



Motivational Techniques for Improving Reading Comprehension Among Innerscity High School Students

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by Carol Wells

The reading process is an extremely complex one actively involving both hemispheres of the brain. Nevertheless, I will try to simplify this process by breaking it down into three major steps:

1. Identification—This involves the pupil's ability to associate meaning with words as they appear in his reading. This to me, is the basis of reading; for sounding out phonemes and morphemes means nothing to the student if he cannot identify or call upon either context clues or his own experiences to bring meaning or comprehension to the word. Yet it is these very two skills which the innercity student lacks: context, because his comprehension skills have not been adequately developed; and meaningful educational experiences, either because of different cultural values or pressures or because of lack of money. These problems can be solved to a great extent by providing these experiences (field trips or by audio visual methods) and by direct teaching of context clues from the SRA Kit, Tactics I, II found in any reading lab of any high school. I have used both these methods with my students (Sophomores—Seniors) and there has been marked improvement in identification.
2. Organization—This is the process whereby the reader organizes the ideas presented to produce a logical result. I am sure that you will agree that many of our students, especially in the developmental and basic levels, wrestle with this problem of organization, both in understanding what they read, and in their own writing. They (the students) want to say a lot but it comes out all confused. This is especially brought out in writing, whether it be answering given comprehension questions or paragraph or essay writing. I have responded to this problem by using exercises in sequencing from ditto masters and by using something as common as the newspaper. I have taken news articles, 'Dear Abby' letters, sports stories, comic strips etc. and by cutting the article into paragraphs or the paragraph into sentences, I have had students rearrange them into a logical sequence, comparing their arrangement with the original.
3. Reaction—This involves an emotional and intellectual reaction which most naturally will depend on the type of material the student reads and the reader's attitude and purpose. Thus if reading has been pleasurable because the student has been able to identify successfully (emotionally and intellectually) with the text, and to organize the material, then the student will want to read more. This desire will set off a chain reaction which will lead to more reading, and the more the student reads, the better he will read. I think this is one of our goals as teachers. ¹

One may ask why we place so much emphasis on the ability to read. First of all, one's overall scholastic success depends mainly on the ability to read. More important, however, are the demands of our modern world which directly relate to this ability. Because we're in an age of science and space exploration and because we're bombarded by propaganda in all its forms, we must be able to read critically. In addition, it is beneficial to read for recreation for besides the relaxation it brings, it takes you to many places and provides you with many experiences which you otherwise may not have.

With all these reasons for the need of reading skill, why then do innercity students perform so inadequately in reading? Once more we've touched on a complex problem on which volumes have been written. However, I will briefly mention a few of the internal and external factors which affect one's reading:

1. Physical—Vision, hearing, lateral dominance, one's sex and health. ²
2. Mental—Intelligence, conceptualization, language, mental immaturity and listening. ³
3. Emotional—Selfconcept, subject matter, and teacher effect. ⁴
4. SocioEconomic—Low socioeconomic status, family mobility and family stability. There is much dispute about whether these are direct causes of reading difficulties. On the other hand, there is little doubt that their influences will have some bearing upon other conditions such as interest in learning and expectations of success, which can affect one's progress in reading.
5. Educational—Inadequate teaching of reading, inadequately prepared teachers, poor teacher strategy, overemphasis on one reading skill, indiscriminate use of reading materials, inadequate and unsuitable instructional material, teacher bias, poor or insensitive administration. ⁵
6. Lack of motivation—On the part of the student and the teacher. It is my firm belief that this is one of the important factors underlying the low performance in reading of innercity high school students. For this reason, I have devoted my time to research on motivational techniques to help these 'turnedoff' 'tunedout' students.

If a student has had past successful experiences in reading, he will be motivated to read more. For many children, the most compelling motivation for reading comes from their parents as models. ⁶ If a child sees his parents reading a lot, he will tend to imitate that model even before reading has any significance. Children have been known to pick up books and look at them, turning the pages and copying the gestures of the adult they admire. If these gestures are reinforced, reading will be a pleasurable experience, reinforcement in itself and the child's reading will improve.

