

## **Engaging Students in Reading: Implications for Research and Practice**

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This issue of *Educational Psychology Review* represents a qualitatively different type of compilation. It consists of papers by leading researchers whose work over the years has focused on questions related to student interest and engagement. In this issue, each of these authors overviews their own findings and the theories and research on which they draw, to discuss the implications of their research for practice and future research.

Student interest and engagement have consistently been found to be associated with or to influence various aspects of literacy, including: (a) situational interest, or the likelihood that students' interest for text can be triggered (Hidi and Baird, 1986; Hidi and Berndorff, 1998), (b) student attention to important content (Garner *et al.*, 1989; Wade, 1992; Wade *et al.*, 1999), (c) student memory for concrete text (Sadoski *et al.*, 2000), (d) student perceptions of text coherence (Schraw, 1998), (e) student understanding (Beck and McKeown, 1988), (f) students' background knowledge (Alexander, 1997; Alexander and Jetton, 1996), (g) students' depth of processing (Schiefele and Krapp, 1996), (h) individual differences in comprehension (Renninger *et al.*, in press), and (i) the design of learning environments that engage readers (Guthrie and Cox, 1998).

However, none of these findings answer all of the questions educators may have about student interest and engagement. For example, what should teachers do if students pay attention to information in a text that they consider interesting when it differs from that which is important to an assigned task? How can teachers engage students in learning the core curricula, when they differ so greatly in their individual interests? How can teachers help

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students expand their individual interests? How can teachers and text authors make important information interesting?

There is a gap between what research can address and its application to teaching practice. All fields of inquiry are subject to this gap because research questions typically focus on investigation and explanation rather than applicability (see discussions in Cahan and White, 1992; Cole, 1996; Sigel and Renninger, 1998). For example, in order to address the question about students' attention to information for which they have an interest rather than information that is important, the researcher usually describes general patterns that emerge in a group of students' behaviors specific to both interest and importance in working with a text. Once this information is reduced and analyzed, the researcher has almost always generated more questions than the first effort at description raised. This process of describing and further describing phenomena defines the research process.

The application of research to classroom use is also constrained by the tools that research is understood to require, such as sampling; the need for research to build on previous research, which narrows the nature of questions posed, methodology, and so on. Even when intervention studies in classrooms are undertaken, their design and the unique contexts in which the studies are carried out constrain their generalizability. They are by definition situated in particular classroom(s).

The tension between the emphasis of research practice on explanation and teaching interest for application is not new, as Cahan and White (1992) point out. It dates back to the 19th century and accounts for divisions that have come to characterize the academy (psychology versus education departments, foundations courses in educational psychology versus methods courses) and the way in which research and practice are each undertaken. Ideally, both researchers and practitioners are concerned with explanation and application—or to put it another way, theory, and practice. For the educator without a theoretical or research background, a researcher's attention to explanation can be an obstacle to having any idea about how to use this information in the classroom (how to translate the explanation into practice). For the researcher with or without classroom experience, on the other hand, attention to application is somewhat inconsistent with standard research practice. For researchers, findings only suggest the possibility of something being the case.

Once researchers have been working with a set of questions over time, however, it is possible for them to identify continuities of effects that emerge across their studies. Such continuities can provide the basis for translating findings to practice. Because this type of finding has been observed across settings, it is likely that it can be reliably predicted.

The researchers who have contributed to this volume describe the research questions on which they have focused, the continuities they have observed, and the implications of these for practice and further research. They use cases or rich descriptions to illustrate the application of their points to teaching practice. Together, the papers in this volume suggest that it is possible to identify texts, design classrooms, develop curricula, and organize instruction that will engage student interest. No grand theory is offered. Rather, the papers are intended to begin a conversation about the possibilities for engaging students in reading, based on what researchers presently know.

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