

Motivating Texts, Motivating Contexts, Motivating Adolescents: An Examination of the Role of Motivation in Adolescent Literacy Practices and Development

by Elizabeth Birr Moje

This paper contains brief synopsis of research findings that highlight the complex role of motivation in adolescent literacy practice and skill development. Specifically, it discusses the role that different contexts (such as the academic content areas of middle and high school settings) and texts (such as those demanded by the academic content areas) play in motivating youth to persist even in the face of reading and writing challenges.

This paper is not intended to serve as a full research review or report. However, it will offer both findings from previous studies and data from on-going studies to exemplify patterns of literate motivation and development in both successful and struggling adolescent readers and writers. From data collected with both successful and struggling students, it is demonstrated that motivation and interest are important challenges to consider for a range of readers and writers.

The data discussed here come from two databases, including two on-going studies: one ethnographic study of urban youths' literacy practices in and out of school (in its eighth year) and one mixed methods study of urban youths' literacy motivations, practices, and skills across multiple contexts (in its second year). Approximately 71% of the youth in the large-scale study identify as Latino/a or Hispanic, 17% of the youth identify as Black or African American, 6% as White, and the remaining 6% fall into other ethnic and racial identity groups. Multiple data sources include surveys, reading diagnostics, school achievement data (grades and standardized test scores) semi-structured interviews, reading process interviews, ethnographic interviews and observations, student written artifacts, and experimental tasks.

Exploring the Role of Motivation in Adolescent Literacy Development

Literacy practice, and comprehension, in particular, occur at the intersection of a text, a reader, and a context, with particular activities in particular contexts being a

critical part of the literacy equation (see Figure 1). A number of important features contribute to a given reader making sense of a particular text in a particular context.

proficiency with sophisticated texts, even among youth identified as "struggling" in school. Alvermann (2001), for example, illustrated the *Pokemon* proficiencies of

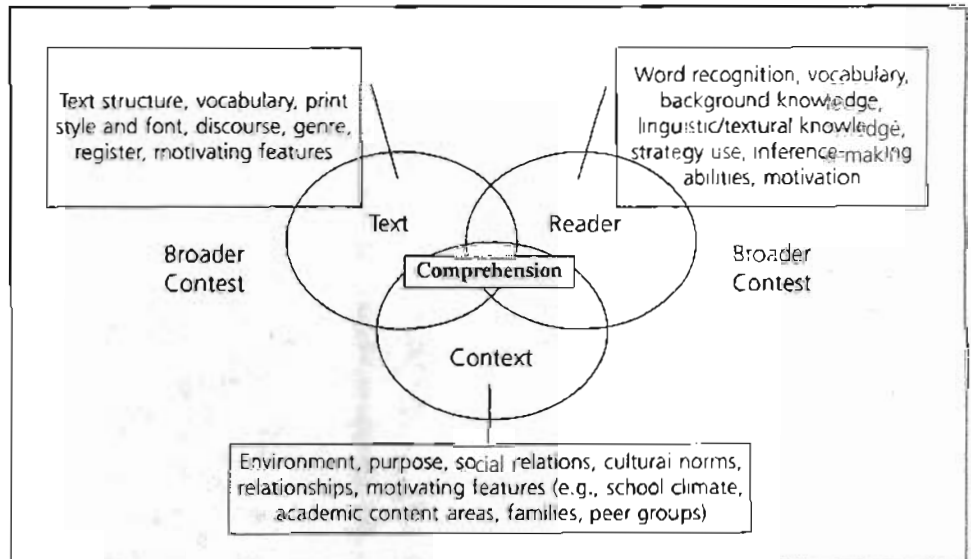


Figure 1. Literacy model

These features can motivate and demotivate a reader to persist in the face of reading challenges. And these features change dramatically as children become adolescents and move through the grades from primary to secondary school. In secondary schools, classroom contexts are largely defined as *content areas*, with specific types of texts and with expectations – often unspoken expectations – for the kinds of texts to be read and written. It is important to account for how young people perceive such texts and contexts. It is also critical to examine the contexts and texts that seem to motivate youth to persist, even in the face of linguistic and cognitive challenges.

For example, although data from the National Assessment of Education Progress suggest that the majority of adolescents from fourth-twelfth grades are not proficient in the literacy skills necessary for high levels of school and social achievement, a number of adolescent literacy researchers who have studied youth engaged in literacy outside of school have observed what appear to be high levels of

one young man who was deemed a struggling reader. The young man combined print texts with other icons, images, numbers, and oral language to construct sophisticated understandings of complex instructions for playing *Pokemon*; his teacher was amazed to learn that he could follow and teach the rules to others, an insight that changed the teacher's assumptions about his literacy potential.