From the research that I have done, I have discovered these other motivators of reading: reading for entertainment, need for novelty, need to know, feeling of power in decoding, freedom attained through access to ideas, vicarious adventures into the unknown, alternative solutions to interpersonal relationships, learning of sex roles and aesthetic experiences. ⁷ I am sure that at some time we, as teachers, have used some of these motivators when, through use of interest questionnaires, we found out just where our students were,

and we provided suitable reading.

But what happens to the disadvantaged child who has had only negative experiences and negative role models? How is he motivated? In answer to this question, I would like to refer to Tolstoi's technique of teaching similarly 'turned off', 'tuned out' students. In the Yasnaya Polyana School which Count Tolstoi founded in Russia, he completely abandoned all existing traditions and refused to follow any method of teaching already in use. First he had to understand the child's culture and the child. Next, he did away with punishment and by doing this he let his pupils teach him the art of teaching.

You may ask what does a nineteenth century Russian teacher have to tell us modern Americans about teaching in innercity schools. Yet although the time and place are different, the philosophy still applies. If we educators (administrators and teachers) would only stop our hurried planning and take some time to sit back and observe the very students for whom we are planning, we are the ones who will *learn* and when we learn, we will be better able to *teach*. This is what Count Tolstoi did. In his school, the pupils were free to choose their own subjects and to take as much work as they wanted. The teacher guided the children by tapering his method of approach to the individual child and by finding the best way of giving help in each case. ⁸

These students met with such tremendous success that they spent their entire day at their studies and were reluctant to leave the schoolhouse. Since 'success' is one of the key words of our school system, we, as educators, can try to adapt as much as possible from Tolstoi's philosophy of education.

John Holt, whose philosophy is a modern version of Tolstoi's, tells us that when we better understand the ways, conditions, and spirit in which children do their best learning, and are able to make school into a place where they can use and improve the style of thinking and learning natural to them, we may be able to prevent much failure. ⁹

Once more, I can directly apply Holt's view of education to my experience teaching in an American innercity public high school. I had done my first three years of teaching in another country and even though I was teaching black, economically disadvantaged teenagers, they were very eager to learn: Students were obligated to purchase all educational material needed (textbooks, dictionaries, atlases, mathematical equipment, paper and pen) which were extremely expensive. There was no hassle with homework not being turned in, and discipline problems were at a minimum. Kids wanted to learn and they really tried. There we had no A.V. material or sophisticated educational equipment. Everything was completely traditional. The compelling motivator was that in that society, you are actually 'nothing' without an education, so even if you wanted to be a sales girl in a department store, you must have a complete high school certificate.

With this teaching background, I started teaching in New Haven. I think you can very well imagine the shock, dismay, and deep frustration that I experienced after my first few weeks of teaching. I attended InService workshops on discipline and classroom management etc. which helped just a bit. And that's when I realized what was happening. I was teaching with my own idealistic expectations and not really listening to what the kids were telling me by their actions. In other words, when I started learning from my kids, I became a better teacher. It was in this learning experience that I began using an interest questionnaire at the beginning of each school year, periodic (twice a marking period) individual conferences where each student has a chance to discuss academic performance, behavior, expectations, and goals, and I began using many of the motivational techniques that will be mentioned later. All of this produced a greatly improved studentteacher relationship, the atmosphere became very relaxed and the classroom became a place to learn.

I will now present some techniques based on these two educational philosophies for motivating our reluctant

innercity high school students to read. I will also present a simple, uncomplicated conference procedure to check on the child's reading and improvement of skills. Finally, I will provide some sources of reading material for teachers and others for students.

TECHNIQUES FOR MOTIVATING READING

1. Maintain a relaxed classroom atmosphere—Having a relaxed working atmosphere is a prerequisite for production of any kind. We know through medical science that stress retards and, in some cases, completely blocks the learning process. Here are a few things that I have done to create a relaxed class:

1. At the beginning of the school year, I have used a questionnaire to find out my students' interests, their attitude to the subject and their attitude towards adults and peers.

