Maximizing Effectiveness of Reading Comprehension Instruction in Diverse Classrooms

by

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Prior to her current position, Dr. Berkeley was an assistant professor at the University of Georgia and served in a diverse public school district as a special education teacher working with high-incidence populations, in both self-contained and inclusive settings, at preschool through secondary levels. Her professional efforts have aimed to improve reading outcomes for older students with learning disabilities in reading. In 2008, she received the Award for Outstanding Doctoral Level Research from the Division of Learning Disabilities in the Council for Exceptional Children for her dissertation research on reading comprehension strategy instruction for secondary students with learning disabilities. Her research has been published in numerous research journals, including *Exceptional Children, The Journal of Learning Disabilities, The Journal of Special Education, Learning Disability Quarterly,* and *Remedial and Special Education.*

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Dr. Taboada Barber's research focuses on the examination of classroom contexts that support reading engagement for monolingual and second language learners. She is specifically interested in the psychology of literacy from a cognitive and motivational perspective. She worked on the development of the modeling of reading engagement as it applies to all learners (e.g., native speakers of English and second language learners) in the late elementary grades. She is currently working on the development of frameworks within the engagement model as they apply to second language learners. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology, Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal; Journal of Literacy Research; Journal of Experimental Education; Instructional Science; Journal of*

Educational Research; and *Lectura y Vida: Latin American Journal of the International Reading Association.* She obtained her bachelor's degree in school psychology in Buenos Aires, Argentina; a master's degree in educational psychology at Temple University; and her doctoral degree from the University of Maryland. She was also a classroom teacher in bilingual schools in Buenos Aires before coming to the United States as a Fulbright scholar.

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Motivation and the Struggling Reader

Although reading skills are certainly important, it is also important to consider and address issues of motivation and engagement. Many older students who have struggled in reading throughout their schooling lack motivation to persist on difficult tasks and become disinterested in reading. It is important for teachers to be aware of this and to take steps that help to reengage students in the reading process.

Good readers generally are motivated readers. Students who are poor readers, however, read too little, rarely read for deep understanding, seldom read to expand their sense of self or identities, and have more negative self-concepts of who they are as readers (e.g., Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2000). Therefore, we cannot only focus on the cognitive dimensions of reading, but we also need to monitor how students think of themselves as readers. Why do they think that they succeed or fail when attempting to read and understand? We also need to explicitly address motivation and engagement as both are tightly connected to reading success.

HOW DO STUDENTS RESPOND TO PAST FAILURES IN READING?

When students experience repeated failures, it generally results in low perceptions of ability, negative academic self-concept, tendencies toward learned helplessness, and lower expectations for future school success (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger, & Pressley, 1990; Chapman, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Paris & Winograd, 1990). In addition, repeated failures contribute to students' beliefs that they have little control over their academic achievement (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Licht, Kistener, Ozkaragoz, Shapiro, & Clausen, 1985). As a result, these students often display low

motivation and a passive approach to learning (Smey-Richman, 1991). Students who have consistent failing experiences look at failure and success quite differently than their proficient counterparts. For example, students who have a history of academic failure often believe that they have little control over their academic achievement or they make faulty conclusions about why they succeed or fail in school (Nelson & Manset-Williamson, 2006; Stipek, 1993; Stipek & Weiz, 1981). For example, students might believe that they do well only when tasks are easy or because they were lucky. Conversely, they may believe that they failed because someone else did not help them or because they are not smart enough. These beliefs about reasons for success and failure are called *causal attributions* (see Text Box 8.1).

Faulty attributional beliefs decrease the likelihood that these students will put forth the required effort to use reading strategies, particularly older students with learning disabilities (LD). For example, students with LD often attribute failure to lack of ability rather than inconsistent effort. Students with LD also are more likely to attribute successes to external causes (e.g., task difficulty) and failures to internal causes (e.g., ability or effort) than their typically developing peers (Borkowski, Weyhing, & Carr, 1988; Tabassam & Grainger, 2002). If effort is not valued as a cause for school success, then a student is unlikely to persist on academic tasks, particularly if the task is perceived to be challenging. This is a big problem when we consider that researchers have suggested that task persistence may be at least as important as knowledge of strategies in whether students successfully understand complex expository text (Gersten et al., 2001). Furthermore, inappropriate attributions of students with LD are often engrained due to experiencing years of failure in academic tasks. There is some beginning evidence, however, that positive attributions regarding effort can motivate students to acquire and persist in using strategies (Berkeley et al., 2011; Borkowski et al., 1988). Part of this involves helping students have more accurate perceptions of their own abilities.

"Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time."

Thomas Edison, American inventor

Students' beliefs about their own abilities are referred to as *self-efficacy* (see Text Box 8.2). Reading self-efficacy consists of students' perceptions of their reading capabilities.

Text Box 8.1

DIG DEEPER

Causal Attribution Theory

The importance of attributions is incorporated from Causal Attribution Theory of Motivation and Emotions (e.g., Weiner, 1974, 1980, 1986), which maintains that "causal attributions can have a direct and important influence on a person's goals, emotions, and personal agency beliefs" (Ford, 1992, p. 164). In achievement contexts, students often attribute their successes and failures to ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck (Weiner, 1979). Research has shown that feedback that helps students make connections between effort and success enhances motivation, self-efficacy, and skills (Schunk, 1985; Schunk & Cox, 1986).

Causal attributions can be defined as one's judgments about the cause of success or failure in achievement situations (Shell et al., 1995; Weiner, 1985). Causal attribution beliefs are developmental processes (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Hiebert, Winograd, & Danner, 1984; Schunk, 1991), which is why young children commonly 1) have inaccurate perceptions of causality, 2) overestimate the contingency between their behaviors and outcomes, and 3) overstate their ability. However, most children's accuracy regarding ability beliefs increases with age and becomes more highly related to achievement (Paris & Oka, 1986; Stipek, 1993). There are some important exceptions that have particular relevance when considering older students who struggle with reading.

Young children tend to attribute success to both effort and ability. Older students, however, tend to believe that if they put in little effort, then they have high ability, and if they need to put in much effort, then they have low ability (Bandura, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Shell et al., 1995; Weiner, 1985). As a result, older children tend to attribute success to effort less than younger children (Stipek, 1993). Furthermore, the influence of social comparisons may have a larger impact on learning with older students because unlike younger students, older students do not perceive success on easy tasks as an indicator of high ability (Stipek & Tannatt, 1984). Instead, students consider many factors, but particularly how well they are performing in comparison with classmates (Bear, Minke, Griffin, & Deemer, 1998). Finally, older students are likely to attempt challenging tasks only if they believe it is something that they are already good at (Bear et al., 1998; Morrone & Pintrich, 2006).

Finally, there are differences between high achievers and low achievers. Students who are efficacious are more likely to work hard, persist, and seek help so they can complete a task and, as a result, these students tend to be high achievers (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Furthermore, compared to low achievers, high achievers tend to attribute causality for success more to internal causes (e.g., ability, effort) rather than external causes (e.g., luck, task difficulty, receiving assistance), and they have higher expectations for positive outcomes (Shell et al., 1995). It is not surprising then that these same students are more likely to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies to increase their understanding of what they read (Walker, 2003).

Text Box 8.2

DIG DEEPER

Self-Efficacy

It is well known that individuals are likely to persist and put more effort in those activities in which they believe they will be able to succeed. *Self-efficacy* is defined as an individual's beliefs in his or her capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action needed to succeed in specific tasks or situations (Bandura, 1977). Students' beliefs in their abilities to succeed in particular academic situations or tasks are important for several reasons. Self-efficacy beliefs can be a powerful predictor of achievement, such as measures of cognitive ability (Pajares & Kranzler, 1995) and reading achievement/ comprehension (e.g., Guthrie et al., 2004; Taboada Barber et al., in press). Understanding task demands is essential for developing self-efficacy beliefs and academic performance because they require consideration of the skills one possesses (Klassen, 2006).

Students with learning disabilities and English language learners do not always have a full grasp of the tasks at hand. This is especially true of literacy tasks when they are faced with multiple strategies to use without often knowing or understanding their purpose. Furthermore, they also struggle with various aspects of metacognition (Butler, 1998), which is the "thinking about thinking" that allows us to assess or evaluate the nature of the task at hand. Forming self-efficacy beliefs is a metacognitive process, requiring an awareness of the self and the task (Klassen, 2006). That is, in order to determine how good one is at a given task/activity, the latter needs to be fully understood first.