Such studies are just beginning to document the extent of adolescent's out-of-school literacy skills and motivations. Nevertheless, these studies suggest that some texts and contexts may be more motivating, and thus more engaging to youth than others. These studies also highlight the complexity of literacy activities youth engage in outside of school, demonstrating that many young people are able to make meaning across a variety of symbol systems, including conventional print texts, such as those represented on the Internet (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003), in Instant Messenger (Lewis & Fabos, 2005), or in video and computer games (Leander & Lowvorn, in press; Mahiri, 1994).

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O'Brien (1998), in particular, has examined the struggling reader and writer's engagement with digital media through his analysis of secondary school students in a digital literacy lab for struggling readers. O'Brien demonstrated that the youth—many of whom were identified as "low literate" and "unmotivated," came to life when engaged in constructing essays using digital forms that allowed them to integrate print, oral language, and, especially, musical forms into one presentation. Several other adolescent literacy researchers demonstrated similar findings in recent school-based studies in which teachers reshaped the learning contexts and offered multiple texts for struggling readers and writers (Dressman *et al.*, in press).

Other researchers (Camitta, 1990; Ingalls, 2005; Knobel & Lankshear, 2001; Moje, 2000; Morrill, 2000) have documented that youth can produce complex texts in and out of school, including in some highly unusual, and even unsanctioned, social settings. In each case, researchers have noted that the youth studied appeared to be highly motivated to engage in and complete the activities under study, even when the literacy activities appeared to challenge some of their print skills (Moje, 2000; Moje, Dillon & O'Brien, 2000).

Taken together, these studies suggest that something about contexts and texts can motivate or de-motivate adolescent readers and writers. It is crucial that the field better understand the unique aspects of motivation for adolescent readers and writers so that we might reshape contexts and either rewrite or scaffold the texts of the content areas to better support adolescent engagement in reading and writing.

Motivation and Motivated Literacy

What, exactly, is motivation? A full review of the construct is beyond the scope of this brief paper. However, one take on motivation is that it is framed by the self-concepts, values, interests, and expectations for success that people attach to particular activities in particular contexts (Eccles *et al.*, 1983). Drawing on work associated with decision-making, achievement, efficacy, and attribution theory, Eccles' model links behavioral choices to expectancies for success and

subjective task values, and specifies the relation of these two psychological constructs to cultural norms, experiences in various contexts, aptitudes, and a set of personal beliefs and attitudes.

Inherent in this model is the idea that participation in any specific activity is influenced not only by the values and expectations associated with that activity, but also by the expectations and values associated with other activities. To the extent that a specific activity or text (e.g., a popular novel) has higher value than another activity or text (e.g., a school science textbook), the popular novel will be preferred even if the biology textbook could result in some positive value to the individual. To the extent that some activities take on higher value than academic achievement, one can expect

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these activities to divert adolescents' energies away from their academic studies, which may lead to declining academic achievement. In addition, given research that demonstrates the benefits accrued to readers from extensive reading of particular types (Stanovich, 1986; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Anderson, Fielding, & Wilson, 1988), it can be argued that the less motivated one is to read a given type of text, the less practice one will have with reading such texts, and the lower one's reading achievement will be in relation to such texts.

The construct of "motivated literacy" (McCaslin, 1990), then, is a construct worth studying in more depth to ascertain whether adolescents' motivations to engage in particular activities have an influence on their abilities to engage in basic, proficient, and advanced levels of literacy skill. Does the motivation to obtain

a particular type of information shape the adolescents' ability to make sense of texts? Do the literacy skills used in motivated practices and activities of adolescents' everyday lives transfer to school contexts in which academic literacy skills are required? If not, why not? Is lack of transfer a matter of motivation? Are everyday literacy skills cognitively different from those required in academic learning settings? Or do the different social and cultural arrangements of home, community, peer social network, and school constrain the transfer of literacy skills from one context to another?

The work of Patricia Alexander (2003) is central to understanding the importance of motivation in literate development. Alexander profiled the stages of development of adolescent readers engaged in reading in the content-area domains in her research on the intersections among learner interest, subject-matter knowledge, and strategic processing. She described adolescent literacy (reading) development as a multi-stage and recursive process in which youth move back and forth among different levels and types of reading depending on context, text, and their own background experiences and knowledge. These dynamic stages include "acclimation," "competence," and "proficiency/expertise." The types of developing readers Alexander (2003) has profiled to date include *highly competent readers*, *seriously challenged readers*, *effortful processors*, and *knowledge reliant readers*.

