Preserving Adolescent Readership

through Interest and Motivation

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Abstract

Adolescent literacy has remained a relatively hot topic for several years in the field of reading education (Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010/2011) however, educators remain conflicted about how to maintain high levels of reading motivation. A historical analysis of adolescent interests and motivations was conducted to determine what instructional techniques have had positive effects so as to meet the imminent needs of adolescent readers. Findings include information pertaining to: choice of a multitude of reading materials, substantial time to experience aesthetic and engaging reading experiences, and a relevant, challenging curriculum that addresses student needs, personal interests, and motivations.

Keywords: Adolescent Literacy, Interest, Motivation, Reading, Choice

1. Introduction

Adolescent aliteracy is on the rise and in turn, educators must tap into the adolescents' interests in order to motivate them to become proficient readers and writers. Adolescents in today's society are no longer just reading and writing, but are also experiencing digital literacies. According to Alvarez (2001):

> As students progress into the middle and high school grades they learn to use and program graphic calculators, write computer programs, create Web pages, publish papers, and access multiple resources from around the world via the World Wide Web. They interact with other students, scientists, authors, university professors, and others via e-mail, and carry on dialogues through chat lines, newsgroups, and discussion groups. Each of these improves their literacy and communication skills as they interact, using various forms of speech, dialogue, symbols, and logic in the process.

Educators need to find ways to incorporate these digital literacies into their curriculum, so as to maximize the adolescents' literacy learning and overall academic achievement. This is not an easy task given that teachers are expected to: follow the grade specific state standards; introduce, develop, and extend specific course content; prepare students to take mandated state proficiency tests; and, in some cases, use prescribed teacher manuals. Given all of these expectations, teachers must rise above the challenges and provide an education that is engaging, integrative, challenging, exploratory, and relevant to the interests and needs of the adolescents. A historical analysis of adolescent interests and motivations was conducted to determine what instructional techniques have shown positive results so as to meet the imminent needs of adolescent readers.

2. Adolescent Interests

The issue of interest is not new in the field of education. As early as 1913, Dewey acknowledged the importance of interest in promoting learning (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). This cannot be truer for adolescents as they develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually. Adolescents are at a phase of life when they are beginning to express their individuality, establish their personal identity, and seek independence, while at the same time build strong peer relationships (National Middle School Association, 1995). All of these characteristics (individuality, personal identity, independence, peer relationships) influence that which they become interested during their adolescent years. Being hooked on reading occurs when there is a connection between the learner, text, context, and teacher (Kamil, 2003). These interests need to become a part of their academic experience. Worthy, et al. likewise reported, "When students both are interested in what is being taught and have access to materials that interest them, learning, motivation, effort, and attitudes improve". Before educators can integrate adolescents' interests into the curriculum, it is necessary to first consider the depth of their interests, and second to discover the breadth of interests they possess.

The depth of interest lies in the acknowledgement that there is both situational interest and

personal interest (Worthy, et al., 1999). Situational interest deals with academically contextualized factors that could potentially facilitate the adolescents' interest. These factors include: the instructional approaches used (lecture versus cooperative learning), materials (basal readers versus trade books), and the teachers. How the teacher presents the content, shows interest in the content, and hooks the students into the lesson can be the most motivating factors in facilitating interest in the adolescents. Educators have complete control over these situational factors, but have little influence over adolescents' personal interest.

Personal interests can be classified into two categories: inclinations and actualizations (Worthy, et al., 1999). Adolescents are naturally inclined to gravitate towards and show interest in specific subjects, fads, and events. These interests become actualized as a result of situations that stimulate this realization. This actualization is important when considering academic activities that can evoke personal interest and ultimately stimulate learning. According to Worthy, et al., "Interest is content-specific; personal interest in a subject motivates and facilitates the learner in going beyond surface level information to a deeper level of processing". Educators must strive to provide pathways to this deeper level of understanding. Their task then becomes finding out the breadth of what personally interests adolescents.