2. In addition, at the beginning of the school year, I make students aware of my expectations. Making them aware of my expectations minimizes fear and confusion.

3. I constantly reward positive behavior and remember to comment favorably on personal appearance (A little praise yields great dividends).

4. I try not to 'put anyone on the spot'. This is easy to do when you keep in mind that there are different types of learners and different methods of producing the same results.

2. Make time for SSR (Sustained Silent Reading)—The SSR method presumes that the more students read, the better readers they will become. In addition, if they can choose books, magazines, etc. that they are interested in, and if they are shown how to create time for reading, then they will read more. With the SSR method, you set aside a specific time for individualized silent reading. Have each child bring a magazine, newspaper or book that he is interested in so that he can read during the allotted time. You, as the teacher, should also read during this time to set the correct role model. In some schools, everyone from administrators to staff help, reads during this time. The SSR model has been accepted by many school systems across the USA.

3. Have a LRR ¹⁰ (Ludington Reading Room) or your own adaptation of this program. Basically the LRR is a partially privately funded reading program where a reading room filled with paperbacks is set aside for each school building. Each reading room contains three books per student and the usual library privileges are observed.

We have an interesting report from one of the first high schools to use this program, the Detroit Northwestern High School, which opened its LRR in 1965. In the first ten days of its operation, over 1,500 of the school's 2,700 students visited the room; they checked out 1,850 books. Seven months later, 1,147 students visited

the reading room in a similar time period and left with more than 1,000 books. ¹¹ A few weeks after the reading room was opened, seventeen yearold illiterate Joe approached his teacher and urgently asked to be the librarian for the program. Joe was given the position, and by memorizing the covers of *ALL* the paperbounds to replace them in their proper pockets in the wire racks, he learned to read.

Wherever this program has been used, teachers and reading coordinators have responded favorably. In New Jersey, more than fourfifths of the students in Grades 312 made use of the program. 40% junior high and 30% senior high students had read more since the paperback books had arrived. Watson and Thornton, in their study, found that nearly 60% of the total pupil population felt that their reading had substantially improved because of the presence of the paperback books provided by the LRR. Significantly a majority of the low readers felt that they were becoming better readers. ¹²

A possible adaptation to this program could include setting up your own classroom library. You can get books and magazines from your own library at home or from teachers who may be willing to share theirs. You can also visit book fairs and second hand book stores where you can get books for as little as a dime. In addition, you can have simple fund raising activities. With funds obtained from these, you can write to RIF (Reading is Fundamental), a federally funded program, requesting additional money for this purpose. See footnote for address. ¹³ They, in turn, will match the amount of money you've raised, with their funds. They will send you a catalogue of lowpriced reading material categorized by grades, levels, and topics. RIF will match as little as \$100; so now you can have a minimum of \$200 to buy books for your classroom library. Next, you need to decide on your manner of displaying your books. If you do not have much space, you can ask your industrial arts teacher to make you some wall racks and possibly some spinners for this. The rest is up to you. You can decide what borrowing privileges you will set up, what types of evaluation you'll use for the program, and what methods of reinforcement you'll use for the students. I will suggest a few reinforcement techniques a little further on.

4. Make the school library inviting—Here are some ways of doing this:

1. Instead of letting students see only the dull, uninviting Dewey decimal notations, arrange books just as a book store owner would, displaying the attractive covers of the books. To economize on space but with the books still invitingly displayed, use wall racks and freestanding spinners.
2. Include many more paperbacks. Fader replies to the objection which may be raised that books would be torn more easily that "It is better for a book to be tattered from eager use than a brain be wasted." ¹⁴
3. If libraries are to be used frequently, a problem of space may arise. Therefore, a largersized classroom can also be set aside for display of paperback books, using revolving wire racks for paper bound books.
4. Finally, to further encourage students to read, Fader says that one or two paperbacks should be given to each child at the beginning of the school year. Explain to the child that whenever he wants another book all he has to do is trade his for the one he wants. You should then schedule the child for the opportunity of borrowing.

