During my 19 years of teaching language arts to middle school students, I have come to respect the importance of motivation and engagement for adolescent readers. The idea of engaging students was always somewhere in my thought process while planning and delivering lessons, but it was never a deliberate part of my lesson planning. The rise of the Common Core State Standards and the resulting stress about an increase in rigor have highlighted the need to address engagement issues specifically in my practice. I found that when I focused my planning and delivery solely on the skills that needed to be learned, the students acquired that new skill, but the lesson felt flat and the joy was missing. However, when I planned lessons through the lens of engagement, I found the students were not only enjoying class more, but they were wrestling with some complex texts, improving their skills, and turning in their work at a higher rate than they had before. These opposing experiences caused me to think more deeply about my classroom practice as it related to the engagement of adolescent readers.

I began to question the use of whole-group novels as a method for teaching reading skills. I felt like I had built in the engagement and scaffolding strategies necessary to make reading these novels a successful and positive experience, but the more I learned about engagement, the more I wondered about using whole-group novels. One day, after a particularly spirited debate started and maintained by the students about a character, we had a frank conversation about the fact that we were all reading the same novel. I thought that the students were going to tell me how much they enjoyed having the shared experience. However, they told me that even though they liked the book, and the discussion was really fun, they would much rather read books that they picked themselves.
This conversation was eye opening for me. The students had been enjoying themselves, doing amazing amounts of upper level thinking, and gaining the authentic reading skills they needed to be successful. Wasn’t that engagement? Was there something more I could be doing? I started to wonder, *what is the best way to create an engaging environment for middle school readers?* These questions led me to conduct a review of the current research to find out how to improve motivation and engagement for adolescent readers.

This article looks closely at engagement and motivation with respect to middle school readers. It focuses on why engagement is important, what students really want, and which practices are likely to support engagement, and offers practical suggestions for increasing engagement.

**The Importance of Engagement**

What is engagement? Many studies of engagement also investigate reading motivation, so it is helpful to understand the subtle differences. Researchers viewed these as connected but separate concepts. Klauda and Guthrie (2015) defined both motivation and engagement by stating that “while motivation refers to goals, values and beliefs in a given area, such as reading, engagement refers to behavioral displays of effort, time, and persistence in attaining desired outcomes” (p. 240). When students are motivated to complete a task, they are also likely to become engaged in the process of learning.

Why does engagement matter? Several researchers have studied the effects of engagement and motivation on reading and found some very positive connections between the two. Guthrie et al. (2007) found that reading motivation is related to growth in reading comprehension. Klem and Connell (2014) found that engagement at a high level was related to higher test scores, higher graduation rates, and increased attendance. When they looked specifically at middle school students, they found that those with a high level of self-reported engagement were 75% more likely to achieve at high levels than average students. Retelsdorf, Köller, and Möller (2011) studied the effects of engagement on adolescent readers and found that reading for interest was the strongest predictor of reading growth. In addition, Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, and Wigfeld (2012) found that intrinsic motivation was positively associated with the use of reading strategies, amount and variety of reading, and reading competence. In addition, intrinsic motivation was also a predictor for growth in reading.
Creating an Engaging Reading Environment

According to one study, when a group of four eighth-grade teachers reformatted their language arts courses to focus solely on engagement, some interesting things happened. Ivey and Johnston (2013) reported that the state achievement test scores increased from 78% passing to 85% passing (while the state averages remained relatively static). In addition, students reported feeling more engaged, demonstrated through increased participation in discussions about the books and in conversations stemming from the books. Specifically, they developed an expanded social imagination through their increased agency and greater general knowledge because of their increased reading.

These studies suggest clear benefits for creating an engaging classroom environment. Students who are engaged show greater achievement in reading and begin to develop the lifelong reading practices connecting with the goals of many teachers’ reading instruction.

Creating an Engaging Environment

What do students want? Considering what students themselves have reported as motivating and engaging might be a wise first step toward creating an engaging reading environment. McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, and Meyer (2012), for example, surveyed 4,491 middle school students to determine the types of reading, digital or print, that they enjoyed most. The students reported that they did not enjoy academic reading as much as recreational reading in either format. The researchers hypothesized that this may be because the students perceived too much teacher control in academic texts, while they had complete control and choice in their recreational reading.

When Ivey and Broaddus (2001) surveyed more than 1,700 sixth grade students to determine what students wanted most out of their English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, they found that 63% of the students wanted to have increased time for independent reading in class. When the researchers looked more closely at this motivation to read, they found that students valued a variety of good books, including novels, magazines, and comics, and choice in selecting those books. When Ivey and Johnston (2013) completed their more recent work with engagement, they asked 71 eighth-grade students about what was important to them as readers. They found that students still valued choice and access to relevant and engaging books. However, students also reported that talking with their peers about what they have read was equally important for motivation and engagement.
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Another key idea to incorporate into an overall understanding of student motivation and engagement was repeated in studies by both Ivey and Broaddus (2001) and Guthrie et al. (2007). Both sets of researchers shared that students reported acquiring new knowledge as a strong motivator for reading. This surprised both groups of researchers and may be an important aspect of student motivation for educators to consider, for students may be motivated simply by learning something new.

