

Building Better Readers:
What Research Says
about Classroom Magazines and Literacy

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Literacy, finally, has become a national priority. State standards and federal initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Reading First demonstrate that the government and the American people are now actively searching for ways to get all children reading, and reading well, in their school years.¹

Teachers have long known that there is no one magic solution for teaching children how to read. But thanks to an extensive body of empirical research, educators now know a lot about what “works” in literacy instruction.² Struggling readers need reading instruction that promotes effective strategies for reading comprehension. They need opportunities to read engaging, non-fiction text both in and out of school. And, perhaps most important of all, they need to be motivated to read. In all of these areas, teachers make an impact every day,

Traditional textbooks and basal readers of course play a central role in reading instruction. But teachers have always used other forms of engaging text to excite students about the power of print. These formats include books, newspapers, on-line resources and -- as both teachers and educational researchers agree -- age-appropriate magazines can play an integral role, too.³ In this article, we’ll review some ways in which researchers and educators have found that magazines make a valuable contribution to children’s improved reading skills.

Motivated students read more

Noted researchers (such as John Guthrie and many others) have repeatedly found that students’ reading performance doesn’t just depend on their reading skills. Motivation is a crucial factor, too. Students are more likely to read – and they spend more time doing it – when they feel motivated to read. Yet, research shows that not all forms of motivation are equally effective. External rewards such as grades or other incentives can contribute to some degree, but a more powerful strategy is to help students build an *intrinsic motivation* to read – that is, to help them recognize the value of reading and develop a desire to read for its own sake.⁴ When students have a strong intrinsic motivation to read, they not only have better attitudes about reading, but they spend more time doing it as well (Figure 1).

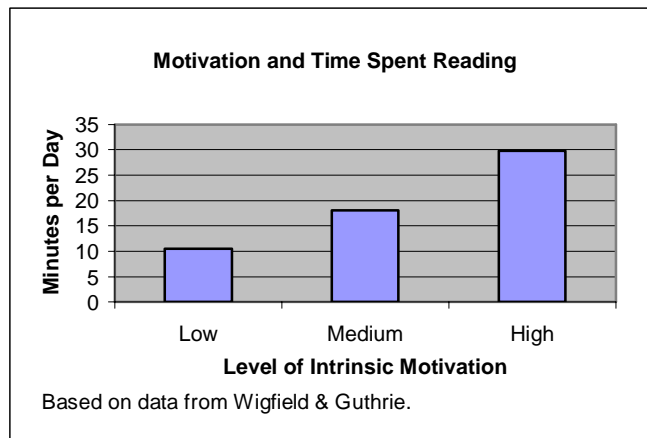


Figure 1

Magazines for young people are designed to motivate students to read. By embedding reading in meaningful contexts, by presenting non-fiction articles that are engagingly written, and by spanning a range of topics, magazines allow every student to choose to read about the topics that he or she finds most interesting and personally relevant – all of which has been shown to boost intrinsic motivation.⁵ Moreover, since most students believe that magazines and other “real-world” media are relevant to their lives, magazines can help students see that reading isn’t just important in the classroom – it’s important in the outside world, too.⁶

Supporting standards-based strategies for reading comprehension

Of course, while motivation is critical, it’s just one part of fostering good reading. Students also need to build a rich repertoire of effective strategies that will help them understand what they read. The content and format of magazines make them well-suited to teaching many of the comprehension strategies described in the national *Standards*. For example:

- ***Using what you know***
Text is easier to understand and remember when it builds on the reader’s prior knowledge.⁷ Because children’s magazines are grounded in the world (and interests) of their readers, they provide natural opportunities for children to use what they know as they read.
- ***Building vocabulary***
Not surprisingly, numerous studies have shown a significant link between vocabulary and reading comprehension; after all, readers can’t understand text unless they know what most of the words mean.⁸ Magazines like *Weekly Reader* publish customized editions that are designed for different grade levels, from preschool through middle school. By selecting the most appropriate edition for their students, teachers can easily find text with embedded vocabulary that will be challenging but understandable to their students.
- ***And more...***
Magazine articles offer helpful opportunities for teachers to practice a broad variety of reading comprehension strategies with their students. Some of the most important strategies include having students identify and summarize main ideas, monitor their own understanding, and think critically about what they read. Since magazine articles are written in an engaging style and various lengths, they provide an appealing and non-threatening context for addressing these sorts of strategies with readers at all levels. This is true whether they’re advanced readers who are ready to delve into extended text or struggling readers who prefer “bite-sized” chunks.⁹

Tools for powerful teaching

In addition, magazines also lend themselves to many of the teaching methods that are recommended by leading authorities in education, such as:

