“It’s Easier When It’s Personal”: What Made Reading Real for Two Tweens with Learning Disabilities

This article highlights the motivational journeys of two African American tween readers with learning disabilities who made measurable gains in literacy achievement between fourth and eighth grades.

In a middle school social studies classroom, a lesson on the rise of Jim Crow in late 19th-century America takes a momentary tangential turn to the topic of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. For Minerva (all participant and school names are pseudonyms), an eighth-grade African American student, this brief aside has ignited a spark of interest and excitement that stays with her throughout the day. That evening, she’s glued to the family computer, googling “Rodney King,” following the online trail to other cases of race-based injustices in L.A.’s history, and then in present-day America. In Internet parlance, this type of activity is referred to as “going down the rabbit hole.” In educational terms, it’s an example of the impact of real-world instruction.

Meanwhile, in another classroom within the same middle school, Nelson, also an African American eighth grader, is working diligently in his classroom, constantly reminding himself that if he wishes to achieve his professional and material aims, he must continue to sharpen his reading skills. His thirst for literacy knowledge is far less intrinsic than Minerva’s, but has been every bit as impactful on his growth as a reader. While these two students are very different learners, they share some important commonalities: they are both African American tweens with diagnosed learning disabilities who consistently struggled with reading during most of elementary school, earning poor grades and low scores on curriculum-based as well as standardized reading tests. Of even greater import is the fact that during middle school, both demonstrated monumental growth as readers at a time when such turnarounds are all too rare.

Past research has chronicled the experiences of struggling African American tween readers as well as those with learning disabilities, painting a clear and accurately bleak portrait of the current landscape (Hall, 2006; Lenters, 2006; McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001). While postmortems on failure are abundant, what is sorely missing is an autopsy of success. Toward that aim, this article highlights the educational and motivational journeys of two African American tween readers with learning disabilities, Minerva and Nelson, who made measurable gains in literacy achievement between fourth and eighth grades. These two participants come from a larger study conducted with eight participants using a multiple-case-study framework (Barone, 2011) and a motivational theory lens (Guthrie, 2001); data came from interviews with the students, their parents, and their teachers, as well as from classroom observations and artifact analyses. As a result, a window into tween development emerged, allowing a unique view of Minerva and Nelson, two exemplars of literacy growth.

The Study

Theoretical Frame and Related Literature

This study is guided by a theoretical framework that deems motivation as essential to reading achievement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). It is critical to understand what motivates students to engage with reading because research has consistently found a positive correlation between engagement...
and reading achievement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). One of the central themes in the literature on motivation is that of real-world instruction—the idea that literacy tasks should be authentic, meaningful, and somehow tied-in to students’ daily lives (Guthrie, 2001). Guthrie, Wigfield, and VonSecker (2000) highlight an example of real-world instruction where tween students were given an opportunity to meet, touch, feed, and discuss live turtles before reading a book about turtles. Not surprisingly, student motivation to read a book on that subject greatly increased under these educational conditions. Real-world instruction is predicated on evoking feelings of intrinsic motivation (Guthrie, 2001).

Accessing students’ intrinsic motivation does not always have to involve tangible artifacts; it can also be accomplished via strategies such as facilitating open discussion that values all thoughts and opinions, in lieu of one black-and-white, “correct” viewpoint (Rosenblatt, 1994), or through building background knowledge as a way to help students connect with classroom texts (Moley, Bandré, & George, 2011). Parsons and Ward (2011), commenting on a review of studies in the field, expressed the belief that a teacher’s role is to “(a) send the message that content and literacy are important and relevant to [students’] lives, (b) enhance students’ motivation, and (c) build their academic vocabularies” (p. 464). Yet, many of the daily tasks of the school day fail to meet this standard. Pearson, Raphael, Benson, and Madda (2007) argue that “too many school tasks are inauthentic, unrealistic, and, by implication, not useful for engaging in real-world literacy activities; that is, instead of teaching kids how to do school, we should be teaching them how to do life” (p. 36). Toward this aim, real-world instruction attempts to forge connections to the outside or “real” world and is not confined to the environment of the classroom.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis
The following research question guided this study: What is the nature of the motivational process among adolescents who made noteworthy reading gains during their middle school years? Multiple one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the student participants, and one interview was held with both their current English teacher and at least one parent. This research followed the requisite elements of a sound case study as laid out by Barone (2011): multiple interviews, observations, and artifact analyses. This was a “collective case study,” one that forgoes the detail of a singularly focused methodology in favor of “building a stronger understanding and a more compelling argument for the significance of the work through the use of multiple cases” (Barone, 2011, p. 9).