There is a breadth of personal interests that are unique and individualized for each adolescent. Adolescents' interests stem from influences that come from family, peers, society, and culture. Peer influence tends to have the greatest power during the adolescent years. Popular culture, or pop culture, dictates how adolescents dress, what they eat, what they do or do not do, what music they listen to, what they watch on TV, and even how they wear their hair. It can be argued that pop culture does not cause an adolescent to behave in a specific way, but instead it is the need to be socially accepted by peers that dictates their actions and behaviors. According to Lewis (2001), "The popular culture of young people is not about individual voices and identities. At the local level, in classrooms and communities, popular culture is related to social and cultural group identities, allegiances, and exclusions". Adolescents want to feel like they are a part of a group and therefore conform to the group's way of doing things. This often involves popular culture.

Technology plays a huge role in popular culture. Today, it is rare to find an adolescent who does not own a cell phone; I-Pods have replaced the now ancient CD player, and computers are in a category all alone. Adolescents use the computer as a tool to find information, display their creativity through Web page design, and more importantly to communicate with peers. Brozo and Flynt (2008) stated, "A student . . . may be engaging in literate practices at home such are reading graphic novels, e-mailing, instant messaging, participation in chat rooms and blogs and consulting computer and video game magazines for strategies". They have even developed their own abbreviated on-line language (i.e. BFF = Best Friends Forever). Technology plays an immensely important role in the lives of adolescents today and these multiliteracy practices need to find their way into the classrooms.

Other forms of popular culture also influence adolescents' personal interests. Movie and television stars influence what youth watch. Music stars influence what they listen to as well.

Sports stars influence who they support. The media presents these superstars to the adolescent audience who in turn emulate them by presenting themselves in a similar fashion. Merchants also cater to the interests of the adolescents by providing merchandise that also emulates these superstars. Magazines, or teen-zines, also give adolescents advice on what to wear, how to look, and how to handle relationships. It can be stated with confidence that popular culture has a huge influence on adolescents' personal interests and teachers must integrate this popular culture into their classrooms. Lewis (2001) argues, "If we choose not to examine the social and political uses of popular culture and not to bring the serious analysis of its forms into the classroom, these expressions of group identities may simply go underground, leading to the disassociation of that which figures most prominently in the everyday lives of our students". Popular culture must be allowed into the classrooms and teachers must embrace the power that popular culture holds over adolescents. Students' in-class experiences should incorporate their lived experiences, including interests and connections with current events. Difficulties remain in how to effectively integrate aspects of pop culture and adolescent interest into subjects across the curriculum.

3. Adolescent Motivations

What is motivation? According to *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2006) the term motive means "an emotion, desire, physiological need, or similar impulse acting as an incitement to action". In order to get adolescents to read and write, they must first have a desire or need to read and write. They must have motivation to read and write. It is up to educators to provide literacy experiences that tap into the adolescents' emotions, desires, and needs in order to promote active learning. Guthrie, Coddington, and Wigfield (2009) reported, "Although teachers and teacher educators rarely deny this motivational aim, it is too often neglected in research, theory, practice, and teacher education in the area of reading". How can teachers and teacher educators stop this cycle of motivational neglect in order to help adolescents to find their desire to read and write?

Theorists have attempted to explain choice, persistence, and vigor related to achievement task completion as they pertain to motivation. Expectancy-value theory contends that one's choice, persistence, and performance can be explained by self-efficacy and the extent to which they value the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Guthrie (2008) explained that the greatest inhibitor to self-efficacy is using texts that are too difficult for students. Marinak and Gambrell (2009, 2010) used expectancy-value theory to study student reading motivation. In two studies, Marinak and Gambrell (2009) found developmental differences for both self-concept about reading and value of reading as well as gender differences for value of reading (2010).

Two types of motivations are generally referenced: intrinsic and extrinsic. The terms intrinsic and extrinsic relate to the person's state of mind or being. Intrinsic factors come from an inherent or internal source, whereas extrinsic factors originate from outside the body. In regard to adolescents' academic motivations, Troy (1982) states, "The terms intrinsic and extrinsic…refer to their application to the state of mind of the students. Does he want to learn for the sake of the learning itself (intrinsic) or is he motivated by some outside stimulus

(extrinsic)?". Interests and desires are considered to be intrinsic motivators, whereas grades and rewards are considered to be extrinsic motivators. Guthrie et al. (2009) likewise stated, "Intrinsically motivated reading consists of text interaction for enjoyment, to satisfy curiosity and to gain the rewards of vicarious adventure, or gaining new knowledge that may be challenging". It is the intrinsic motivation that educators want to build and strengthen in the adolescents. Lack of intrinsic motivation and lack of interest will lead to aliteracy, but having strong intrinsic motivation will lead to lifelong learning.