One of the important characteristics of successful individuals is that failure and adversity do not undermine their self-efficacy beliefs. This is because self-efficacy is not so much about learning how to succeed as it is about learning *how to persevere when one does not succeed.* Self-efficacy cannot provide the skills required to succeed, but it can provide the effort and persistence required to obtain those skills and use them effectively. (Pajares, 2006, p. 345)

Teachers can influence students' awareness of themselves as readers, as well as their efficacy beliefs. Given that students with LD sometimes struggle with metacognition (awareness of their own thinking and understanding), it is not surprising that these students tend to miscalibrate their self-efficacy beliefs (Klassen, 2006). In addition, teachers' anecdotal observations have indicated that English language learners (ELLs) often have low self-efficacy for reading and often a poor understanding of the purposes of many reading activities as they move through the upper elementary and middle grades. Researchers (e.g., Schunk & Miller, 2002) proposed several approaches that teachers can use to cultivate students' self-efficacy beliefs, including

- Help students set short-term goals that are achievable so they can work toward them in effective ways and become aware of their success when goals are met.

- Teach students *how* and *when* to use specific cognitive reading strategies.

- Provide opportunities to observe models completing the same or similar tasks so that students are exposed to the components of the task being performed.

- Teach students to recognize positive (self-promoting) and negative (self-defeating) thoughts and how to use positive self-talk.

- Provide specific feedback to teach students to attribute outcomes to strategic efforts. For example, instead of saying, "Good job," say, "Good job. I really liked how you tied your background knowledge to this section of text."

- Help students see where their strengths are and build on them by discussing them with individual students in relation to specific tasks.

WHY DOES MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT MATTER FOR READING SUCCESS?

Abundant empirical research shows that reading for internal reasons such as enjoyment, desire to learn about favorite topics, and for sheer interest is conducive to reading achievement and increased comprehension. Reading engagement and reading achievement interact with each other in a spiral—high achievers read more, and the more they read, the more engaged they become and the higher they achieve. Lower achievers read less, and the less they read, the more disengaged they become with reading, and the lower they achieve (Guthrie, 2008).

Disengagement from reading has its roots in early years. For example, research has shown that first-grade students who struggle with reading see themselves as less competent readers and have more negative attitudes about reading than students who read at a high level (Morgan, Fuchs, Compton, Cordray, & Fuchs, 2008). Furthermore, teachers indicated that poor readers are less likely to read widely and frequently, read about favorite topics/activities, prefer reading during social settings, or write about what they read (Morgan et al., 2008). These early patterns of motivation and attitudes toward reading become entrenched as students move through the grades, such that by the time they transition in middle school, declines in academic motivation and performance are well established (e.g., Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002). In fact, many struggling readers are demotivated, apathetic, or resistant to reading. Furthermore, these students have little interest in reading for pleasure, and they report not believing they can read well enough to understand the books used daily in class. Their beliefs in their capacity to understand through reading are severely diminished. Therefore, in addition to teaching students skills and strategies in the area of reading, it is also important to address factors related to engagement and motivation.

Engagement versus Motivation

Engagement and *motivation* are related terms and are often used interchangeably (e.g., National Research Council, 2004). However, the two should be differentiated. *Student engagement* refers to student involvement, participation, and commitment. Experts on student engagement describe it as a manifestation or an expression of motivated action. Engagement presupposes motivation. That is, when a child is engaged in a book or in a task, his or her emotions, attention, goals, and other psychological processes that are involved in motivation are present. *Engagement,* however, is more of an umbrella term that includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (e.g., Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Behavioral engagement at school has been described in the forms of listening carefully, showing effort and persisting with academic activities, and participating in class discussions (e.g., Fredericks et al., 2004). It has also been characterized as zest and enthusiasm for learning and academic tasks (e.g., Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). Because reading is inherently cognitive, some of the effort in behavioral engagement is cognitive. *Cognitive engagement* refers to intention and effort to be actively involved in the reading (e.g., by using cognitive strategies) as well as through the dedication, time investment, and commitment toward reading activities (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012).