Expanding Guthrie’s Model
Based on the evidence from these case studies, I posit that Guthrie’s notion of real-world instruction with regard to the teaching of reading should be reexamined and expanded. While Guthrie’s existing notion of real-world connections to literature did, in fact, play a significant role in Minerva and Nelson’s journey toward reading achievement,
what precisely made reading “real” to Minerva was quite different than the “real-world” aspects of literacy that inspired Nelson on his road to proficiency. These findings, when viewed through a wider lens, reveal many motivational sources that can still be encapsulated by the traditional notion of real-world instruction.

**Minerva**

At the time of the study, Minerva, an African American female, was in eighth grade at Fairfield Middle School. Minerva spoke with pride of her involvement in dance classes; she enjoyed jazz dance and intended to move on to tap in the near future. Ms. Trappler, Minerva’s eighth-grade English teacher, described her as someone who is in touch with her emotions, values connections with teachers, and has many close friendships with peers in her class. Ms. Williams, Minerva’s mother, seconded the notion of her daughter’s emotional intelligence: “She’s a pretty deep person, Minerva. She’s a thinker and she feels everything.”

According to Ms. Williams, while elementary school helped Minerva become a better reader, additional factors related to her transition to middle school helped accelerate her improvement even more. Minerva’s statewide standardized reading scores from fourth through eighth grade support this account of growth:

- 4th Grade: Below Basic
- 5th Grade: Basic
- 6th Grade: Basic
- 7th Grade: Proficient
- 8th Grade: Advanced

Minerva received the following curriculum-based assessment scores in eighth-grade college-prep reading and English classes:

- 8th-grade Reading: 76%
- 8th-grade English: 81%

In contrast, records from grades 3 to 5 indicate that Minerva’s reading scores on curriculum-based assessments in elementary school typically ranged from 33% to 70%. When asked what being a strong reader meant, Minerva answered that good readers are those who can relate to texts and get involved with them on a deep level:

> Anybody can pick up a book who knows how to read, but you’re a good reader if you can really pick out the details and it’s something you can really relate to . . . and also you’re a good reader if you get into the book and you feel kind of connected to it in some way.

In Minerva’s view, being a good reader is inextricably linked to the concept of real-world connections to literature.

**Minerva’s Motivational Journey**

For Minerva, texts that are interesting almost always have a component of real-world application or relevance. This was true of both school-assigned and pleasure-reading texts. Minerva’s description of one of her favorite books read outside of school, *Go Ask Alice* (Sparks, 2006), illustrates this point:

> *Go Ask Alice.* That it was real, it didn’t have to be one of those books that (has) a happy ending. With everything...
bad that happens . . . it kind of like builds character, makes you kind of not want to go in certain footsteps.

While *Go Ask Alice* is not a true story, it does purport to be a real diary, which still made it highly engaging for Minerva. She also mentioned liking to read biographies because they are “true stories.” The element of a real-world connection is evident in Ms. Williams’s account of her daughter’s interest in a far-ranging selection of real-world topics, from psoriasis to pop culture, that she regularly explores online on sites like *Wikipedia*. Ms. Williams also described the aforementioned incident where a discussion in social studies about Rodney King’s death was a catalyst for Minerva to seek information on the L.A. riots of the early 1990s through discussions with family and reading articles online. A lesson about slavery during African American History Month also piqued interest in her heritage. In Ms. Williams’s assessment, “She cares about real life things that happen—anything in history. She likes things that make an impact on her.”