According to Fader, this method has been highly successful at the Maxey and GarnetPatterson Schools. It seems then that in our school system where there is never enough money in the school budget that our own creative fund raising methods and RIF, alluded to earlier on, may just be the answers.

5. Provide a reading list. This list should be drawn up from the student response to the interest questionnaire given out at the beginning of the year. Let students choose and read any books they wish to from the list. Hold the student accountable for his reading by having individual conferences. The following represents one example of a conference procedure as suggested by Evans.¹⁵

1. Two days prior to his conference, student puts his name on the schedule sheet. He also puts the name of the book he's read.
2. The teacher reads or skims the book prior to the conference.
3. The student gives the teacher a file card with the book title, author and possibly brief summary at the time of the conference.
4. The teacher keys opening question to find out the child's general opinion of the book or compares the hero of this book to one from a previous book the child has read.

The teacher tries to determine how the student has approached and experienced a work of literature by asking questions to judge the student's levels of comprehension: Did the student relate the book to his previous reading? Did he relate it to his own life? Did he understand the literary techniques of the author? Does this book represent progress in the student's work as a reader? The answers to these questions will vary with the ability and needs of each student.

According to the child's response in the conference, the teacher can then suggest the next book for him within his reading interests and ability. Naturally, there should be more than one suggestion so the student can have a wide range of choice.

The conference can be graded by the teacher on any number of criteria—studentdetermined, teacherdetermined, or studentteacher determined.

6. Provide a classroom environment that is conducive to reading—To do this, teachers can put up posters and sayings about reading, pictures of authors and of people reading, so that students can see the act of reading as something people like to do. In addition, using the interest questionnaire done at the beginning of the year, teachers can provide a variety of magazines (past issues) for browsing etc. In fact, for the past three years of teaching in New Haven, I did not think of providing magazines for extra reading when there was time remaining before the end of the period. Therefore, if I didn't plan anything else, there would be talking. In my second year I

decided to provide magazines (*Ebony* , *Jet* , *Sports Illustrated* and *Scholastic Scope*). These were selected based on the interest questionnaire. In addition, I gave extra credit points for reading when their regular assignment was finished. Students had to read the article and write the name of the magazine, the title of the article, issue date and number, and write a summary of it. This they kept in individual folders. At the end of the marking period, I would check them and give points accordingly. This method helped in many ways. It gave students more reading practice. It individualized work so that the quicker students had something meaningful to do when their assignments were completed. It gave students practice in summarizing articles. During that second year there were hardly any discipline problems. It was really smooth!

This past year, I provided the magazines but did not give extra credit for reading. The results weren't as great. But discipline problems were also low and most of the kids really read. One thing that I observed though, is that even though the *Scope* magazines are interesting and easy to read, my kids (99 1/2% black) preferred to read the *Ebony* , *Jet* , and *Sports Illustrated* magazines even though they were past issues.

7. Occasionally read aloud to students—This can be a useful technique in getting students interested in reading. Since the teacher generally knows what books are particularly good, reading aloud a few good stories and then suggesting others that are similar, can go a long way toward leading students to read. Karlin says that if a student realizes that his classmates are captured by the “magic” of a story, he may feel that he is really missing something and he will join the crowd. In addition, auctioning off books by reading the first few paragraphs in one book and offering it to the most interested student, repeating this procedure with the next, is an excellent way of using the competitive spirit in all of us to sell reading. ¹⁶

8. Make your own readalong tapes—Because of increased technology, cassette tapes have become a very lowpriced commodity. Therefore, we as teachers could use these in our readalong programs without incurring much expense. With the help of some of your better students, tape excerpts from novels etc., then have low students read along with the tapes. This method works well with young and old alike and it has even been successful for those who have had no formal reading training. See footnote reference for examples. ¹⁷ As an alternative to teacher-made tapes, you can have students make their own tapes. To do this, the student would tape any experience that has made an impact on him. The teacher writes it out and gives it back to him as his reading assignment. The student then reads this along with the narration from the tape. This motivational technique is effective with any age group but does wonders with older students who are illiterate'

9. Form a Reading Club—This would give interested students time to share their reading experiences with others. If the club is well-organized, the meetings will not be merely conversational sessions. Sometimes you can invite authors in or around the school area to attend these meetings. In addition, you can organize field trips to interesting places associated with authors or books.