Alexander describes highly competent readers as possessing "principled linguistic knowledge," as well as "a sufficient body of prior knowledge relevant to the topic or the domain." Such readers also possess both "surface-level and deep-processing reading strategies," according to Alexander. Most important, Alexander argues that "highly competent readers are interested in the domain or the topic about which they are reading" and that they "engage in goal-directed behavior." Despite this focus on a trajectory or profile of types of readers, however, it is important to note that any given individual can be highly competent in one domain, an effortful processor in another, and seriously challenged in yet another domain. It is less likely that highly competent readers will experience multiple contexts in which they find themselves seriously challenged, because highly competent readers typically

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know strategies for dealing with the challenges posed by demanding texts or contexts. Readers with linguistic processing deficits can also learn strategies to compensate for those deficits; if, however, contexts and texts do not motivate readers to compensate, then they will be unlikely to employ the strategies necessary to compensate

Consider, for example, the contrasts in text and context that appear to motivate—and de-motivate—the 16-year-old Latina, Yolanda (a pseudonym) featured in these excerpts from an ethnographic interview conducted while in the school cafeteria with a group of young women:

E: Yolanda just said that she bought the most, what word did you use, interesting? An interesting book. She bought it on Saturday and she finished reading it on...?

Y: Tuesday.

E: Tell us about the book.

[Yolanda gives a lengthy description of the book.]

E: The title is in Spanish, so are the characters Latino?

Y: Yeah.

E: Do you know are they Mexican, are they Puerto Rican, are they Dominican? You don't know. They don't identify that, you just know they're Latino. Where do they live? They don't tell that either? Like, they don't say this is in New York or Detroit or ...?

Y: That's why it's so interesting. . . . because it doesn't give you, like, it's not going, "Aha!" they let you use your imagination. . . . And it has words in Spanish sooo big like, I go, "Mom, what is this? And she explains. Okay, that's cool

I: So, you say you like this book. What about school books, what about this book [interviewer points to a science textbook lying on the table next to Yolanda]?

Y: School books are really boring. They don't make sense. Like the biology book.

You read the whole section and you're like, okay, you gotta read it four times just to understand it a little bit. It's confusing.

I: You can imagine everything and just fill in the blanks when you read those novels. But why can't you imagine what's going on when you're reading a school text.

Y: . . . It's just written the way adults read it . . . And they have the knowledge to do that . . . And they write it in their own little language. Like you said, there's different ways to write a sentence. . . . Well, they write it in their language that only them can understand because they graduated they have a diploma and everything. And we don't get that. The words are big that you're like, "Okay." You gotta go look it up. . . . You read the word and you try to translate it in Spanish . . . And you try to translate it and you can't. . . . It's like, oh, it gives you a head ache . . . So it gets you brain dead."

As this brief excerpt illustrates, Yolanda's motivation to read was not merely an artifact of her individual sense of self. Yolanda was motivated to read a text suggested by her mother, who scaffolded Yolanda's struggle with difficult words, actually making Yolanda feel powerful about her reading ability. In fact, the text may have even served to support Yolanda's relationship with her mother, even as Yolanda worked toward independence as a young adult, by providing an opportunity for Yolanda to make use of her mother's expertise. Moreover, the text, written in Spanish, allowed Yolanda to improve her Spanish literacy and maintain a cultural identity that was important to her (documented over eight years of ethnographic research with Yolanda), a first generation immigrant to the United States, even as she became more and more integrated into U.S. society and more and more fluent in English. In addition, Yolanda was motivated by a text that did not reveal every detail of the characters and plot, but allowed her to use her imagination.

By contrast, the biology textbook to which the interviewer directed Yolanda's attention did not provide the same motivating features. The text did not inspire Yolanda's imagination; in fact, it confused

her. The "big words" of the biology text did not motivate Yolanda in the same way that the "big Spanish words" of her pleasure-reading text did. What's more, the social contexts in which Yolanda read the biology text did not provide motivational supports, as she believed her only strategic reading option was to "look up" the many difficult terms she encountered in the biology reading, thus reducing her fluency and apparently impairing her comprehension.

Moreover, the text itself de-motivated Yolanda as major concepts and terms were not communicated in a way that scaffolded Yolanda's existing conceptual and linguistic knowledge. In fact, children as early as third grade start to encounter challenging and abstract content area texts (Ciechanowski, 2005) due to the high degree of specification of content area texts, layered with mass market textbook publishers' attempts to write disciplinary textbooks that speak to a range of student abilities and backgrounds. Indeed, analyses of texts our research team is using as part of a large-scale reading diagnostic support this claim, suggesting that the content area texts youth are confronting are *inconsiderate* (Armbruster & Anderson, 1985; Anderson & Armbruster, 1984) and may interfere with their comprehension (Moje, 2006)

Furthermore, the texts that youth are required to read in one middle-school content classroom are different from those required in another content classroom, and these different types of texts will appeal to and motivate readers in different ways. For example, descriptive data from our ongoing adolescent literacy development study indicate that students evaluated their textbooks differently, depending on grade level and content area. Eighth-grade students in the sample, for example, repeatedly evaluated their own ability to read their mathematics textbook higher than they did their abilities in any other of their content area texts. These same students also rated their liking of their mathematics textbook as higher than their liking of textbooks in science, English, and social studies, with science textbooks as their lowest rated subject area text. It is interesting to note that these students also reported that they saw their mathematics textbook as having more utility and importance value than their other textbooks, with science textbooks rated as least useful and English textbooks as least

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important, suggesting that whether the students see a text as useful in their learning will shape their motivation to read it.

