

TEACHING OPINION

# 22 Strategies for Encouraging Students' Intrinsic Motivation to Read

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) — November 13, 2020 ⌚ 11 min read**Larry Ferlazzo**

Opinion Contributor, Education Week

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*(This is the second post in a four-part series. You can see [Part One here.](#))*

The new question of the week is:

***What are ways to help students develop intrinsic motivation to read?***

Part One's guest contributors were Melissa Butler, Sawsan Jaber, Jennifer Orr, and Katie Alaniz. All of today's writers also were guests on my 10-minute BAM! Radio Show. You can also find a list of, and links to, previous shows here.

Today, Dave Stuart Jr., Dr. Rebecca Alber, Kate Sullivan, and Joy Hamm share their commentaries.

**“Credibility, value, belonging, effort, and efficacy”**

*Dave Stuart Jr. is a classroom teacher in Michigan. In his bestselling book, These 6 Things: How to Focus Our Teaching on What Matters Most, he devotes an entire chapter to the five key beliefs beneath intrinsic motivation:*

There are five beliefs that we want to cultivate in our students if our hope is to get them reading because they want to: credibility, value, belonging, effort, and efficacy.

**Credibility** is the student's belief that I'm a good teacher—one who cares about them, who understands them as a reader, and can help them experience great things through reading. Efficient teaching strategies like moments of genuine connection help with credibility, as does the long-term teacher goal of being well-read in our discipline.

**Value** is the student's belief that reading matters—that it's interesting, useful, enjoyable, or so on. We can influence Value through tried-and-true methods such as book talks, effective hooks, or the student-centered “build connections” intervention activity.

**Belonging** is the sense a student has of a fit between their identity and a given reading assignment. We can influence this by asking our students to share their reading histories and complete interest inventories at the start of a school year, using what we learn in subsequent interactions with our students.

And finally, the **Effort** and **Efficacy** beliefs are present when a student feels that they are able to succeed at a given reading task and that their effort is likely to produce improvement in their skill and knowledge as a reader. We can improve Efficacy by being clear about what success looks like for a given reading assignment and we can improve Effort by praising students for specific, strategic, successful efforts that they've taken to improve themselves as readers during their time in our class.

It's critical to note that these beliefs around reading are heavily dependent on context, meaning that a given task or text may be highly motivating for a child on Monday, but then a different task or text may be highly demotivating. The more we learn about the way these beliefs work and how they are influenced—and research is clear that they are influencable—the more effectively we'll cultivate them in all of our students.

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- Dave Stuart Jr.  
in Education Week Teacher

### **We need to “show our students the value of reading”**

*Dr. Rebecca Alber is an instructor at UCLA's Graduate School of Education. A teacher educator and literacy specialist, she advocates liberatory education and literacy in all K-12 classrooms. She is an ardent follower of the Abolitionist Teaching Network @ATN\_1863 and Rethinking Schools @Rethink Schools:*

One of my lofty goals when I was teaching high school was this: to have students fall in love with reading while they were in my classroom (or at least like it a little more). One of the ways we strive to do this as educators is show our students the value of reading, of texts.

