read and discuss it. What is critical to the literacy ladder is that family, teachers, friends, and peers all help to hold the ladder together to ensure an impact on the reluctant readers' ascension. These ideas are similar to Beers' (1998) in relation to the people influencing students' attitudes towards reading. When looking for ways to identify a student's cause for being an unmotivated or reluctant reader, the impact of their community and environment within and beyond the classroom needs to be considered. Additionally, some of the factors that are related to unmotivated readers may also be uncontrollable by the student. These factors could be coming together, much like Brinda's (2011) "literacy ladder", by preventing or limiting the students' motivation to read.

Research Methods

Investigating reader motivations using measures that were age appropriate, revealed honest insight, and disclosed what kept students from becoming avid readers was the goal of the study's data collection and analysis. To do this, two techniques were employed; a survey and an interview.

For the first stage of data collection, every student completed a series of 20 survey questions in the format of an elementary reading attitude survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990). The Garfield Survey is a time-tested instrument used to gauge the attitudes of individual readers (McKenna & Kear, 1990). Researched and validated by its originating authors, it is a student-friendly, visual Likert-style scale ranging from 1 to 4. Drawing from the literature review, the researchers identified questions 2, 3, 5, and 13 of the Garfield Survey as questions related attitudes of reluctant readers. These questions highlighted student attitudes toward reading during free time at school, reading for fun at home, spending free time reading, and attitudes about reading at school. All four questions specifically related to student choice and attitude about reading, which was the foundation for the inquiry of the study.

Student completion of the survey involved a single session which took approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Data were analyzed and desegregated to identify students who scored a 2.5 or lower out of a total of four on the identified questions. Of the 28 students participating, eleven scored at or below the associated benchmark. After identifying these students, Spreer conducted individual interviews with each of the 11 students. The interview consisted of five questions derived from and inspired by Miller's (2012) Wild Reader questionnaire. The interview questions were: 1) What types of books do you most like to read?, 2) How often do you read on your own?, 3) Do you think that finding time to read for you is easy or hard? Why?, 4) What is the greatest obstacle that keeps you from reading outside of school?, and 5) Are you successful in finding your own books to read? Why or why not?

Together, Spreer and Meritt triangulated past research, the student survey ratings, and the student interview responses to disaggregate the data. The student interviews answers were individually audio recorded and transcribed and coded by both researchers in efforts to highlight trends. Recordings were listened to separately by each researcher and coded based on student responses. Open coding was used to summarize students' responses. From the codes, characteristics and themes developed, including the factors that influenced students' motivation to read.

No student personal information or recordings were shared with anyone other than the primary and secondary researchers collecting the data, and all names were changed. In taking these

steps, the researchers obtained enough data to advance classroom practice and increase students' interest and motivation to read independently as well as to provide explicit examples when discussing the topic in the university teacher preparation program.

Research Findings and Discussion

According to the data, two major factors influenced students' drive toward self-motivated reading and a supportive community and environment. In addition, the data revealed that students move fluidly between the reluctant reader classifications. Students were not exclusively dormant, uncommitted, or unmotivated readers, but rather some combination of the three depending on their interactions with the community and environment. While the dynamic reader classifications of dormant, uncommitted, and unmotivated are student responses, the community and environment were found to be the stimulus. Figure 1 below displays this relationship:

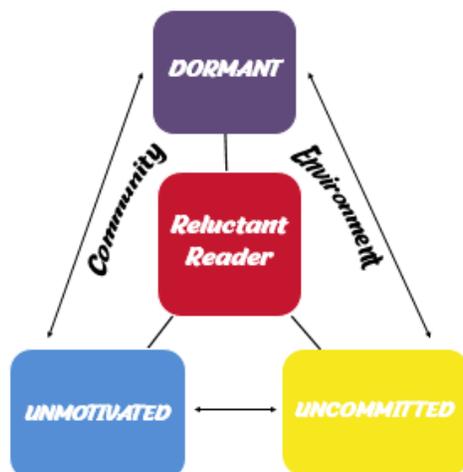


Figure 1: Relationship between Dynamic Reader Classifications, Community, and Environment

In this study, reluctant readers shifted across the categories of dormant, uncommitted, and unmotivated reader depending on the context in which they found themselves, which included the community (i.e., readers or non-readers) and the physical environment. Based on the Garfield Survey data, 39% of the students scored as reluctant readers. This classification was determined as a result of survey scores averaging a 2.5 or lower. Four questions were related to the influences that community and environment hold over young readers. Question 2, how do you feel when you read a book in school during free time? and question 5, how do you feel about spending free time reading a book? related to environmental influences such as time and access. In comparison, question 3, how do you feel about reading for fun at home? and question 13, how do you feel about reading in school? incorporated both environmental and community influences. Community influences included, but were not limited to peers, family, and school models.