Reading engagement, in particular, has been described as the fusion of cognitive and motivation processes that takes place as the student approaches and deals with the act of reading. Thus, students who are engaged readers are motivated to read by showing interest, involvement, attention, concentration, and perseverance, but they are cognitively invested in their reading as well. As such, they actively use cognitive strategies such as asking questions or monitoring their comprehension while reading.

Teachers are quite used to determining which students are more engaged or less engaged in their classrooms by simply observing student behaviors and actions. We are all familiar with the student whose head is down, the student whose eyes are blank or fixated somewhere else but the task at hand, or the student who initiates a task but loses focus quite soon. These students are likely to use superficial strategies, if any, while reading; easily lose track of content and key ideas; and become disinterested in reading right away. Teachers fortunately are also familiar with the opposite case—the insistent hands-up participant, the diligent task completer, and the avid reader who comes back with curious questions. Yet, we also are well aware of those students in between, those who straddle between being interested and easily losing it. These students put effort into their reading, but fail to persist if the task is too complex or the topic is too foreign or new.

Many people think that motivation is an ingrained, inherited trait, just like whether you have blue or brown eyes. You either have it or do not (or you have it for certain things and not for others). Although we are all more

intrinsically motivated for some activities than others, school reading is not an option for students. Reading during school time is most likely the only opportunity to build knowledge and learn from reading for many students, especially those who live in poverty or struggle with reading. It is this school-based reading that can launch them to reading outside of school and for their own enjoyment.

HOW CAN TEACHERS ADDRESS
MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM?

Research repeatedly has shown that supports that teachers provide during classroom instruction are strongly related to outcomes of reading achievement, motivation, and engagement (Guthrie et al., 2012). How can teachers help with student motivation in the classroom? There are some research-based practices that have shown to increase student motivation for reading and students' reading engagement, both for English monolingual students (e.g., Guthrie et al., 2004; Guthrie, Mcrae, & Klauda, 2007) and for ELLs (Taboada & Rutherford, 2011; Taboada Barber et al., in press).

Knowledge Goals

One engagement-supporting practice is the use of knowledge goals in reading tasks. This practice has also been found to significantly improve reading comprehension (e.g., Guthrie et al., 2007). *Knowledge goals* simply refer to the organization of content units around themes that explain substantial principles of a domain (Cox & Guthrie, 2002). Teachers can easily draw from these to organize reading topics around thematic units because of the explicitness of content standards. The idea is to organize content around "a limited set of powerful ideas (basic understandings and principles)" (Brophy, 1999, p. 80). Students engage in deep processing of text and comprehend more when a knowledge goal is the driving question of instruction than when the emphasis is on trivial facts or performance goals (e.g., to do better than your classmates; Benware & Deci, 1984; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Furthermore, reading to build knowledge (and not merely to learn to apply strategies or vocabulary skills) imbues reading activities with a clear purpose that is in itself motivating.

Knowledge goals are best exemplified through conceptual themes (i.e., themes that are organized around central concepts within a unit or domain; see Chapter 2 for additional benefits to this approach for students working on basic reading skills). For example, a life science unit that is organized around the topic of "Adaptations to the Environment" can prompt reading about mammals' and birds' types of adaptations (or simply one species' adaptations) so that students are reading and learning about key concepts through different topics. Having students just read about different types of birds without a unifying theme would not be an example of a conceptual theme. Similarly,

when first introducing the idea of chemistry for an introductory high school chemistry class, the teacher may choose to have students read articles and collect artifacts behind household items such as cosmetics, perfumes, medicine, household cleaners, soap, and toothpaste. The unifying theme would be to learn what is common and what is different about the chemical composition of these items. The broad concept of chemistry is at the center of all this reading and exploration. Knowledge goals for reading can be more easily set if subtopics or key concepts are preselected by teachers before embarking on a broad theme.

Abundance of Interesting Texts

An abundance of interesting texts for comprehension instruction is critical to fostering students' engagement in reading. Research indicates that students showed better comprehension of texts rated as more interesting than of texts rated as less interesting (Alexander, Jetton, & Kulikowich, 1995; Schiefele, 1999).

