An Urban School Shapes Young Adolescents' Motivation to Read

When I started teaching, I could easily place my students into two categories related to reading—motivated or unmotivated. Those I saw as motivated to read seemed capable of mining my skimpy bookshelf in the corner of the room for something appealing during our silent reading time. They saw themselves as good readers and were ready for a challenge. It was easy to categorize these students as "hardworking" and "capable."

In contrast, the students I believed were unmotivated readers couldn't be bothered with improving their reading skills. I observed these students engaging in habits during our silent reading time that characterized what I believed was a lack of motivation: they chose any book off the shelves—each day a different one—and would sit down, sometimes holding it upside down or sometimes falling asleep. Not only did they struggle with reading independently, they struggled with literacy tasks in general. They told me that reading was "wack" and "boring." It was easy to label those students as "struggling" and "lazy."

I was frustrated that many of my students expressed such a vocal disdain for reading. At the same time, neither I nor my colleagues at my New York City public school knew how to help students become more motivated to read. I also did not know that our collective lack of capacity in supporting students' reading motivation was not only hindering their potential to be successful in most domains of school, it was also setting students on a course for underachievement in and disengagement from reading in the future.

Unfortunately, what I experienced in one urban middle school can be extrapolated to young adolescents across the country; researchers observe a pattern of declining reading motivation among this age group, both in comparison to younger students and, more notably, in longitudinal inquiries of the same population from year to year (Wolters, Denton, York, & Francis, 2014). Researchers also hypothesize that the reason for declining motivation can be attributed to schools' tendency to carry a fixed view of literacy incompatible with middle level students' experiences (del Valle & Lewis, 2009). But I wanted to know, is that the only reality possible in urban public schools?

How Does a School Influence Reading Motivation?

I spent a year at Grant Street Secondary School (school and participants' names are pseudonyms), another New York City public school where I had also taught, interviewing students and teachers and observing school spaces to be able to describe what reading looked like in this context. Further, I also administered a survey on students' reading motivation and a standardized reading assessment. Findings from this study counter what I first believed about reading motivation; that as much as it is intrinsic, it is also contextual. I learned that a school can shape students' motivation to read in the classroom in ways that have positive effects on their reading identity, efficacy in reading, and ability to read well.

Grant Street's student body mirrored most small urban schools in New York City. At the time of the study, the 2009–10 school year, 82 percent of the 560 students were economically disadvantaged, 59 percent were Latina/o students, and 27 percent of the students were Black. About a third of students were designated special education.

I chose to conduct my research on literacy at Grant Street because of its past efforts in literacy instruction and because of its present accomplishments. The principal, Jack Steinberg, led the staff in professional development initiatives that targeted students' literacy growth. For example, the school partnered with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, and teachers read professional texts about the teaching of reading together. Steinberg also arranged time in the school's weekly schedule for teachers to plan their curriculum. As a result, the staff learned that the problems with literacy weren't about students' lack of reading motivation but instead were about the staff's shared lack of capacity in incorporating what students' interests were with what was expected of them in school.

Grant Street was also an ideal site for this research because of students' accomplishments in reading during the time of the study. In one year, students outpaced the national sample of the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test, a standardized assessment. Furthermore, Grant Street students displayed higher levels of reading motivation on the Adolescent Motivation Reading Profile (Pitcher et al., 2007) than students in other studies that used the same survey. Equally important, school members and visitors often described Grant Street as having a "culture of reading."

I interviewed a sample of twenty-three students who varied in grade level, academic status, ethnicity, and gender to understand more about their motivation to read and about the school's culture of reading. When I asked students to name what made them want to read in school, their responses illuminated the role the school had in shaping their reading motivation: 75 percent of the sample said that they believed that Grant Street was a "reading school." Another 72 percent said that the constant opportunities to talk about books throughout the school made them want to read, and 42 percent of the sample discussed the role of Steinberg's book club. The students' responses, along with observations that I made during the school year, suggest that young adolescents have clear ideas about what they need to be motivated to read in school, and these ideas affirm the idea that reading is a social, participative activity.

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Grant Street Is a "Reading School"

Seventh grader Latressa explained that she became more motivated to read when she entered Grant Street because she recognized that the school was "big on reading" in that "they're always talking about it . . . . They think books are important. They put it out there . . . . They have posters, the teachers are always reading stuff, the morning announcements have it, they have meetings on it." Latressa believed that these activities made her believe, "maybe it is important to read more." Grant Street's independent reading program appeared to shape students' view of Grant Street as a "reading school" and in turn influenced their willingness to read every day in school.

Notable patterns permeated independent reading, a time that lasted 30 minutes daily in the double-period English classes in sixth to tenth grades and 30 minutes weekly in single-period English classes in the eleventh and twelfth grades. During independent reading, students silently read in the company of other students and their teacher. They chose books from their classroom libraries or visited the school library. They maintained a record of the pages that they read at home and in school, along with a list of

books they'd read across the year. Students read books of their choosing, and teachers expected them to read at home each night for at least 30 minutes for a total of twenty-five to forty-five books each year. Teachers read too; otherwise they spent the time conferring with students on reading strategies that they taught in whole-class lessons or on students' reading habits. For teachers and students alike, independent reading took on a nonnegotiable status; it was one of the few activities that everyone had in common during the school day, regardless of grade level or classroom role. These features of the school's independent reading program rendered it meaningful enough to encourage students—even ones who were labeled "struggling"—to become motivated to read in school.