While Minerva named many pleasure-reading texts that were meaningful to her, no small number of school-assigned texts were also seen as worthwhile. In fact, her experience reading a play for English class about *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 1967) was enhanced by the fact that she had read the actual book for pleasure the year before. In addition to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Minerva mentioned other texts that she engaged with, such as *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000), even if the book was not highly appealing at first.

*Stargirl*. I like a lot because it kind of has a message. *The Wave* [Strasser, 1981], I like. I kind of wish the ending was different but like (with) each book, whether I like it more or not, I still pay attention. I just don’t read it just to read it. I’ll find something to get into it, something that I like and hang onto, even if I don’t personally like the book. Yeah, I kind of like that it is a true story.

Finding stories with an element of real-world connection also occurred for Minerva in school when learning about the Holocaust:

Well, we read a lot about the Holocaust and I really like that . . . when my teachers teach that because they really get into that. Now that we are older, we learn more stuff, it’s not just . . . what we learned when we were young. It’s the real details.

In line with the recommendations of Moley et al. (2011) to carefully scaffold instruction around a given text to build interest and meaning, Ms. Trappler, Minerva’s eighth-grade English teacher, helped her students relate to *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 1967) by drawing connections to the psychology of adolescence, a link that helped Minerva relate to the text.

When we did *The Wave*, it’s all plot. There’s nothing really to interpret, it’s pretty straightforward, so we did a lot of work with psychology. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the need to belong . . . she kind of seemed interested in it, and when we did *Anne Frank* we talked about how when you’re that age, you want to distance yourself from your parents and establish yourself as an individual. But *Anne Frank* can’t really do that because she is stuck in a room. She really liked *Anne Frank*, but I think psychology was sort of an undercurrent there.

Minerva’s mother summed up the importance of a text that is both interesting and offers real-world connections:

She has to feel it to get invested in something she’s reading. Like *Anne Frank* or the book . . . *Bounce* [Friend, 2009] that she read. . . . In that story, the girl was moving and stuff and they’re just things that really sparked her interest and she wants to read more about it. She can pay more attention. If you’re talking about something to her that she can’t connect with, it’s tougher.

In order to make school-assigned texts more interesting and connected to the real world, Minerva’s teachers employed various strategies. Minerva spoke about ways in which Ms. Trappler enhanced her reading experience in eighth grade:

There’s a lot of things. As we went throughout the year, I really liked how she relates to us with the books and she really gets us into it. . . . she’ll ask us questions [and] not even tell us what the book is. . . . she would say, “What would you do in (this) situation?” We would have to kind of write it out. . . . “Oh, this is why she did this.”

To prepare students for reading *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000), a story about an outcast in middle school, Minerva recalled Ms. Trappler asking students, “How would you feel if one of us was pink and the rest of us [were] green?” This helped Minerva feel prepared to read the text. Minerva’s mother feels strongly that the teachers at the middle school have
made a strong impact on Minerva’s increased motivation for reading and for school in general:

She just wants to do well, she wants college in her future—that matters to her. She has a goal. I really think it was maturity and the teachers in the middle school. I really believe that was her turnaround. . . . It just seems like a lightbulb has gone off ever since seventh grade. Before then, I never heard her talk about a conversation about what she read or anything about school.

Minerva’s mother noted that her daughter has recently taken a keen interest in her teachers’ educational backgrounds, colleges attended, and favorite books. Minerva was “so excited at the end of the school year because she said teachers loosen up and they talk more about themselves.” Books that had realistic or relatable qualities were clearly motivating to Minerva, but so were insights into the role that strong literacy skills played in the personal and professional lives of her favorite teachers.