10. Use topical devices close to the students' experiences ea. a “Hit Parade of Books,” “A Reading Diet,” or “Reading Rainbows.” The “Reading Rainbows” idea is taken from Ellen Lamer Thomas' article “Reading Rainbows,” in *English Journal* (November 1961). In this technique, the teacher gives each child a variety of colored slips representing each type of book. As students read each type of book they place the matching colored slip in book pockets on the bulletin board. This technique encourages balance in the selection of books and helps to steer the student away from

reading only one type of book.

11. Use signs, forms, labels, rules for sports, advertisements etc. as high interest material for students reading at very low levels or for completely illiterate teenage readers.
12. At some time replace customary texts and workbooks with newspapers and magazines (magazines that would especially appeal to the child's culture). For example, for a short story unit, instead of using big hard cover text books featuring stories foreign to the child's culture, use magazines. For black adolescents, you can teach the characteristics of a short story from *Ebony* or even *Jet* . Fader suggests that anthologies and hardbound texts should be discouraged because they are symbols of a world of scholastic failure to the unsuccessful student.
13. Use the inductive rather than the deductive approach.
14. Give awards—Always reinforce positive behavior. Therefore, make sure you have award certificates or some token or even extra credit points, for increased reading activity.

In his book on *Teaching Reading in High School* (p. 278), Karlin lists sixteen sources which provide booklists for normally progressing readers, some listing as many as 2,000 titles. Three sources I have found particularly useful are:

Books for the Teenage Reader. New York Public Library Annual. This source provides a descriptive guide to over 700 books designed for those who are just beginning to like reading, to the mature reader.

Books for You. National Council of Teachers of English, Champaign, Illinois, 1964. This provides over 2,000 titles in 45 different categories and subcategories.

Karlin also provides (p. 279) a similar list of sources which provide booklists for poor readers. *High Interest, Easy Reading*, prepared by the Committee on the High Interest—Easy Reading Book List for the National Council of Teachers of English, is a very valuable source for motivating those of our very reluctant readers.

In this the final part of my project, I will now provide an annotated bibliography of books and magazines that have worked well with my students, and books that I have used as reference material for this project.

Notes

1. Griese, *Do You Read Me?* , p. 5.
2. Burmeister, *Reading Strategies for Secondary School Teachers* , pp. 1921.
3. Horn, *Readings for the Disadvantaged* , p.84.
4. Glasser, "Roles, Goals and Failure", *Today's Edition* , pp. 20 21.
5. Karlin, *Teaching Reading in High School* , pp. 26 46.
6. Robeck, *Psychology of Reading: Foundations of Instruction* , p. 170.
7. *Ibid.* , p. 173.
8. Tolstoi, *The Complete Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi* , pp.164172, Vol.VIII
9. Holt, *How Children Learn*, p. 8.
10. Fader, *Hooked on Books* , p. 123.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
12. *Ibid.* , p. 127.
13. Reading is Fundamental, Inc. 475 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 4800, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560
14. *Ibid* , p. 86.
15. Evans, *The Creative Teacher* , pp. 1 5.
16. Karlin, *Teaching Reading in High School* , p. 280.
17. Holt, *How Children Learn*, p. 101.

Booklist for Students

Devaney, John. *Baseball's Youngest Big Leaguers* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.

Tells the true stories of top major league players who all were accepted into the major league before they were twentytwo years old.

Gloag, Julian. *Our Mother's House* . New York: CowardMcCann Inc., 1965.

This book centers around seven young children who face life with no adult supervision after their mother dies.

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies* . New York: CowardMcCann Inc., 1955.

Shipwrecked on a tropical island, these British school boys set up their own government and run into serious problems.

Gunther, John. *Death Be Not Proud* . New York: Harper and Row, 1949.

This is a true story that tells about the courageous struggle of a boy, who in his senior year at high school, discovers he has a brain tumor.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun* . New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1959

This play, set in Chicago's Southside in the late twentieth century, centers around a black family's struggle to be 'somebody'.