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Students and Teachers Talk about Books

School members constantly talked informally and formally about the books they read for independent reading, and students told me that these conversations also motivated them to participate in Grant Street's reading culture. They appreciated the times when teachers carved out a few moments at the end of independent reading to share books with one another and with the whole class. But equally important as the planned moments were the spontaneous ones that took place near a classroom library, in the hallway, or in the school library. Martin, a ninth grader new to Grant Street, said, "In junior high school, we had independent reading. I never liked it . . . Here, a teacher recommends a book, and that really helps me. They know my taste. Sometimes I don't know so many titles, and they help me . . . ." The appreciation of book recommendations extended to students' peers as well. Stephen, an eighth grader, said his classmates knew him well enough to put good books in his hands: "They just come up to me and say, 'You've read this? You have to read this.'" In turn, Stephen often recommended books to his classmates.

While these informal interactions may have come across as arbitrary, they were intentional in the role they played to distribute the expectation that each student could find something that they would want to read at Grant Street. These conversations illuminate what it looked like to be a reading school in the eyes of its students; at any time during the day, and in any space in the school, students could have a meaningful interaction with someone else about a book. These interactions provided an opportunity for the students who might not have appeared to be enthusiastic about the reading culture to become engaged; they came to know that at Grant Street, their interests could be cultivated with a book that they would enjoy.

Teachers can consider different ways to start conversations with students about books. Teachers can set aside a few minutes several times a week to give book talks about titles they think may appeal to students. These book talks—no more than a few minutes per book—can include a quick and captivating summary of the text, major themes, and suggestions for the kinds of readers who might enjoy the plot. At the same time, teachers can confer with individual students during independent reading to make suggestions about titles they plan to read next. By examining students' reading logs or asking them about their most recently beloved titles, teachers can gain insight on the topics and genres that appeal to any student. Teachers can then recommend a few titles that students might enjoy, and students can even set goals for titles that they can read next. Put together, book talks and conferences appeal to both the collective and individual dimensions of independent reading. Book talks allow the teacher and students to publicly celebrate texts that students may enjoy. Meanwhile, conferences enable teachers to develop a deeper understand-

ing of each student's personal interests and be attuned to students' reading trajectory across the year.

The Principal Has a Library and Runs a Book Club

Students also discussed the role their principal had in their reading lives. When Steinberg became Grant Street's principal in 2001, although he appreciated the intimate academic setting that the school provided its students, he recognized that beyond whole-class novels, the school did not do enough to prepare its students to read voluminously and meaningfully. Just as he expected the staff to rethink their instructional practices, he took on practices of his own to motivate students to read more. For example, he rearranged his office to make room for a library of about 800 titles that students could access throughout the day (see Figure 1). Mario, an eighth grader, observed, "To see the principal get involved with students' reading instead of just straight business is key." The interactions that I observed Steinberg having about books in his office and throughout the school upended the traditional interactions we might assume that principals have with their students and ultimately encouraged many students to want to read more in school.

In addition to his own library and conversations with students about books, Steinberg hosted book clubs throughout the year for his students. He identified up to ten fiction and nonfiction titles that would appeal to his students. For example, in the spring of 2014, titles included *Zombie Baseball Beatdown* by Paolo Bacigalupi, Veronica Draper's *Out of My Mind*, and "The Best Report on Bullying I've Ever Read," Emily Bazelon's commentary about the NFL's investigation of the Miami Dolphins released earlier that year. Steinberg posted fliers in the hallway advertising the books and purchased several copies of each title to distribute to any student who wanted to sign up. Those copies became a part of each English teacher's classroom libraries or part of the school library. Steinberg then hosted a lunch with pizza and drinks for each featured title, open to any student who had read the text.

Each book club brought together between eight and twenty-five students from different grades. Together with their principal, students discussed character development, authors' messages, and new insights into their own lives and society as a result of reading the text. Students in interviews appreciated the book clubs because of their unique multigrade interaction. Clarence, a seventh grader, told me that he enjoyed participating in book clubs because they made him go on in books just at the moment when he wanted to quit: "I was reading *Spanking Shakespeare*. I thought the book was boring towards the beginning, but then kids at the book club were telling me other parts of the book that were interesting, and I said I wanted to get to that part so I finished the book and I liked it."

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Figure 1. The principal's office library arranged in bins by genre. Some bin labels included sports nonfiction, graphic novels, quick reads with female main characters, principal's book club, romance, and life in the city.

Grant Street students suggest that school leaders can play a vital role in their reading lives. Principals, assistant principals, literacy coaches, and librarians can consider advertising popular titles in and around the school building to spark interest and momentum for independent reading. School leaders can use bestseller lists and recommendations from students and teachers to identify titles that students may enjoy. School leaders can nurture the interest and momentum for independent reading by hosting periodic book clubs for titles that appeal to students. These actions have the power to shape a schoolwide reading culture that is more sustainable than the impact an individual class or grade can provide.

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Redefining School Literacy

Grant Street students taught me more about reading motivation than I knew before I taught them and studied their school; in fact, they helped me to redefine school literacy. The fact that students named schoolwide rituals that were important to their motivation to read shows the importance of coordinated efforts across the school instead of the sometimes temporary impact that an individual classroom can offer. Students articulated that, although the school contexts surrounding young people tend to maintain narrow conceptualizations of reading success that place a premium on standardized tests, textbooks, and worksheets, students at Grant Street understood that encouraging their motivation to read was about cultivating their *joy* of reading. The factors that students named in interviews and that I saw as patterns in observations—nonnegotiable independent reading, constant opportunities to talk about books, and the principal's involvement in their reading at school—affirmed the long-held idea that reading, and the motivation to do it, is mediated by its surrounding context.

References

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