**Nelson**

Nelson, an African American male student, was in eighth grade at Fairfield Middle School at the time of the study. He is highly athletic and involved in soccer and wrestling at school and tae kwon do outside of school. Nelson is also very creative; he has an interest in architecture and math and would like to explore a career along those lines. Since he was young, Nelson has enjoyed building elaborate structures with Legos and KNex. An extremely social young man, Nelson genuinely enjoys the opportunity school provides to hang out with his many friends. He is also active in Voices Involved in promoting Black Excellence (VIBE), the school’s extracurricular club that promotes African American achievement. Mr. Morgan, his eighth-grade English and reading teacher, sums Nelson up by saying, “He has a great personality, he gets along with everybody in terms of his peers—they look up to him. He gets along with his teachers really well, very respectful, good kid all-around.”

**Educational History and Evidence of Reading Growth**

Nelson began his educational career with two years of Montessori school prior to entering the Fairfield School District for kindergarten. According to Mrs. Bates, Nelson’s mother, her son struggled greatly with reading in kindergarten and first grade. At that point, aware that there was a problem, Mrs. Bates pushed the school to accelerate the level of intervention with her son. He was diagnosed with a reading disability and was placed into the Wilson Reading program. Having made progress in that phonics-driven program, Nelson was switched into the Triumphs Reading Program at the start of fifth grade. When Nelson transitioned to Fairfield Middle School as a seventh grader, he continued to receive support for reading in the special education setting while taking his other courses in the general education setting. He participated in the READ 180 program in seventh grade and eighth grade, making tremendous progress both years.

The READ 180 program measures a student’s Lexile level, which indicates the grade level at which a student is reading. The Proficient level for an eighth-grade student is between 900–1150. The following are Nelson’s Lexile levels at the beginning of seventh grade, the end of seventh grade, the beginning of eighth grade, and the end of eighth grade:

- September, 7th Grade: 595
- June, 7th Grade: 765
- September, 8th Grade: 831
- June, 8th Grade: 1119

Data from the statewide standardized reading exam paints a similar picture of Nelson’s growth pattern:

- 4th Grade: Basic
- 5th Grade: Below Basic
- 6th Grade: Proficient
- 7th Grade: Proficient
- 8th Grade: Proficient

Nelson’s account of his own progress matches his notable rise in achievement scores over his academic career:

**Reading is not a big issue for me because I think of all the things that have gone into it and everything in sixth grade I did. I got taken out of Wilson, and they put me into regular ed. I did pretty well in regular ed. It was the first year I got proficient in the PSSAs. I understood**
Nelson’s Motivational Journey

Nelson lent insight into his motivation for reading when he described what he enjoyed most about his in-class reading experiences in middle school:

When I read a book I like to feel like I can understand how the character is thinking, so I can get a feeling toward it, so I can keep on going forward. . . . I’d rather read a book where I can understand what he’s thinking and I can relate to it, so I can judge what he’s doing.

Nelson described one compelling assignment that he completed as part of his unit on the book *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988) that helped him get involved with the text through outside connections:

Well, for Mr. Morgan this year, we had to do [a] soundtrack. I thought that was fun because in class we (would) go to listen to music to figure out what it meant. I picked what songs were right for the scenes because I had to pick a song and then figure out what scene in the book it would go with. It was *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988). I had to figure out what scene it was. I used a song *Got Money* by Lil Wayne and T-Pain. Jamal had to make $2,000 for his brother’s bail.

The fact that Nelson found this assignment to be highly relatable was not an accident. Rather, it stemmed from Mr. Morgan’s keen awareness of what motivates Nelson. Mr. Morgan stated that if “you just said, read chapters 3, 4, and 5, he would have never enjoyed it at all. He’s the kind of kid that wants to talk about it, he wants to get involved with it; otherwise it’s just a grind.” Nelson confirmed that Mr. Morgan’s assessment was correct and elaborated on what exactly he enjoys about the opportunity to make real-world connections to in-class texts:

During pre-class, he’ll ask us to answer these questions. He gave us these situations, then tell us to answer it, and he’ll tell us about the book a little bit. He’ll give his side of a book, and he’ll tell us how long we’re going to read it. After hearing what he says, I have to form my own opinion about the book. He throws out open-ended questions. He gives you things that make you think and make you want to read more about the book.

