

SOUTH KOREAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LITERACY EVENT FOSTERS STUDENTS' MOTIVATION TO READ



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WHY SHOULD CHILDREN READ? This question must sound silly—we all know the importance of literature in children's lives from our own experiences. Children enjoy reading, expanding their imagination, and experiencing things they may otherwise never encounter, and children's literature supports their development of personal values (Huck et al., 2001). It also helps them become readers and writers: Children can strengthen their oral language, comprehension skills, and writing through reading a wide range of children's books (Krashen, 2004). Children's literature guides children to understand and express their difficult emotions, and it assures them that they are not the only ones who experience such feelings (DiCamillo, 2018). If children do not read, they miss out on these many benefits.

The importance of fostering students' motivation to read has been a subject of study for decades (e.g., Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 1996; Oldfather, 1993; Palmer et al., 1994), but teachers still face the fundamental problem of students' lack of motivation (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). Therefore, educators need to continue to explore methods to help encourage students to read (Putman & Walker, 2010). This study sought to document how students are motivated to read by looking at a sixth-grade South Korean classroom during a two-week school-wide literacy event. The findings of the study may reveal that decades-old methods to motivate students to read are still effective across time and in different cultures,

even in the tech-savvy era in which social media appears to be more popular among children than books are.

Key Features for Students' Motivation in Reading

Studies about students' motivation in reading agree on the importance of fostering classroom culture (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 1996; Oldfather, 1993; Palmer et al., 1994). Among the key features for cultivating classroom culture, students' choice in reading is clearly a powerful one. Students are excited to read when they can choose books about their interests (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). They may also obtain a sense of agency and personalize their learning to their interests and needs (Guthrie, 1996).

Another essential feature in motivating students to read is teacher modeling. This includes a wide variety of teachers' actions, such as silent reading when students read, sharing personal reading experiences, and modeling reading strategies explicitly (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 1996). Access to books and appropriate reading-related incentives are also crucial features in fostering students' motivation to read (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Gambrell, 1996; Palmer et al., 1994). Along with children's exposure to books, having a person (e.g., a teacher, a family member) who encourages students to read can be an essential factor (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). Rewards for reading can

be both intrinsic (e.g., reading with friends, reading good books) and extrinsic (e.g., receiving stickers, bookmarks, books), and these rewards may boost students' interest in reading (Gambrell, 1996).

Teacher, Class, and School

Ms. Park (all names are pseudonyms) was willing to share what she and her students did during the two weeks of their school-wide literacy event, and the 24 sixth-grade students agreed to share their written responses for this study. Ms. Park has taught for more than 20 years in elementary schools. She strongly believes in the value of children's literature and always tries to find time to read children's books in her class. Ms. Park worked in several different elementary schools before she came to Treetop Elementary. In her previous schools, she intentionally brought multicultural literature often because she had students from other countries. She brings multicultural literature to Treetop as well, but she hasn't had any students from other countries in her class. Ms. Park was one of seven sixth-grade teachers at Treetop. Each class had about 25 students, and there were about 175 sixth graders in the school.

Ms. Park's students were homogenous in terms of their families' socioeconomic status (middle class), nationality (Korean), and race (Asian). A lot of students lived in newly built tall apartment buildings near the school. Some lived in the same apartment complex, and most students walked to school by themselves. Treetop is a public elementary school located in a metropolitan city on the west coast of South Korea. It was founded in 1981, and its buildings were renovated in the early 2000s. The subway station is located nearby, and numerous bus lines pass the school. The big public library, the city hall, and the city's department of education building are located close to the school. As the population of the area has grown, so too has the student population at Treetop. Currently, Treetop serves over 1,000 students from first-grade to sixth-grade.

Literacy Event at School

Over two weeks, Treetop Elementary held its annual school-wide literacy event, and students in all grades participated. The school scheduled the two weeks for the literacy event on the school calendar, and the teachers in each grade proposed activity ideas for students. During the weeks of the literacy event, students were asked to choose any books that

they wanted to read. Then, depending on what grade students were in, they would do different activities. For example, primary-grade students made book posters or drew characters. Later, teachers displayed the students' drawings in the library and the hallway. Sixth-grade teachers decided to do a writing activity because it was in line with the writing curriculum.

Students' Self-Selection of Books

Allowing students to choose books to read turned out to be the best practice that inspired Ms. Park's students to read (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 1996; Miller, 2012; Oldfather, 1993; Palmer et al., 1994). Ms. Park said that when she assigned a book, several students always refused to read. But when she asked her students to choose whatever books they wanted to read, she did not hear a single refusal. Giving students a choice removed the option of not reading (Miller, 2012).