- ***Making reading purposeful***
When readers are personally interested in what they're reading, they're more likely to read with the goal of finding something out, rather than simply because the teacher said so. Engaging magazine articles can promote purposeful reading and contribute to what Wiggins and others call "enduring understandings" — understandings that reach beyond the classroom to relate to real-life topics and situations as well.¹⁰
- ***Boosting comprehension through visual support***
Magazine illustrations support comprehension, too. Illustrations provide clues to all readers as to the content of the accompanying text, and they can be particularly helpful to struggling readers or students whose native language is not English.¹¹
- ***Connecting across the curriculum***
Because the diverse content of many magazines spans a range of academic subject areas – be it science, history, math, social studies, or other subjects — magazines can help teachers build purposeful reading and writing into virtually all areas of the school curriculum. By using an article about plants as a springboard for a science lesson, or weaving a current events article into a social studies class, teachers can help students see connections among different subject areas ... and appreciate the value of reading across the board.¹²
- ***Bringing learning home***
In keeping with the recommendations of numerous experts and organizations,¹³ magazines can also promote links between home and school. Magazines can excite children about the things they read, so students share what they've learned with family and friends. In addition, Morrow and Young found that parents were more likely to help their children with homework assignments that involved magazines, because of the interesting material and visual appeal.¹⁴

The bottom line: Supporting instruction and assessment -- and making reading fun!

With all of the constraints on teachers' busy days – meeting the demands of local and national standards, as well as No Child Left Behind – teachers could only afford time for magazines if the magazines mapped closely onto their local standards and regular classroom curricula. In fact, teachers agree that they do. For example, in a recent survey of more than 2,000 teachers who subscribe to *Weekly Reader*, 84% rated *Weekly Reader* as "good" or "excellent" in reinforcing their classroom reading curriculum and state/national standards.¹⁵

In addition, apart from the content and format of the magazines themselves, teachers also appreciate the supplementary materials that accompany classroom magazines. For example, 98% of teachers report using the teacher guide that accompanies each issue of *Weekly Reader*, which supplies teachers with background information on the magazine’s content, vocabulary words, related books, and extension activities.¹⁶ Twice each year, teachers also receive reading assessments that use material from *Weekly Reader* to gauge students’ reading ability. Teachers have found all of these materials to be helpful tools for instruction, assessment, and accountability.

Last but not least, magazines are *fun!* As researchers such as Lesley Mandel Morrow, James Gee, and their colleagues have observed, the text in magazines is composed and presented in ways that make it simultaneously informative, entertaining, amusing, and instructive.¹⁷ Indeed, in the *Weekly Reader* survey mentioned earlier, 96% of teachers rated the magazine’s appeal for their students as either “good” or “excellent.”¹⁸ The appeal of magazines makes them ideal vehicles for introducing new subject matter, practicing reading comprehension strategies, and stimulating discussion, both in the classroom and beyond.

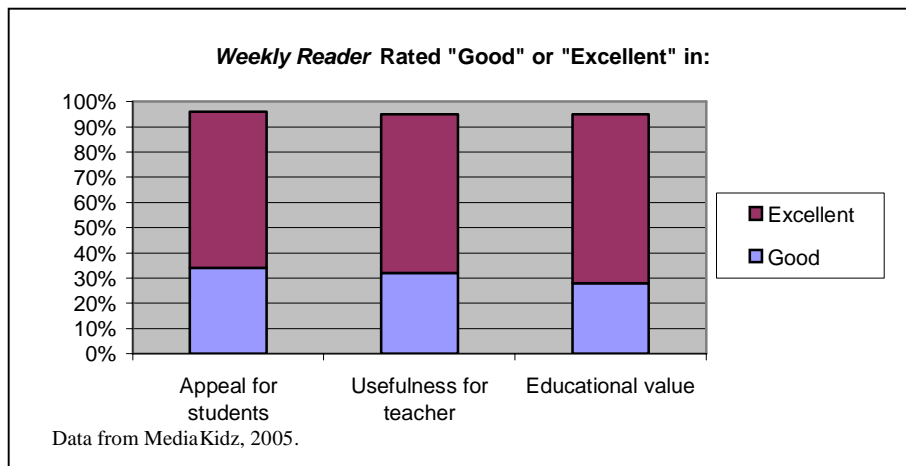


Figure 1

In teachers’ own words...

Time and again, the big-picture view of the *Weekly Reader* survey has been confirmed by comments from individual teachers, too. Classroom teachers at various grade levels note the value of magazines such as *Weekly Reader* in introducing new vocabulary and supporting students’ comprehension. For example:

“I appreciate the repetition of high frequency words in each issue.”
 — Kindergarten teacher

“I love the Weekly Reader vocabulary words to identify with the children.”
 — Second grade teacher

“Weekly Reader’s content was more age/grade appropriate because the visuals supported the content of the articles. Therefore, both the advanced readers and the students who struggle with reading were able to understand the contents of the articles.”

— *Fourth grade teacher*

Other teachers appreciate *Weekly Reader’s* fit to standards and curricula across a wide range of subject areas. For example:

“Each month, there is at least one issue that lines up perfectly with a lesson in science or social studies from our curriculum.”

— *Kindergarten teacher*

“Great for math and reading.”

— *Fourth grade teacher*

“The language skills that could be incorporated using the pictures was excellent reinforcement of receptive and expressive language skills hit in the curriculum.”

— *Kindergarten teacher*

“I am always amazed, after teaching a unit, how often Weekly Reader reinforces it.”