Discussing the importance of real-world connections with texts, Mr. Morgan stated that with Nelson, “It’s easier when it’s personal.” Fortunately, in Mr. Morgan’s assessment, Nelson had absolutely no trouble getting involved and connected with the novels they read in class. This may be attributable to Mr. Morgan offering students many opportunities to engage in authentic classroom activities. He noted that when they read the novel *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988), Nelson connected with multiple themes of the story:

*Scorpions* had that whole Harlem mentality, [be a] tough guy, prove yourself every day. He understands that because he’s part of that . . . . I think he understood that and also the family aspect of it. The one character taking care of his mom and his sister—he’s very protective of his family and even of younger students in the class. He likes to look out for people.

In addition to understanding academic achievement’s immediate rewards, Nelson also has an awareness that being a good reader and student is linked to material rewards in the future:

I have a ton of shoes in my house now, have a couple of Nikes, and my mom, another reason why I want to be in architecture is because . . . sometimes I’ll go shopping with my mom and I’ll get stuff, like expensive stuff . . . . My mom’s like, “You got to go into a big business job because if you were to go to Burger King, you would not get what you want.”

When asked if Nelson was intrinsically motivated to succeed as a reader, Mr. Morgan answered: No, definitely not . . . He kind of felt okay . . . especially when I saw his Lexile level coming up. He felt motivated by that . . . the more progress he made, the harder he worked.

Even though Nelson may not possess an intrinsic love of reading, he was still able to make real-world connections to characters in the texts he discussed on a situational basis. He seemed to want to ensure that he earned strong grades and increased his Lexile score. This would indicate that Nelson drew a connection between his literacy improvement and the promise of a future benefit in terms of career and financial security. Mr. Morgan found that in order to sustain Nelson’s engagement in traditional texts, he needed to plan activities that generated situational interest through a variety of means. Nelson and his mother both reported that outside of school, Nelson did not read many traditional books, but he did engage with texts that connected with topics he enjoyed, such as music.
An additional area of out-of-school real-world connections with reading took place through family vacations. Mrs. Bates made sure to give Nelson unique opportunities to see the real-world importance of literacy through extensive family travels when he was younger.

Because with me, my kids, I tried to expose them to a lot of things. My kids are well-traveled since they were babies. . . . you have to learn to read signs, you have to learn to read directions, you have to learn to fill out forms, and read forms, and all that. You got to read, you got to read, you got to read.

What Worked? How Reading Became “Real” in the Classroom

Nelson and Minerva’s preference for in-class instruction that offers connections to the world outside the classroom was clearly communicated. Minerva was very strong in expressing that she was most motivated by material that was relevant to the outside world. Ms. Williams’s story of her daughter always looking up random, intriguing topics on the Internet was a notable example of this. Although Nelson was not as prolific or naturally engaged with reading as Minerva, he was more engaged by opportunities to share his opinions about texts and draw parallels between fictional worlds and his own. Nelson specifically mentioned the activity his READ 180 teacher had him complete where he incorporated music that he personally enjoyed as part of reading a novel. This opportunity to select music from the genre of his choice—in this case, rap—is an example of Nelson benefiting from a classroom meeting his cultural needs.

Minerva and Nelson expressed that many of the books they encountered in middle school were relevant to their lives. Relevance, as defined by Douglass and Guthrie (2008), refers to “the extent to which the content of instruction is linked to students’ direct or recalled experience” (p. 22). A majority of the books selected at Fairfield Middle School featured a teenage protagonist, creating instant relatability for the participants. None of the texts selected for this age range were dated earlier than World War II. These contemporary books contained language, structures, and subject matter that were highly familiar to the participants.