The selections made by students in Ms. Park's class showed how different children's interests were when choosing books. With the opportunity for self-selection, students were able to personalize their learning and explore a variety of topics, from Korean history to how to make friends (Guthrie, 1996). Most of them chose fiction; only two students chose nonfiction (see Figure 1). Among the different genres under fiction, students favored realistic fiction ($n = 12$). Fantasy was the next most chosen genre ($n = 7$), followed by Korean traditional literature ($n = 3$).

A wide variety of titles were selected. Out of 24 students, 20 chose unique titles, and only two titles were picked twice: *A Bowl of Udon* (一杯のかけそば; Ryohei, 2013) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 2000). Most students selected children's books, but three chose young adult (YA) books: the Japanese best-selling novel *Want to Eat Your Pancreas* (君の臓をたべたい; Yoru, 2017); the American novel *The Fold*, written by Korean American author An Na (2011); and Albert Camus's *La Peste* (2001). Ms. Park shared that the student who chose *La Peste* had recently received *The Collection of World Classic Books for Children* as a gift from her mom.

It was interesting that a little more than half of the students ($n = 14$) chose books written by foreign authors (see Figure 2). Five of those authors are from the United States (An Na, Andrew Clements, Kate DiCamillo, Jeff Kinney, and Rebecca Stead) and two are from Japan (Ryohei Kuri

and Yoru Sumino); other countries represented include Australia (Andy Griffiths), England (Roald Dahl), France (Albert Camus), and the Netherlands (Annie Schmidt).

Considering the audience, YA books like *Want to Eat Your Pancreas* and *The Fold* were surprising choices. Due to the book level, YA novels would not be assigned to students to read in elementary school. But, as shown in the students' choices, some sixth graders may be ready for such novels, and the free choice enabled them to look for books beyond their grade level. The overall survey of students' choices gave Ms. Park insights into what genres of books her students liked and what topics they were interested in reading about.

Figure 1
GENRE OF THE BOOK

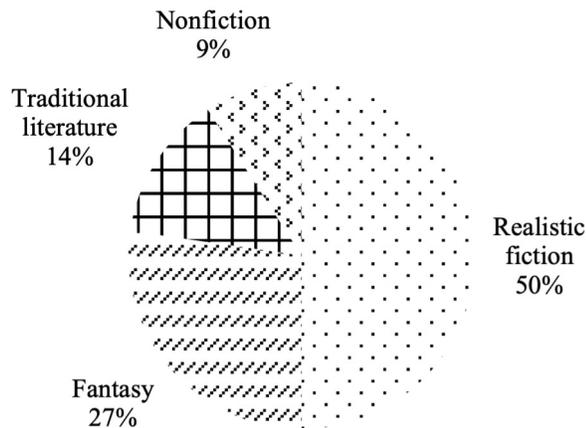
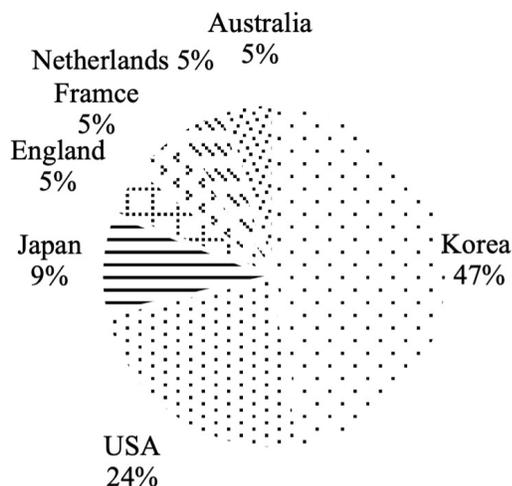


Figure 2
AUTHOR'S HOME COUNTRY



Teacher Modeling

Ms. Park said her modeling was not limited to having students see her reading; she also explicitly modeled how to respond to literature (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 1996). Since the students were asked to write one or two pages of responses after reading their chosen books, Ms. Park took this opportunity to teach writing. In fact, by looking at the students' written responses, she could tell if they understood the writing lessons. Ms. Park said the topics in the students' written responses were ones she had explicitly suggested during the writing lessons (see Table 1; the student writing is translated from Korean). She could use these written responses as assessments because they demonstrated students' comprehension and writing skills.