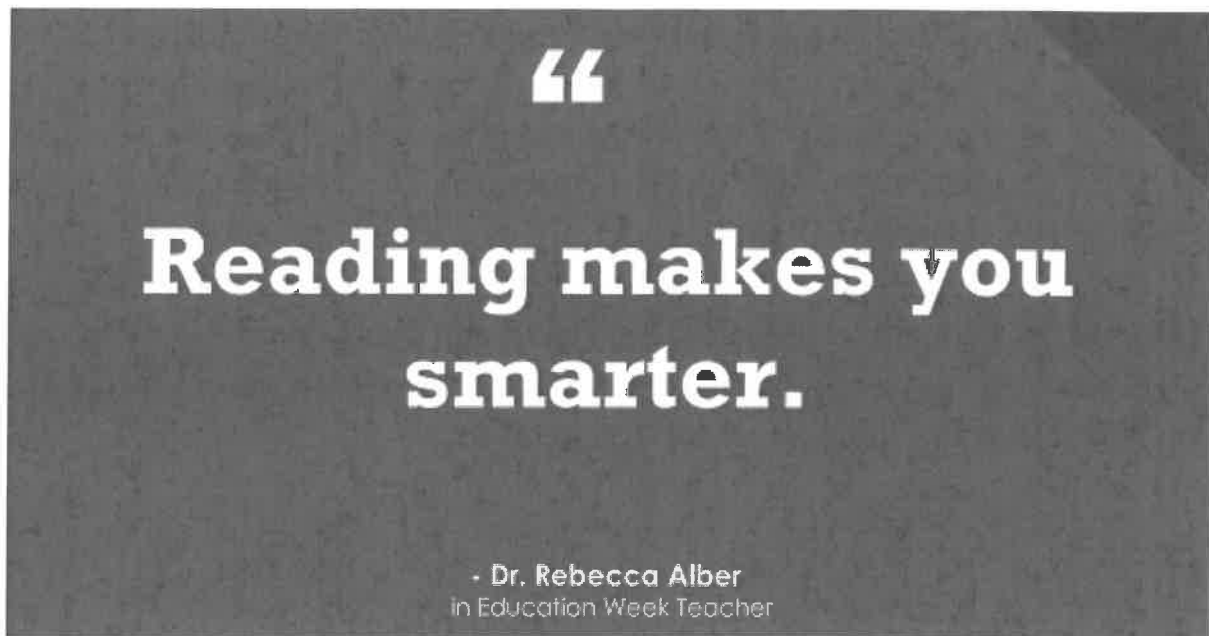
My first or second year in the classroom, I was lucky enough to come across Kelly Gallagher's book, *Reading Reasons: Motivational Mini-Lessons for Middle and High School*. I adapted several of the mini-lessons and I found them to be golden—they began reminding *each other* of why they need to push through with that difficult text, or get to reading that latest young-adult novel; I saw the power of giving students reasons to read. These are a few reading reasons for your consideration that you can adapt for the age group of your students:

**Reading makes you smarter:** Gallagher does an activity with his high school students called “15 Things I Learned from Reading the Newspaper Today.” He reads aloud what he learned that day by reading the paper and then asks his students to look through a daily newspaper and do the same. It concludes with them sharing their lists and then journal responding to the question, “How will reading a newspaper regularly influence my life?” A class discussion follows.

**Reading is fulfilling and rewarding:** Reading prepares us for what is to come in life. Novels, short stories, and poetry take from the universal plots and themes of the human condition—to name a few: love gone wrong, coming of age, rites of passage, and misunderstandings with loved ones. Kelly Gallagher suggests an activity called “Favorite First Lines” where the teacher reads aloud to students interesting first lines from his or her favorite books. You can invite students to do the same as the year progresses. Gallagher also suggests reading aloud a passage you find humorous, troubling, angering, beautiful—one that exhibits powerful writing. Find lines in books and also in magazines, newspapers, speeches, blogs, and poetry.

**Reading can equip you against oppression:** Critical educators explain that their charge in part is to prepare students to read the word and also read the social world. We need to explain to students the importance of viewing text through a critical lens and how this criticality can help them identify social, political, and economical exploitative systems and practices (*Who wrote this? Why? Who will benefit? Who might be harmed? In talking back to this text, what would you say?*) Teachers can also tell students they will sign many contracts in their lifetimes, as one example, and that it is paramount they be able to comprehend and question something before they sign it.

**Reading results in you being a better writer:** Gallagher shares in his book an activity called, “Cooking Up Good Writing.” In this activity, the teacher shares ways to become a good chef (read a lot of recipes, experiment with different kinds of food) and ways to become a good musician (read a lot of music, experiment with different kinds of music). The lists echo each other, including both ending with practice, practice, practice. Using the two lists as models, students then pair up and create a list for how to become a good writer. The teacher can encourage students to include reading on their lists by sharing how most admired writers are voracious readers.