Hinton, S.E. *The Outsiders*. New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1967.

The story of gang rivalry which led to trouble and violence.

Hunter, Kristin. *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968.

Trying to escape their unpleasant family situation, these four teenagers, begin recording soul music. The police regard them as a nuisance but experience teaches them escape isn't the answer to their problems.

Kata, Elizabeth. *A Patch of Blue* . New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961.

A poor, blind white girl who has been nurtured on racial prejudice finds love and understanding in a black man.

Keyes, Daniel. *Flowers for Algernon*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc.

Charlie Gordon, a pitiable moron is remade into a genius. His emotional progress, however, cannot keep pace with his intellectual achievements and so he encounters many difficulties.

Rothman, Esther. *The Angel Inside Went Sour*. New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1972.

This book, from a student perspective, is about a special public school in New York City where delinquent teenagers, most of them black, attend. It shows how these kids actually began to like school after having been completely turned off years before.

Russell, Bill. *Go Up For Glory* . New York: Noble and Noble, Inc., 1968.

This book shows the struggle of a black man as he makes his way up in a white society. It also deals with the problems he faces when he becomes popular.

Shapiro, Milton. *Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers*. New York: Julian Messner, 1966.

This is an inspiring story of survival despite great odds.

Shotwell, Louisa. *Roosevelt Grady* . New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964.

This is the story of a fruit picker's family who must always keep moving. As a result, their eldest child experiences alienation.

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men* . New York: The Viking Press, Inc.

This story deals with alienation, alienation of the mentally retarded.

Steinbeck, John. *The Pearl* . New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1947.

This portrays the tragic story of a poor illiterate Mexican who finds a priceless pearl and the resulting misfortunes he encounters.

Wharton, Edith. *Ethan Frome*. New York: Charles C. Scribner's Sons., 1939.

The story deals with one man's reaction to the frustration of his dream.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AshtonWarner, Sylvia. *Teacher* . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.

An inspiring book of how some disadvantaged Maori children were taught to enjoy reading.

Biehler, Robert F. *Psychology Applied to Teaching* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

As its name suggests, this book provides in detail, the psychological aspects that must be dealt with in teaching.

Dennison, George. *The Lives of Children*. New York: Random House, 1969.

This book tells how disadvantaged children, some of them disturbed, learned and grew in school because they were respected and trusted.

Evans, William. *The Creative Teacher* . New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1971.

This book deals with bringing creativity, and thus, life, back into the classroom.

Fader, Daniel. *Hooked on Books*. New York: Berkely Pub. Corp., 1976.

This book convincingly describes a program where young people, who were completely turned off from school, got hooked on reading.

Griese, Arnold. *Do You Read Me?* California: Good Year Publishing Co., Inc., 1977.

This book gives practical approaches to teaching reading comprehension.

Hentoff, Nat. *Our Children Are Dying* . New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1966.

It shows how a courageous and creative principal and his staff bring life and learning back to an innercity school. It also shows how it can be done anywhere.

Herndon, James. *The Way It Spozed To Be*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

A perceptive story told in a humorous way about teaching one year in an innercity junior high school.

Holt, John. *How Children Learn*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1972.

An eyeopener which shows how children really learn if allowed to do so in their own learning style.

Horn, Thomas. *Reading For The Disadvantaged*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World Inc., 1970.

This gives a sociological, psychological, linguistic, and economical background for the problems which disadvantaged children face in reading.

Karlin, Robert. *Teaching Reading in High School*. New York: The BobbsMerrill Co., Inc., 1972.

A very good handbook for secondary school teachers. It presents detailed methods for dealing with a variety of reading situations.

Neil, A.S., *Summerhill*. New York: Hart Co., 1960.

This is the story of an internationally famous school which is based on the dignity and freedom of children.

Rothman, Esther. *The Angel Inside Went Sour*. New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1972.

This book shows how a principal, defying the traditional system handed down to her, dared to be different and created a school in N.Y. city's innercity where students grew.

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