Gender and Grade Differences in Motivation to Read

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With the presentation of new standards for assessment by the IRA/NCTE Joint Task Force on Assessment (1994), the language arts assessment picture began to change more than it had in many previous decades. The joint task force declared that “Regardless of the source or motivation for any particular assessment, states, school districts, schools and teachers must demonstrate how these assessment practices benefit and do not harm individual students” (p. 14). These new joint standards developed by IRA and NCTE also made clear that the consequences of assessment must be taken into consideration. “The consequences of an assessment procedure are the first, and most important, consideration in establishing the validity of the assessment” (p. 25). This brought into question much of what had been done under the guise of assessment and opened the door to a new era.

This new era will ostensibly focus as much on the emotional correlates of schooling as this century has stressed the cognitive gains. In the twenty-first century, the emotional correlates of all aspects of schooling, including assessment, in the language arts will surely be scrutinized. This paper is an attempt to study one of the most important correlates, motivation to read.

Review of Literature

In 1995, The Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS) was presented to assess four different perceptions by students (Henk & Melnick, 1995). The Progress Scale showed how students perceived the progress they were making in reading. The Observational Comparison Scale assessed students’ perceptions as to progress in comparison with their peers. The Social Feedback Scale gave children’s perceptions of the feedback related to reading they were receiving from teachers, parents, peers, etc. The Physiological States Scale was an assessment of students’ feelings during different reading situations such as oral reading. Like the earlier Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990), the Reader Self-Perception Scale had an excellent research base developed around the psychological construct of reader self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1982).

Then the Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling & Mazzoni, 1996) elicited, among other things, information about the value students placed on reading activities by focusing on the frequency of such tasks. This was translated to a Value Scale. Another part of this new instrument, a Self-Concept Scale, sought quantifiable information about students’ self-perceived competence in reading. Gambrell et al. (1996) described in detail the development and field testing of the instrument. This included construct validity, factor analyses, reliability of subscales, and pre- and post-test reliability.

These authors avoided the problems inherent in much of the motivational research prior to Gambrell et al. by designing the instrument to be read aloud by the examiner.
Reading often confounds the results so that better readers appear more motivated. The two scales, Self-Concept and Value, could be administered to a large group at one time. This instrument added to the repertoire of affective measurements for the 1990's.

The Reader Self-Perception Scale was a beginning attempt to assess self-concept as a reader. While meeting a genuine need in the assessment arena, there seemed to be a need for starting earlier. The RSPS started with norms for grade four. The Motivation to Read Profile began earlier, at second grade level, and also addressed the problem of very poor reading by having the items read orally twice. Thus the instrument designed for assessment at an earlier grade was used for this study.

Cloer and Pearman (1993) analyzed gender differences and found that middle-grade girls’ attitudes toward recreational reading did not differ significantly from primary girls. Such was not the case for boys. Boys’ attitudes toward recreational and academic reading deteriorated significantly by the fourth grade. While girls’ attitudes toward academic reading did deteriorate significantly by fourth grade, they didn’t appear to see recreational reading as the same endeavor.

Recent analyses of the data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (Williams, P.L., Reese, C.M., Campbell, J.R., Mazzeo, J., & Phillips, G.W., 1994) revealed that consistent with results from past assessments, "the 1994 assessment showed that across all three grades, a significantly higher percentage of female students than male students were at or above each of the three achievement levels" (p.20).

Another recent national study analyzed by Campbell, Kapinus, and Beatty (1995) pointed to the need for students to value diverse reading experiences. These 1,136 fourth graders who were representative of fourth grade students across the country did not read information books to the extent they read storybooks and magazines. Diversity in reading experiences was related to reading comprehension achievement as measured on the main reading assessments. Students who read diversely had higher average proficiency than peers with less diverse reading experiences. In this large research endeavor, more students in the top-third schools in achievement reported reading information books than in the lower-third schools. Thus, the value placed on books as a source of information was very important. Females in the study were significantly more likely to say they read books on their own time than were males.

The readers will notice that the studies cited utilize middle grades. The researchers contend that the affective correlates to language arts are invoked earlier than fourth grade. While studies have looked at differences between elementary and middle school students, these differences may start at an even earlier grade. There is obviously a need for more understanding about the importance held by emotion, motivation to read diversely, and value assigned to reading in explaining the development of life-long readers. This current study is an attempt to add some insight about these variables.

**Method**

The current study attempted to determine if there were significant gender and grade differences in motivation to read, at grades two and four, as measured by the Motivation
to Read Profile (Gambrell et al., 1996). The scales of Self-Concept, Value, and Total were compared for all boys versus all girls in grades two and four respectively. There were also comparisons made for all second graders (boys and girls) versus all fourth graders (boys and girls) in addition to the gender analyses for second and fourth grades. The research question was whether or not significant grade and gender differences existed in motivation to read for second and fourth graders in public schools supplying the sample subjects.

The subjects for the study were 309 pupils from 14 classrooms in grades two and four. Three different public elementary schools from upper South Carolina participated. There were 52 second grade boys and 61 second grade girls from six classrooms. There were 103 fourth grade boys and 93 fourth grade girls from eight classrooms in the three schools. The participating teachers administered the Self-Concept and Value Scales of the Motivation to Read Profile.

Procedure

Six teachers from second grade and eight teachers from fourth grade administered the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP) by reading aloud the directions and each item twice. The students marked each item on the second reading by the teacher. The researchers did all the re-coding and scoring of the instrument.

