

Research Supporting the 7 Strengths for Reading Success

When it comes to “super reading” (avid, proficient reading), engagement trumps all—it’s even more important than family background. In other words, it doesn’t matter what education or income a student’s parents may have—if students are drawn to read with deep longing and interest, they will succeed (Guthrie, 2008). Think of the inspiring stories of young people who “read their way out of poverty” and all sorts of life challenges (Walls, 2006; Murray, 2010).

The research is equally powerful and convincing. Many studies show that students who read for internal reasons (interest, pleasure, favorite topics) read a lot and do well on all measures of achievement. In contrast, students who read only for external reasons—prompted by grades, rewards, or recognition—do not read as often or as deeply (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1992; Guthrie, et al., 2013).

Not only do super readers, driven by their own robust appetite for a wide range of text, read significantly more than those who are extrinsically motivated, their level of engagement and comprehension tends to be deeper and richer (Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2012; Duke & Carlisle, 2011). What’s more, reading engagement and achievement interact in a spiral. Super readers read more, and the more engaged these students become, the higher they achieve. Super readers want to learn, and, immersed in a strengths-based learning community, surrounded by books and discussion about books, they become very confident in their abilities. Such students persist in the face of difficulty and keep at it until they have achieved their goals (Guthrie, 2012; Dwek, 2008). On the other hand, students who remain fearful of reading read less and, as a result, decline in achievement—the spiral goes downward as well as upward. In fact, continued low engagement in reading is often a precursor to dropping out of school (Guthrie, 2008).

In general, helping all students succeed is not a mystery; we know the teaching elements that motivate and inspire (Muir, 2014):

- Recognizing what students can do and building on those strengths (Guthrie, 2008; 2012).
- Creating nurturing relationships and a welcoming, collaborative learning community (Guthrie, 2008).
- Recognizing the social nature of learning and helping children learn from each other as well as from older, more accomplished readers (Vygotsky, 1930).
- Providing specific feedback that helps students succeed (Hattie & Yates, 2013).
- Honoring different learning styles and providing multiple ways of accessing the content (Tompkins & Moon, 2013).
- Honoring student voice and choice; immersing students in abundant text and inviting them to choose the texts that match their own reading interests and passions (Wilhelm & Smith, 2013).
- Connecting learning to problem solving and inventive thinking; fostering real-world connections (Duke, 2014; Guthrie, 2012).

Teachers who cultivate reading engagement through strength-based classroom instruction, student choice, immersion in abundant text, and a vital classroom reading culture not only increase the amount of time students spend reading silently, but also their overall reading achievement. At the same time, the research shows that teachers who do not focus on student engagement are actually hindering their students by increasing avoidance behaviors. When students avoid reading, they short-circuit the very process that would help them become better readers. Nurturing young readers is not simply a matter of providing instruction that fosters reading engagement, but also providing instruction that thwarts avoidance behaviors in the classroom (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

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