This study’s findings in the area of school-based, interesting texts run counter to previous findings by Pitcher et al. (2007), who concluded that, while texts that motivate tweens are available, they are rarely used with students in middle school classrooms. Rather, they found, overly challenging classic works of literature and adult-oriented books too often dominate middle school reading lists. Both of the participants in this study, however, noted a far greater degree of interest in classroom texts they read in middle school, where young adult literature held a large presence, than those more classic options they read while in elementary school.

Instructional Factors That Mitigated Disability/Deficit

While the focus of this article is the impact of real-world instruction, it would be negligent not to also discuss the instructional decisions made by Fairfield School District that built a foundation upon which Minerva and Nelson could grow. From a teacher’s standpoint, even the most relevant and engaging texts taught in the most relevant and engaging manner will accomplish little if students lack basic literacy skills. Unfortunately, past research suggests that this happens with tragic regularity, especially with the African American population. Walker-Dalhouse, Risko, Lathrop, and Porter (2010) asserted that teachers frequently assume their African American students possess skills that they, in reality, do not, leading to instruction in the student’s frustration range. Delpit (1995) also found that African American students are not always taught the basic literacy skills needed to succeed.

This does not appear to have happened to my study participants while enrolled in the Fairfield School District. Minerva entered Fairfield schools in first grade and was quickly placed in a learning support reading class with an adapted curriculum at her instructional level. She was also provided with speech and language services. Through what appears to be careful progress monitoring and frequent assessments, Minerva was gradually mainstreamed into general education classes as the school believed she was ready to experience success in a more challenging classroom environment.
In Nelson’s case, the school was responsive to his struggles with reading as early as kindergarten. Nelson’s mother also pushed hard for the interventions to be as intensive as possible. His subsequent placement in the Wilson Program appears to have helped him gain the fundamental skills he needed to switch into a comprehension-focused special education reading class in fifth grade. He was finally slated to enter a general education reading class in ninth grade.

Minerva and Nelson frequently cited teacher involvement as a motivational factor and appeared to view these interactions as being closely tied to their reading improvement. Both students identified one teacher, in particular, as making a critical difference in their reading progress. For Minerva, it was her IEP teacher through all of upper elementary school who made her believe she was smart and could become a capable reader. Her confidence then grew in the middle school as she connected with a series of teachers who motivated her to take even further leaps as a reader. Nelson raved about Mr. Morgan, his eighth-grade READ 180 teacher, and viewed him as an authority figure who held him accountable for becoming a proficient reader. Mr. Morgan’s system of rewards and punishment, in the form of challenges and expressed disappointment, played a huge role in his progress.

Expanding the Concept of a Real-World Connection to Literature

Minerva and Nelson’s real-world connections to literacy expanded beyond mere text selection and included the enabling and empowering life-outcomes of becoming a literate individual. Nelson did not possess the strong intrinsic love of reading exhibited by Minerva, but, according to his mother, his teachers, and his own words, he cares deeply about earning high grades, pleasing his parents, and setting himself on a course to achieve professional and material success. In fact, the African American students in this study both seemed to possess a healthy sense that their success in school, in general, and as readers, specifically, was connected to success as an adult. Minerva’s mother spoke of her daughter’s acute interest in her teacher’s education levels. Minerva identified as a reader and genuinely enjoyed reading as an activity, linking it to rewards one can enjoy as an adult in the form of earning degrees.

Tatum’s (2006) findings that texts chosen for African American male adolescents should a) be enabling, b) provide students with a roadmap to success, and c) help forge a positive identity are also relevant to the cases of Nelson and Minerva. The data from these two case studies suggest that educators might view real-world connections to literature as part and parcel of a larger concept of real-world connections to literacy. These two African American students benefited from internalizing the future-oriented tangible and social rewards associated with being a good reader—from attainment of an academic degree to avoiding undesirable employment in the fast food industry, to the procurement of Nike shoes and other expensive consumer goods. Considering Minerva and Nelson’s educational narratives, it seems possible that their success may have relied just as much on one motivational source as the other.