The effect of community and the environment was even more evident in the student interview responses. When students lacked supportive factors relating to community and environment, they were more likely to become reluctant readers, shifting between the dormant,

uncommitted, and unmotivated classifications. Easy access to books of interest was an important environmental factor. Students were able to identify specific titles that motivated them to read including the *Harry Potter* series, the *Little House on the Prairie* series, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, and the *Magic Tree House* series (see Figures 2 and 3).

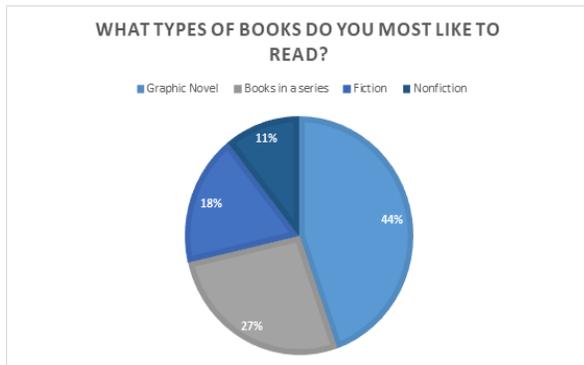


Figure 2: Most-Liked Books



Figure 3: Success Finding Own Books

Students also identified specific genres or content that interested them. General fiction comprised 18% and nonfiction books comprised 11% of the group questioned. Other topics of interest included ghost books, comic books, and animal books. Further, 44% of students interviewed preferred graphic novels while 27% were drawn to books in a series. One student shared, “I know what I want. Non-fiction-books that are real help me learn.” Another student commented, “I can’t find any comics at school. I like books to have some pictures.” In addition, a third student stated, “At home, we don’t have any biography books.” This seemed to indicate that reluctant readers who were uncommitted knew what they liked but didn’t always have access to the books they would choose to read, which prevented them from reading, both at home and at school.

This concern relates to both environmental influences, those involving both time to read and access to specific texts, as well as community influences, relating to the people comprising students’ reading interactions at home and at school. Interestingly, 36% of students identified as reluctant readers shared that they read daily in some form. Seventy-three percent of students admitted that finding time to read was hard due to outside influences (see Figures 4 and 5).

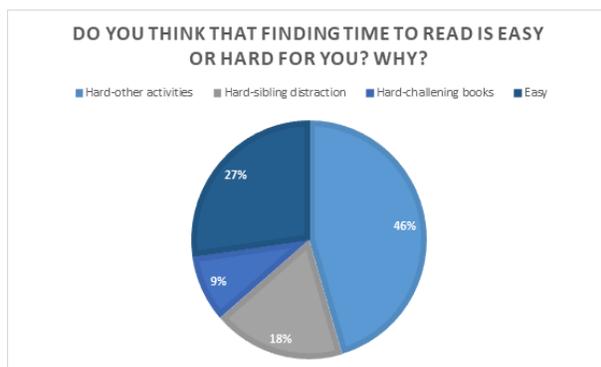


Figure 4: Finding Time to Read

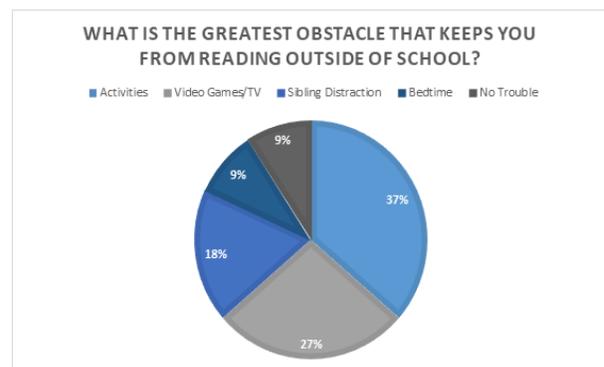


Figure 5: Greatest Reading Obstacle

The student's environment was a factor here, and often left students without control of the situation. However, 55% of students indicated that they were successful in being able to find books to read, while 36% said they were sometimes successful. It seemed that these dormant readers were indeed able to read and to find books to read, but they choose not to as a result of environmental and community influences. One student expressed, "I have four practices a week." Another student explained, "I'm watching my brother sometimes and it makes it difficult to read." Figures 4 and 5 summarize student responses to the five interview questions.

Impact of the Study

The action research process is a cyclical one, which prompts additional action and research. This action research project impacted both Spreer's fourth grade classroom, in which the study took place, and Meritt's college classroom at KSU. Based on the data collected, Spreer made immediate changes to his instruction, which included expanding his classroom library with additional books and comic books and asking students what their weekly demands outside of school were each week to reasonable expectations for self-reading. Spreer also recognized the need for further classroom investigation. Spreer is also considering revisions to the survey and interview questions for the next year's group of students to better assess students' communities and environments both in and outside of school. With this extended understanding, he hopes to begin designing an effective plan to better support the needs of reluctant readers in his classroom.