Abundant texts also have advantages over textbooks for some learning purposes. Limiting students to the exclusive use of the textbook seems rather coercive when the goal is to give students the opportunity to get involved and engaged in sustained reading. Textbooks tend to cover topics in abbreviated forms so as to meet the priorities of extensive curricula. Although textbooks are needed for essential content, students will be engaged in their reading and motivated to read if they get exposure and can read extensively about a topic. For example, students who are learning about Teddy Roosevelt's presidency might read books that span his presidency, his foreign policy legacy, his civic involvement, his role in fighting business monopolies, his early childhood health struggles, and his love of nature and his pivotal role in creating the national parks. The students benefit from the opportunity of developing expertise on a topic when time for extensive reading on a topic is prioritized. In addition, they have the opportunity to engage with the materials and the content in ways that are not feasible when piecemeal treatment of multiple topics and teaching to the test are exclusively emphasized.

Student Collaboration in Reading

Teacher support for student collaboration in reading activities is another important engagement-supporting practice. Several instructional programs (e.g., Guthrie et al., 2004; Scardamalia, Bereiter, & Lamon, 1994) have characterized social, knowledge-building contexts as important for reading comprehension, conceptual learning, and reading engagement, especially for students of diverse backgrounds (Au, 1998). Students themselves express positive influences for small-group interactions and discussions about texts. For instance, Juan, a sixth-grade ELL, said, "In a group it is easier. You have people to think with. What is the main idea? And that has got to be easier." Miguel, a fourth-grade student, expressed, "I like working with my buddies

in small groups when we read; we get to talk about dangerous animals and how they are at the top of the food chain. If I am reading alone all the time, it is boring. I do not get to discuss this."

The important thing for teachers to bear in mind is that if social collaboration around literacy is to be productive and engaging, then the fun of small-group collaboration cannot be dominated by the prevalence of trivial talk. Students need well-structured, goal-driven literacy-related tasks in which they are all accountable for a common (group) goal and where individual responsibilities are clear for each team member. Teacher monitoring and scaffolding is essential for effective collaboration in reading to succeed.

Autonomy Support

Autonomy support consists of enabling students to control significant elements of their reading and writing (Guthrie, 2008). Feeling in control and self-directed in their reading is a powerful motivator, especially for struggling young adolescents. Autonomy support takes different forms. Two of the most investigated by educational psychologists are 1) fostering relevance by explaining the role of the learning activity in relation to the students' personal goals or everyday lives (i.e., Why is this important to learn today? How is this relevant to your learning and/or your life? How does this reading strategy help you with your reading?) and 2) providing students with meaningful academic choices. Teachers can do multiple things to establish relevance, from providing hands-on activities for science to taking students to a local museum so they can interact with primary documents and artifacts before learning a specific topic in history. Teachers clearly conveying and discussing the importance of why they are learning what they are learning are equally important for fostering relevance. Although this may not be possible for every aspect of a mandated curricula, multiple aspects of learning can be justified or explained to students. This is especially important for adolescents who tend to question almost every aspect, including the purpose of school. This can be accomplished by posing questions to students such as

- Why do we care about activating our knowledge about text? How does it help us?
- Why is it useful to ask questions during and after reading?
- How do summaries help with our reading?
- When do you think summarizing may become especially helpful to you?
- Why do good readers monitor their comprehension?

The impact of relevance-fostering statements/questions for student awareness of the usefulness of strategies and their bearing for current and future reading cannot be underestimated.

In relation to affording student choice, it is fundamental that these choices are perceived as meaningful by the students in addition to addressing the content to be learned. Choice of books to read within subthemes of a theme, choice of strategy to apply out of a menu of teacher preselected ones, and choice of media to present a unit final project are just a few. Many studies confirmed the value of autonomy support in instruction (e.g., Perencevich, 2004; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004). Students show increased reading activity and comprehension when they perceive that instruction is relevant to their lives (Lau, 2009; Reynolds & Symons, 2001).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Many students struggle to understand what they read either due to basic reading difficulties that hinder their access to the text or a failure to strategically approach text. These students include both students with LD and ELLs. Teaching these students how to better understand text includes employing an array of instructional approaches before, during, and after reading. It also includes teaching students strategies that they can independently use when reading.

> Competency in reading is necessary but insufficient by itself to engender better academic performance. Students need to be self-regulating not only to become more successful academically, but also to be able to employ their skills flexibly long after they leave school. (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004, p.16)

Teachers can help students gain meaning from text with support and independently. They can also make instructional decisions that help to motivate and reengage struggling readers. These efforts can make all the difference for these students.