— *Second grade teacher*

Finally, supplementary materials that accompany *Weekly Reader*, such as the teacher’s guides and reading assessments, have proven to be valuable as well. For example:

“Weekly Reader has excellent content in the teacher guides that I can use as part of my lesson plans.”

— *Preschool teacher*

“The Fall and Spring diagnostic assessments have been on target in identifying many strengths and weaknesses of my fourth grade students. I feel that the graphic organizers, insets, colorful pictures, and vocabulary found in the assessments, along with the weekly issues, have kept my students’ interest and has given very accurate evaluations of their knowledge and skills.”

— *Fourth grade teacher*

Conclusion

Certainly, no one would suggest that magazines should completely replace textbooks or basal readers – or, for that matter, books of any kind. However, the research makes it clear: Magazines can be powerful supplements to other forms of print in literacy instruction. In the hands of a skilled teacher, magazines can serve as effective educational tools – an important part of a “balanced literacy breakfast.”

Notes

¹ For example, see National Center for Education Statistics (2003). *Nation's report card: Reading 2002*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

² Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C.E. (2004). *Reading Next -- A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2000). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension to enhance understanding*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers. International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English. (1996). *Standards for the English language arts*. Urbana, IL and Newark, DE: Author. McCardle, P., & Chhabra, V. (Eds.; 2004) *The voice of evidence in reading research* (pp. 329-354). Baltimore: Brookes Publishing. National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.; 1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Shanahan, T. (2005, May.) Scientific Evidence-Based Reading Research and Instruction: The Influence of the National Reading Panels. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Reading Association, San Antonio, TX. Strickland, D.S., Ganske, K., & Monroe, J.K. (2002) *Supporting struggling readers and writers: Strategies for classroom intervention 3-6*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers & Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

³ Morrow, L.M., & Lesnick, J. (2001). Examining the educational value of children's magazines. *The California Reader*, 34, 2, 2-13. Also see, for example, Kendall, J. S., & Marzano, R. J. (2004). *Content knowledge: A compendium of standards and benchmarks for K-12 education*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. Available online: <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

⁴ See, for example: Guthrie, J. T. & Humenick, N. M. (2004). Motivating students to read: Evidence for classroom practices that increase reading motivation and achievement. In P. McCardle & V. Chhabra. (Eds.) *The voice of evidence in reading research* (pp. 329-354). Baltimore: Brookes Publishing. Guthrie, J.T., & Wigfield, A. (2000). Engagement and motivation in reading. In R. Barr, M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 3). White Plains, NY: Longman Publishing Group. Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 54-67. Snow, Catherine. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Wigfield, A., & Guthrie, J.T. (1997). Relations of children's motivation for reading to the amount and breadth of their reading. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 420-432. Wigfield, A., Guthrie, J.T., Tonks, S., & Perencevich, K.C. (2004). Children's motivation for reading: Domain specificity and instructional influences. *Journal of Educational Research*, 97, 299-309.

⁵ See, for example, Guthrie & Humenick (2004). Wigfield et al. (2004).

⁶ Hobbs, R. (2005, October). What's news? *Educational Leadership*, 58-61.

⁷ For example, see: Armbruster, B.B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2001). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read*. Washington, DC: Partnership for Reading. Hirsch,

E.D. (2003, Spring). Reading comprehension requires knowledge – of words and the world. *American Educator*, 10-29.

⁸ See, for example, Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: Guilford Press. Block, C.C., & Pressley, M. (2003). Best practices in comprehension instruction. In L.M. Morrow, L.B. Gambrell, & M. Pressley (Eds.), *Best practices in literacy instruction (2nd ed.)*. New York: The Guilford Press. Hirsch (2003).

⁹ Morrow & Lesnick (2001). For more information about these and other comprehension strategies, see, e.g., Block & Pressley (2003). Hobbs (2005). International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English (1996). Kendall & Marzano (2004).

¹⁰ See, for example: Smith, M.W., & Wilhelm, J. D. (2002). “*Reading don’t fix no Chevys*”: *Literacy in the lives of young men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

¹¹ Kinsella, K. (n.d.). "What is cowboy?": Preparing English learners for a culturally based curriculum. Available online: <https://216.173.225.55/Ballard-Tighe/Source/CommunityHTML/IdeasOfExcellance/idea7.htm>

¹² For more on the importance of building cross-curricular connections, see, e.g.: Armbruster et al. (2001). de Leon (2002). International Reading Association & National Middle School Association (2002).

¹³ See, for example, International Reading Association & National Middle School Association (2002).

¹⁴ Morrow, L.M., & Young, J. (1997). A family literacy program connecting school and home: Effects on attitude, motivation, and literacy achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 736-742.

¹⁵ MediaKidz Research & Consulting. (2005). *Weekly Reader teacher Web survey*. Teaneck, NJ: Author.

¹⁶ MediaKidz Research & Consulting. (2005).

¹⁷ Morrow & Lesnick (2001). Gee, T.C., Olsen, M.W., & Forrester, N.J. (1989, October). Classroom use of specialized magazines. *Clearing House*, 53-55.

¹⁸ MediaKidz Research & Consulting. (2005).