What factors do adolescents find intrinsically motivating? Studies pinpoint self-efficacy as an intrinsic motivator (Alvermann, 2002; Gambrell & Marinak, 2008; Marinak, 2006; Scott, 1996). Self-efficacy, as defined by Scott, is "a person's judgments of his or her ability to successfully participate in an activity…[S]tudents with positive self-efficacy feel in control of their learning situation and believe they have the capabilities necessary to succeed". By providing adolescents with many opportunities to feel successful, their self-efficacy will grow and ultimately they will become more motivated to learn. Guthrie et al. (2009) further explain, "Efficacious students participate more readily, work harder, persevere longer in the face of difficulties, and achieve at higher levels". This notion is very important with reluctant readers specifically. According to Alvermann, "Adolescents' perceptions of how competent they are as readers and writers, generally speaking, will affect how motivated they are to learn in their subject area classes".

When considering reading specifically, there are many strategies that educators can implement to motivate adolescents to read. Beers (1996) lists several factors that will help to increase readers' motivation to read. The number one motivating factor is to give adolescents the choice of reading materials. Brozo and Flynt (2008) warned, "As students advance through the grades, their choices about many things outside of school increase significantly, yet options in school remain limited". By giving the students a choice they will be able to choose topics with which they are interested. Lewis (2001) adds, "An assumption underlying the notion of 'free choice' is that when students choose their own texts and topics, they are expressing their individual voices and identities". This idea should encourage educators to first find out what interests their students, and then to stock their classrooms with books that match those interests. Worthy, et al. (1999) argues, "Limited availability of preferred materials in school leaves students with three choices: reading something outside of their interests, obtaining their preferred materials themselves, or not reading at all". This reading material should represent many different genres and styles such as: nonfiction, science fiction, romance novels, magazines, newspapers, poetry, and even comic books.

Time is also a very important factor that needs to be considered. Adolescents need ample time to read. Ivey (2001) suggests that "for students to become personally engaged in reading…they need significant amounts of time to get involved with books;…this time ought to be provided in school". Some schools have already programmed this voluntary reading time into their daily schedule as either Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) or Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). As stated earlier, there are numerous benefits from allowing voluntary reading time in school including: adolescents become motivated to read for pleasure, they read material that is relevant to their lives, they read for personal purposes, and they read

aesthetically.

Beers (1996) suggests that another option to motivate students is for the teacher to personally read aloud with enthusiasm, inflections and intonations, expression, and passion. Scott (1996) also agrees that teachers should "model the enjoyment, appreciation, and relaxation of reading and learning". This purposeful modeling can motivate students to also read in this manner and experience the reading event aesthetically. Adolescents need to participate in many aesthetic and successful reading experiences in order to build their self-efficacy and motivation.

The NMSA (1995) has outlined what middle school educators need to do in order to become developmentally responsive to adolescents' needs. Schools need to develop curriculums that are relevant to adolescent lives, relevant to their interests, and related to motivational learning experiences. The NMSA suggests, "Making curriculum relevant thus does not mean limiting content solely to students' preexisting interests. Challenging curriculum creates new interests; it opens doors to new knowledge and opportunities; it stretches students" The notion of having a challenging, integrative, exploratory, and relevant curriculum puts the adolescents' needs and interests in the forefront. Alvarez (2001) concludes:

> If we are to meet the challenges of a global society and the needs of a diversified adolescent population, it is vital that an emergent curriculum be our focus: a curriculum that challenges students to engage in meaningful learning activities by offering problem-oriented tasks using authentic materials and affords opportunities for multiple resolutions. This type of curriculum spurs the imagination of passive learners. In the process, teachers take advantage of the knowledge and skills their students bring into the classroom.

In conclusion, adolescents need to have a choice of multitudes of reading materials, substantial time to experience aesthetic and engaging reading experiences, and a relevant, challenging curriculum that addresses their needs, personal interests, and intrinsic motivations.

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