There are some overarching characteristics about the types of learning environments and tasks that students report as engaging. Research in this area helps us conclude that students value reading as a means of gaining new knowledge; appreciate time to read and the freedom to choose their own texts; and having access to a variety of high quality, relevant texts covering various topics and genres.

What types of classroom environments and practices are likely to engage readers? Many studies have been conducted to determine characteristics related to reading engagement. In general, the researchers found the factors for engagement include curiosity, choice, control, self-efficacy, involvement, collaboration, conversation, and access to relevant texts (Guthrie et al., 2007; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2015; Schiefele et al., 2012).

Studies also offer a detailed look at engaging classroom practices. For example, a recent year-long study completed by Parsons, Mallory, Parsons, and Burrowbridge (2015) found that open-ended or moderately open-ended activities, in addition to authentic, collaborative tasks allowing for student choice, were most likely to contribute to engagement. Overall, their research found that the most engaging tasks were collaborative and allowed for appropriate academic and behavioral support. Klem and Connell (2014) also looked at the connection between classroom practices and engagement and found that students who felt they had highly supportive teachers were three times more likely to be engaged. The researchers defined support as the feeling that teachers and other adults in the school cared for them, allowed them to make their own decisions, and assigned relevant work. They also found that students felt nurtured and became increasingly engaged when teachers created structured environments with clear expectations.

Common characteristics of engaging reading practices emerge from these studies. First, when students choose texts that pique their interest, engagement will likely increase. Second, collaboration in the form of activities
or conversations appears to enhance engagement. Finally, an appropriate amount of teacher support may lead to greater self-efficacy, or perceived ability to succeed, which can lead to more engagement.

What types of classroom environments and practices are NOT likely to engage readers? Although it is important to understand the types of practices likely to contribute to engagement in adolescents, it is equally important to understand the types of practices which might result in little to no engagement. Parsons et al. (2015), for example, found that these activities included those that were too difficult, relied on worksheets, were whole-class activities, were not open-ended, or required little to no involvement. In general, when the complexity of the activity was not matched with the child, the activity was not likely to be engaging. Similarly, Ivey and Broaddus (2000) suggested that middle school students will be less engaged when conditions include a one-size fits all curriculum, poor use of class time, insufficient materials for instruction, or teachers keeping too much control. McKenna et al. (2012) echoed the negative effects on engagement from too much teacher control when they discovered that students viewed both academic digital and print reading much more negatively than recreational digital or print reading.

The type of motivation is another important idea to consider when thinking about non-engaging practices. Schiefele et al. (2012) found that extrinsic motivation had a negative effect, or no effect at all, on the growth of reading skills. These results seem to suggest that teachers may want to look at external motivations for reading with caution.

When looking at tasks least likely to contribute to engagement, the research again reveals commonalities. Tasks not matched to a student’s unique ability, those too difficult or confusing, are not likely to be engaging.

**Classroom Implications**

The research reviewed here helped me form an answer to my initial question, *What is the best way to create an engaging environment for middle school readers?* As a result of the research review, I have identified four classroom practices that should increase student engagement. In order to create an engaging reading environment, I suggest that teachers create a place for independent reading of texts chosen by students, create a high quality classroom library, focus on the individual needs of each student, and be aware of engaging and non-engaging practices.
Create a place for independent reading of texts chosen by students. Much of the research points to the need for rethinking the curriculum to create instruction based on the independent reading of self-chosen texts. We might not be able to completely revamp our curricula like the teachers who worked with Ivey and Johnston. However, we would do well to bring independent reading of self-chosen texts to the forefront of our instruction in whatever form is possible within our unique teaching situations (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Create a high quality classroom library. The research points out that ready access to relevant and engaging texts is a factor in student engagement. Working to create a library that includes many different types of text and reflects various student interests will help ensure that students are able to choose engaging texts. Although funding a classroom library is difficult, teachers can use budget money, sponsor book fairs, apply for grants, and encourage used book donations to increase their classroom libraries (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Focus on the individual needs of each student. Students need the appropriate amount of academic and behavioral support. They also need to feel cared for, respected, and free to make their own decisions. The research suggests that creating this type of student centered learning environment may result in higher test scores, attendance, and engagement (Klem & Connell, 2014; Parsons et al., 2015).

Be aware of engaging and non-engaging practices. When planning instruction, remember that open-ended, collaborative, authentic activities that allow for some student control are more likely to be engaging. Conversely, activities not matched to the student’s ability, have a one-size fits all approach, have too much teacher control, or do not require involvement are not likely to be engaging. Taking a bit of time as we construct lessons to evaluate the activities we plan will help ensure engagement (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000; Parsons et al., 2015).

Although the unique constraints placed on each teaching situation may not allow teachers to incorporate each of these practices, a variety of practical suggestions have been offered. Teachers can choose the practices that work for their unique situations and begin using them in their classrooms to increase engagement.
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**Conclusion**

Reading engagement has positive effects on reading achievement. Students are more engaged when they can choose what they read and have access to a variety of interesting texts. In addition, teachers support student engagement when they allow for student collaboration and provide the right amount of support.

This study brings current research together so that teachers can see what practices work, what practices do not work, and what we can do in our own classrooms to increase student reading engagement. Even if the curriculum can not be completely overhauled, changes can be implemented to increase the levels of student achievement in the classroom.

**References**


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