Meritt found that the study's results had the potential to affect his pre-service teachers at KSU, not based just on the findings, but as further reinforcement that teachers benefit from leadership roles in research. Following the study's conclusion, as part of a class discussion at KSU, teacher candidates explored the research findings and considered possible implications. Discussion about the findings led to discoveries and deeper understanding concerning the impact that early literacy has on students. Teacher candidates also realized that impacting reluctant readers comes in various forms and that students can be influenced in many ways. Synthesizing these findings, teacher candidates discussed how to plan future lessons with the understanding that utilizing relatable text and incorporating text discussions within the learning environment supports diverse learners and establishes an environment that reinforces literacy and spans all subject areas.

Without exposure to the findings of this action research project, teachers may struggle in knowing what steps to take to identify possible root causes of reluctant readers, and university professors may lack authentic information to guide teacher candidates. In order to increase educator awareness, Spreer presented the study's research methods and findings to fellow teachers at his elementary school, and as a result began working with the school librarian to explore strategies for supporting reluctant readers school-wide. In addition, Spreer and Meritt shared the research project at the 2019 KSU Graduate Student and Partners Research and Creative Activities Fair, which generated meaningful, data-driven conversations between the researchers, future educators, and university faculty. The study was also presented at the 2020 NAPDS Conference.

Action Research, Teacher Leadership, and the NAPDS Nine Essentials

Essential 4 of the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) Nine Essentials of PDS states that an effective PDS partnership includes "a shared commitment to

innovative and reflective practice by all participants” (NAPDS, 2008, p. 3). The action research project described in this article was an excellent example of this principle. The college faculty and teacher researchers involved benefited from this collaboration, but the project also benefited the PK-12 students in the participating classrooms (Teitel, 1997). As in Doolittle, Sudeck, and Rattigan’s (2008) example, the district’s action research group functioned as a small learning community, with professors of practice supporting classroom teacher researchers as critical friends. This framework “supplied an infrastructure for improved communication and connectedness, trust, and equity between school and university partners” (p. 309). This trust and relationship allowed the participating teachers to take on leadership roles in the learning community as well as in classroom research.

Trust is critical when building transformative PDS partnerships, and the smaller projects that take place within these partnerships. Finding someone who can build upon previous work relationships and prior knowledge of work while also demonstrating dependability is important in relationships such as collaborative action research (Teitel, 2008). In this study, Speer’s leadership was encouraged and promoted by the established school-university relationship. Because classroom teachers were empowered to take on leadership roles through action research, his findings directly and positively impacted the learning of his fourth grade students during the study and changed his approach to literacy instruction the following school year. Additionally, he shared his findings with his building peers, and with support from the university partners, produced a model that can be applied in other classrooms through presentations with and without Meritt at local and national conferences. In this way, the action research study reported here also accomplished NAPDS Essential 5, “Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants” (NAPDS, 2008, p. 3).

Limitations

The action research study was limited to one district, a single school, and one classroom, resulting in a small sample size. However, this study could be replicated in additional classrooms within the school to create a stronger understanding of the reluctant readers in the school and implications related to the particular school’s demographics. Extending the reach of the study to outside classrooms and grade levels would widen the scope of data. Further replication could be conducted in any location. The Garfield Survey is easily available. In addition to survey size, the Garfield Survey results may vary depending on student attitudes and experiences during the interview day or week. Environmental factors such as recent experiences with reading may sway attitudes one way or another. To minimize these effects, it would be beneficial to have students retake the survey additional times in an effort to triangulate student responses. Finally, within the parameters of this study, the classroom teacher conducting the survey and interview had an established relationship with the students. This relationship may have caused bias in his interpretation of the data.

Conclusion

Not all reluctant readers are the same, which means each reluctant reader needs different support. What this research discovered was that simply identifying a reader as dormant,

uncommitted, or unmotivated leaves the student's motivations unknown. Understanding a student's reasons for being a dormant, uncommitted, or unmotivated reader equips teachers with knowledge that can guide interventions. When teachers understand the structure of a student's reading community and environment, they can determine what supports are needed. Is it time that restricts a student from engaging in personal reading? Does lack of access to text create a barrier to success? Is there a respected circle of readers in a student's life? Before schools can expect students to cultivate internal reading motivation, educators must carry out their due diligence to understand student interests, community, and environment. With further inquiry and research, these answers can be revealed and meaningful relationships with text can be fostered.

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