The precise conditions in which engaging, motivating, high-level instruction can take root are not fully known. Just as skill acquisition is a necessary prerequisite for reading growth, so too may be a larger belief that literacy has a real-world connection to students’ future life goals.

In Closing

In trying to remediate and motivate struggling tween readers, the use of real-world instructional materials and methods as defined by Guthrie (2001) can perhaps best be characterized as necessary but not sufficient. The cases of Minerva and Nelson offer a view of the complexly interwoven strands that can comprise tween readers’ motivational profiles—specifically, those in the category of real-world connections. These two African American students were not only motivated by the real world and the relevant nature of the texts selected by their teachers, they were also driven by an awareness of the many educational, professional, and material doors that swing open for literate individuals. This connection may serve to buoy students through instructional experiences that are less desirable, but vital to
the acquisition of requisite literacy skills (i.e., Nelson’s experience in the Wilson program).

For Nelson, this concept of literacy relating to success in the real world began at home and was cultivated by a number of caring teachers at school. Nelson’s mom taught him from a young age that literacy competence is required in the real world, whether one is filling out forms or following directions. Most important, she was frank about her son’s future job prospects and his ability to attain desired material goods if he didn’t improve as a reader. Mr. Morgan astutely recognized Nelson’s lack of intrinsic motivation for reading, but also that he was extremely motivated by extrinsic rewards. As a result, Mr. Morgan developed an appropriate and effective instructional approach.

Minerva was a student for whom the traditional definition of real-world instruction was a driving force. Her penchant for true stories, texts that were easy to relate to, and culturally relevant topics that spawned independent reading was a driving force in her learning process. Yet, there was also a thread of Minerva’s motivational being that was highly conscious of the ways in which one’s real-life educational and professional pathway is linked to one’s ability to connect with a given text—a skill that Minerva directly equated to being a good reader.

Recognizing this more complex picture of the ways in which connections to the real world can inspire tween engagement with literature, middle school language arts teachers should consider the following:

• Take advantage of opportunities to connect literacy to future success in college and career. Students lacking in intrinsic motivation to engage in literate practices may draw inspiration from the more tangible or material by-products of reading aptitude.

• Assign text-related projects that allow students to bring their outside interests into the classroom. Incorporating music, artwork, and multimedia into the reading experience will give students the opportunity to personalize their learning, thus making it more “real.”

• Build students’ background knowledge prior to reading a novel. Front-load instruction on themes, historical and social contexts, and vocabulary to assist students in making connections to literature.

• While curricular freedom enjoyed by teachers will vary, it is important, whenever possible, to select texts that are culturally relevant; feature young, relatable protagonists; and offer ample opportunity for real-world connections.

Minerva and Nelson were, of course, the beneficiaries of more than just these classroom strategies. A middle school language arts teacher cannot instantaneously ameliorate any shortcomings of their students’ elementary school reading instruction, nor can an educator provide each student with a family member as influential as Nelson’s or Minerva’s mother. Teachers can only strive to ignite a spark of motivation that may one day, through a multitude of influences, result in the development of a literate individual.

References


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David Bergman | What Made Reading Real for Two Tweens with Learning Disabilities


**Children’s Literature Cited**


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**INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK**

When we intentionally respond to the diverse needs of our students, we are differentiating the product, process, or content of learning according to the learning style, interest, or readiness of our students. A wealth of research suggests that by framing learning with student interests in mind, teachers can increase student motivation and learning. This ReadWriteThink strategy guide discusses a number of specific methods that can help you to gain a fuller picture of your students’ interests as well as what they understand, know, and can demonstrate by doing.


Students who make connections while reading a text are better able to understand that text. It is important for students to draw on their prior knowledge and experiences to connect with the text. Students are thinking when they are connecting, which makes them more engaged in the reading experience. In this ReadWriteThink strategy guide you’ll learn how to model how students can make three different kinds of connections (text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world). Students use this knowledge to find their own personal connections to a text.


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