It is also important to note that an analysis of the texts that youth choose to read outside of school reveal four important themes that suggest striking differences between in-school and out-of-school text reading motivations. Texts youth choose to read out of school (a) represent aspects that feel *real* to the youth in terms of age, geography, and ethnicity/race of the protagonists, (b) impart life lessons (e.g., resilience/survival, inspiration), (c) offer utility/practical knowledge, and (d) allow youth to explore relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners. Such themes are not likely to be routinely reflected in content area texts, although it seems clear that the utility value of texts has a strong impact on these young people's motivations to read in or out of school.

Even this brief interview excerpt and cursory report of survey data suggest that a students like Yolanda need support in reading their classroom texts. Yolanda, for example, is clearly motivated to try to make sense of her classroom texts, but the text wears her down. Thus, her classroom content teachers might be advised to (a) conduct a text analysis before teaching, to predict the aspects of text that will frustrate their adolescent readers, (b) provide organizers and conceptual scaffolds that will support students in making sense of texts as they read, and (c) explain words and concepts as students ask, so as not to impair fluency. One can imagine a well-intentioned teacher admonishing Yolanda to "look it up" when questioned about word meanings, as a way of teaching independent reading skills, not recognizing that stopping frequently to look up words can actually interfere with comprehension. Teachers can learn from the model provided by Yolanda's mother that offering immediate linguistic and semantic support can not only support comprehension but also build relationships that motivate struggling readers.

The most important point to take away from this brief, but representative data exemplar is that motivation for reading was not something that Yolanda either possessed or did not possess. Motivation was less a static and singular feature of Yolanda as an individual, and more a feature of the texts and contexts she

experienced in and out of school. In addition, based on her experiences with this one science text, it is likely that her expectancy for future success with science texts, and her sense of usefulness and importance of science texts in her life will be diminished. Thus, as Yolanda enters new science contexts, she will bring with her a history of participation with science texts, a history that will suggest a lack of motivation for reading science. In sum, neither the texts nor the contexts in which Yolanda read her biology book encouraged motivated science text reading.

Yolanda, however, was an engaged

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and committed student, who, when necessary, would engage in the "effortful processing" (Alexander, 2003) necessary to make sense of text. Moreover, Yolanda demonstrated no learning disabilities; she did not struggle with basic processing in either language, although she did struggle with terminology in English and her reading comprehension generally fell in the basic level, depending on the prior knowledge demands of the text. What then, must the experience of reading such texts in such contexts be like for students who do struggle with basic processing and with learning disabilities? More important, can we assume that if students' basic processing challenges were overcome, then they would necessarily be motivated readers across multiple contexts and texts?

Conclusions and Implications: Features of Motivating Contexts and Texts for Motivating Adolescents to Read and Write

A number of studies of literacy learning and use outside of school illustrate that individuals and groups often

characterized as lacking in literacy abilities are capable readers and writers in contexts that value their skills and allow them to draw on other text forms to mediate their reading and writing with print. However, many adolescent literacy scholars have also raised questions about whether access to multiple forms of representation in unique contexts distracts struggling print readers and writers from learning conventional print literacy skills, and from learning to navigate the challenges posed by abstract, upper-level content area texts (Dressman, *et al.*, in press). Thus, even as researchers seek ways to reshape the contexts and make texts more approachable, we must also develop interventions in secondary school teaching practices that can support teachers in scaffolding adolescent students' reading of the demanding texts of the content areas. This challenge is compounded by the many different types of adolescent readers one might encounter in secondary school classrooms, from youth who cannot decode but have high levels of knowledge, to youth who can decode and read with fluency, but fail to comprehend the challenging texts of different content classrooms.

In particular, if readers are challenged by basic linguistic processing demands of texts, then it is likely that they have not had the same opportunities—through independent or classroom activities—to build the content knowledge they need to make sense of text, even when decoding skills are in place. Such students may also have experienced a lifetime of frustration and school failure. In other words, problems of motivation can intertwine with linguistic processing challenges. Wherever youth sit on the spectrum of adolescent literacy development, it is critical that their motivation to read and write particular kinds of texts be carefully considered. And it is equally important that we carefully examine the ways that texts and learning contexts themselves can motivate adolescent readers and writers to engage with ideas. Even simple changes to contexts and texts may engender the motivation necessary to push so-called struggling readers into the effortful processing and employment of strategies necessary to read and write print and other text forms across the wide variety of academic domains of the secondary school.

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