The MRP has 20 items based on a four-point scale. Some items are listed positively and some are listed negatively. The researchers recoded the items and totaled the scores of each subject. The total number of possible points for both scales combined was 80. The Self-Concept scale and Value scale had 10 items each with a total possible score of 40. The Self-Concept and Value scales were combined to give the Total score.

T-tests for independent means were used to analyze mean differences related to gender and grade.

Results

Table 1 gives the means for the three scales, Self-Concept, Value, and Total, included in the MRP of the males and females in grade two. T-tests for independent means showed that on all three scales the girls, even at this very early stage in the emergence of literacy, scored significantly higher.

Table 1

Mean Gender Differences, Grade 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys (X)</th>
<th>Girls (Y)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t=</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 52</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>30.98</td>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>33.43</td>
<td>2.37*</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 gives the means for the three scales included in the MRP of the males and females in grade four. T-tests for independent means revealed a statistically significant difference in the value placed on reading in favor of the females.

**Table 2**

**Mean Gender Differences, Grade 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys (X)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Girls (Y)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t=</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 103</td>
<td>30.53</td>
<td>N = 93</td>
<td>31.70</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>30.87</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>32.33</td>
<td>2.10*</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>31.75</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63.25</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p = .02

**Table 3**

**Grade Differences in Motivation to Read, Grades 2 and 4**

Table 3 gives the means for the three scales included in the MRP of all second graders versus all fourth graders. T-tests for mean differences in relation to grades two and four showed that on all three scales of the MRP the fourth graders scored significantly lower as a group than the second graders.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t=</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 113</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 196</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>32.30</td>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>30.77</td>
<td>2.44*</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>33.50</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>31.57</td>
<td>3.16**</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65.80</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62.33</td>
<td>3.26**</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p = .001  
** p< .001

**Discussion**

These data showed that second grade boys scored significantly different and lower than second grade girls on both sub-scales of Self-Concept and Value. These data also showed that fourth grade boys scored significantly different and lower than fourth grade girls on the sub-scale of Value. These data further showed that the fourth graders in the study scored significantly different and lower than all second graders in the study on both self-concept as readers and value placed on reading. This study presents data that call for investigations as to why general reading motivation drops from grade two to grade four. What are the correlates to this statistically significant drop? Why a significant drop at such an early age? Furthermore, if motivation to read is so low this early (second grade) for boys, as is attitude toward recreational and academic reading (Cloer & Pearman, 1993), and self-concept as readers (Cloer & Ross, 1997), then early awareness as to correlates and some type of action may be in order to try to address this phenomenon.

All parties involved with literacy of our nation’s children may need to recognize, address, and when necessary, change some of the activities that children encounter in school. Some current activities may need to be replaced with more mind-expanding, emotionally satisfying, and engagingly applicable activities that involve a myriad of contexts where real reading and writing of real texts for real reasons is the norm.

The main reason anyone chooses to read, whether child, adolescent, or adult, is primarily an emotional response (Smith, 1988). Therefore, if we truly want to develop effective language arts instruction for children and adolescents, then we might need to be more cognizant of and attentive to the developing emotions of our students. We might need to adjust our behavior and start working as if we understand that every teaching-learning episode has both a cognitive and an affective dimension. Students need to see purpose in what they do, and there must be enough enjoyment in the whole process to help children experience genuine fulfillment.
Conclusions

If what we do in language arts in the primary grades is related to the self-concepts of students as readers, and to the value students place on reading, we need to investigate further our methods and materials to ascertain which are positive correlates, and which are not. In order to move forward with this line of research, we will hypothesize some pedagogical areas and ways instruction might change to realize possible remedies. But, to get started in the exploration of attitudinal correlates, we must have assessment instruments that measure what we deem important.

The new affective reading instruments mentioned in this article, the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990), the Reader Self-Perception Scale (Henk & Melnick, 1995), and the Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell et al., 1996), have definite advantages over the reading achievement instruments now being used. Children's reading achievement results from state-mandated tests for accountability may not be affecting instruction and/or modifying teacher and student behavior positively in many states. So we might need to get serious about using instruments that measure what we see as essential to the language arts curriculum.

Listed below are just a few of the possible correlates and ways instruction might change after viewing data from these affective instruments. Teachers could use the results of these affective tests to:

1. Modify classroom oral reading practices.

2. Revise grouping techniques.

3. Assign reading material that is not too difficult.

4. Model how to give constructive feedback about reading to all students in the class and to all parents.

5. Make children more physically and mentally comfortable during the act of reading.


7. Give opportunities to read in situations that are non-threatening: echo reading, repeated reading, choral reading, multiple-response reading, etc.

8. Model the enjoyment, appreciation, relaxation, and gratification that can be gained from reading.

9. Solicit more positive reinforcement from other students, parents, and other teachers.

10. Share enthusiasm with a particular student.

11. Strive to make reading consistently pleasurable.
12. Provide students with a rich array of engaging literature.


14. Use some predictable reading material that allows for frequent use of praise.

15. Monitor body language closely to make sure positive messages are sent about reading performance.

16. Intentionally and respectfully make each child feel valuable, capable, and responsible.

Negative emotional reactions to language arts instruction can and do result in school problems that can exacerbate and even explode, especially among boys. Our nation can ill afford to lose these students to drugs, juvenile gangs, or to unfulfilled lives that never experience good literature, laugh at a short story, or taste the words of a flavor-filled poem. If we don’t do more to affectively help our students savor the flavor of language arts instruction, much of the attempted cognitive cultivation of young minds might turn potential flower gardens into dying weed beds.
References