Access to Books

Access to books was one of the key features in supporting students' motivation to read in Ms. Park's class (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Gambrell, 1996; Palmer et al., 1994). Ms. Park had a small collection of books for her students in the classroom, and the students had access to many more books at the school library. During the two weeks of the school-wide literacy event, Ms. Park was able to schedule more library time for her students to visit so that they could have multiple chances to select books and read. Because other classes were also making extra visits, the library was busier than usual. Ms. Park said that the students understood why the library was busy and that they shared the space with other students.

Ms. Park also added morning reading time in class. Even though students were only asked to read one book, Ms. Park believed that her students ended up reading several books during the two weeks as a result of their multiple visits to the library and the added morning reading time.

Appropriate Reading-Related Incentives

Once the writing process was completed, Ms. Park formed small groups and created time for the students to share what they wrote. As part of the celebration of the school-wide literacy event, the school planned to give awards for the three best-written responses per class. Ms. Park shared this news with the students and asked them to select the three winners themselves. That may sound competitive, but Ms. Park said that the students made decisions on whose written responses deserved to be awarded without any problem. It

Table 1
TOPICS IN STUDENTS' WRITTEN RESPONSES BOOK CLUB SELECTIONS

Topic	Example of Student Writing
The reason why I chose the book	<i>One day when I was reading at home I found the funny title on the bookshelf.</i>
About the author	<i>The author of this book, Kate DiCamillo, was born in Pennsylvania, and she spent her childhood in Florida.</i>
Synopsis of the story	<i>Of course, the story happens in Japan, and it has high school students as protagonists.</i>
How I felt about the story	<i>I was impressed with Madam Park because she put other people before her despite their maltreatment of her.</i>
Author's intention	<i>It seems that through the book, the author wanted to deliver the message that there should be no war, and we should not make any weapons or buy them.</i>
Connections to life	<i>Korean adolescents today care about their appearance. They put on make-up and get cosmetic surgery.</i>
Lesson I learned	<i>After reading this scene, I thought that it doesn't matter how hard it is or how poor you are, you should not give up and keep doing your best.</i>
Whom do I recommend the book to?	<i>I'd like to introduce this book to friends who have difficulty with comprehension and tell them it has a lot of pictures.</i>

gave the students a chance to talk about what a well-written literature response looked like.

The writing activity was intended to help students deepen their understanding of literature and give them meaningful writing practice. But, this purpose could also be served without giving awards to a select few students per class. After reflecting on how the school-wide literacy event had gone, the sixth-grade teachers thought that some students' self-esteem could be lowered if they did not get an award. The teachers agreed that the writing activity should be an enjoyable experience and not a writing competition. Consequently, they decided not to give awards the following year. In Ms. Park's class, reading and sharing their favorite books may have served as the incentives that motivated students to read, not the awards for the top three best-written responses (Gambrell, 1996).

Teacher's Comments

Ms. Park said that the school-wide literacy event did promote reading and made it fun for her students. She witnessed her students enjoying reading their choice of books and engaged

in sharing their responses in class. Ms. Park added that reading was more exciting for her students during the two weeks of the literacy event because they were aware that the entire student body was reading books in school. She believed that seeing the products of reading activities in different areas of the school (e.g., libraries, hallways, and classrooms) certainly boosted the reading ambiance as well. For Ms. Park, the school-wide literacy event was a win-win situation because the students enjoyed reading and the writing activity satisfied the sixth-grade writing curriculum.

Final Thoughts

Children need to read, but we cannot force them to do so. If children are willing to pick up a book and enjoy reading, we can say that it is a great success. Individual students in Ms. Park's class had different interests and preferences in books. It can be inferred that this was one reason why the students enjoyed reading more when they could select a book by themselves rather than when they were assigned to read a specific book. The students all read different books, but their written responses showed

that they met the reading and writing standards listed in the curriculum, such as identifying a theme of the story, developing an independent reading attitude, and writing a response to literature.

This study witnessed that the decades-old methods to motivate students to read, such as self-selection, teacher modeling, and book access, can be implemented across time and cultures. These methods worked for Ms. Park's students in a South Korean elementary school—students who were used to reading posts on social media rather than reading children's books. Reading-related incentives such as awards seem to be unnecessary; instead, the students were rewarded by having agency in their learning and sharing their joy of reading. In schools like Ms. Park's Treetop Elementary, which uses textbooks for language arts, there is not much room for students to read their choice of books. Usually, students read excerpts from books that are included in the textbooks for instructional purposes; however, as shown in this study, a school can intentionally create an environment for students to have positive reading experiences. Certainly, Ms. Park endorsed the school-wide literacy event wholeheartedly. •

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