### **“I believe every child wants to be able to read”**

*Kate Sullivan has been teaching at The Windward School (and for a time in two charter schools) for almost a decade. Kate has a master's degree in special education, with a concentration in learning disabilities, and works privately as a learning specialist:*

I believe every child wants to be able to read—reading is a key that unlocks so many doors in our world, and children want to be able to do that independently. I think students become more apprehensive about or even resistant to reading when it becomes difficult for them. For our students who struggle to do the most basic step of decoding, reading becomes frustrating and a source of great distress for them. For our students to want to read, they need to have the tools to do it. This is where reading instruction comes in.

If students are taught to read in a systematic, direct, multisensory way, they learn decoding skills earlier and are able to apply them independently much sooner. Programs like Orton Gillingham teach students sounds in context for spelling and reading and are critical in helping students develop an awareness of how words are put together. Once students can decode, they begin to feel pride in their independence with understanding words.

Students who struggle with reading comprehension face similar hurdles. If they are properly instructed with teacher questioning and summarization techniques from an early age, they may find more success with understanding stories and therefore find more joy in reading.

The final piece of the motivation puzzle is direct and honest feedback from adults and being taught to analyze one's own work. When students are given honest feedback, they begin to trust that the adult giving it to them is congratulating work that is genuinely praiseworthy, which helps the children to differentiate their own work and to self-correct. I have eliminated the phrase "good job" from my classroom. Instead, teachers and students remark on a chosen vocabulary word in a response or a particularly in-depth assessment of a character interaction. Students can tell when they have gone above and beyond in their work, and they are looking for adults to acknowledge that, rather than the mundane. Children want to read. It is up to us to give them the tools and the independence they need to do it.

### **"Build confidence"**

*Joy Hamm has taught 11 years in a variety of English-language settings, ranging from kindergarten to adult learners. The last few years working with middle and high school newcomers and completing her M.Ed. in TESOL have fostered stronger advocacy in her district and beyond:*

Unfortunately, reading in school is often associated with comprehension questions or assessments, which feel punitive. It is critical, especially in the early stages of literacy, to associate reading with pleasure and the delight of learning new information. Students who don't read are intrinsically motivated to avoid pain or failure. As educators, we can alter this motivated avoidance of reading by reintroducing students to successful, joy-filled experiences with books.

### **Build confidence/success in students who struggle with phonemic awareness or decoding:**

1. Guide students to age-appropriate Lexile-leveled books. Search Lexile's [website](#)..
2. Swap literary graphic novels in place of middle/high text-heavy classroom books.

3. Provide native language or CUNY's list of translanguaged books for ELs (especially older newcomers) who are literate in their first language.
4. Utilize audio books or online platforms where students can listen while tracking with the words on the page.
5. Share your reading journey. What struggles did or do you face as a reader? How did you overcome these challenges?

### **Foster delight and curiosity:**

1. Find books that interest the student. Some ideas include hobbies, books made into movies, choose your own adventure books, as well as culturally relevant and native-language books (check CUNY's website for the latter).
2. Reading "outside of the box" should be encouraged. If students want to read cookbooks, how-to books, appropriate magazines, or online articles, this is great! They are reading!
3. Get your class involved with The Global Read Aloud. Implement daily storytime for younger students or host secondary book club/read-alouds and discussions.
4. In high school classes, rife with heavy content texts and less student investment, spark a question or discussion where students *want* to search and read about the topic.
5. Model your personal reading. Discuss what you liked or found interesting about your recent reads and invite students to share about their independent reading.

In conclusion, begin to increase intrinsic reading motivation by removing the stress or boredom that motivates students to disengage. Then you can experiment with different books or methods until you find the perfect combination of challenge and satisfaction to engage the student. There's nothing sweeter than the words, "May I take this book home?"

Thanks to Dave, Rebecca, Kate, and Joy for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at [lferlazzo@epe.org](mailto:lferlazzo@epe.org). When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](https://twitter.com/Larryferlazzo).

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