

# Middle School Students' Motivation Fluctuates Across Content Areas

## Article

Neugebauer, S. & Gilmour, A. (2020). The ups and downs of reading across content areas: The association between instruction and fluctuations in reading motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 112 (2), 344-363.

### What did they do?

They studied 161 6th-8th students in under-resourced, parochial schools in the Midwest United States for fluctuations in reading motivation through science, social studies, math, and English classes. Motivation was defined as intrinsically initiating a student's desire to read for more information or because the topic was interesting. They wanted to know if specific instructional practices boosted student intrinsic motivation to read. They also wanted to know if subject matter played a role in motivation throughout the day or between days. They were able to follow a diverse group of students that were performing below benchmark in reading. The study followed students across 45 classrooms with 14 different teachers.

### What did they find?

The study looked at both curiosity and involvement with texts. They found students who were more curious about the reading were also more engaged with it. The study also showed that both curiosity and involvement varied throughout the day for individual students. Some students' curiosity and involvement went up and down more throughout the day. Interestingly, the subject they were reading about (science, history, etc.) didn't seem to affect the overall results. The study also looked at instructional practices that increase student reading motivation. From the study, they found that the following increased student reading motivation: social organization of the classroom, text selection, and student interpersonal preferences. It is important to note that the study found that students were more curious and engaged when they had closer interaction with the teacher or the text itself (through one-on-one or small group work). However, working in pairs specifically didn't show the same positive effect for student involvement.

### What could this mean for teachers?

Curiosity and involvement in reading fluctuate for each student, and the content in which they are reading does not affect motivation. Instructional practices, however, do impact motivation. In all content areas, teachers can foster reading motivation by practicing the following:

- Ditching textbooks and worksheets that dictate information and lack student engagement
- Embracing social interaction with one on one or small group work
- Offering student choice such as who they work with on activities
- Considering the context, text, and reader: effective reading instruction goes beyond just the subject matter. Teachers should consider the overall classroom environment, the type of text being read, and individual student preferences when planning lessons.

