

E-Readers: Powering Up for Engagement - Educational Leadership

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 Send to Kindle

E-readers like the Amazon Kindle and the Barnes and Noble Nook are beginning to make their way into school libraries and classrooms. It's about time.

E-readers have tremendous potential to entice reluctant readers to read more. A study that we recently conducted among low-reading-ability middle school students demonstrated that potential. Students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades became more engaged and motivated during their scheduled silent sustained reading periods when they were given the opportunity to use e-readers.

The study took place in two reading improvement classes in Rivercrest Middle School in the urban metroplex of Dallas-Fort Worth. A total of 199 students—most of whom were reluctant to pick up books and saw little value in reading—were given the option to use Kindle e-readers during their scheduled sustained silent reading time. In both classes, students could choose to read printed text, but the majority of them chose to use the e-readers.

The devices were loaded with 25 books, including classics like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Black Beauty* and ghost stories and scary stories like *Forever Neverland* and *They're Coming for You: Scary Stories That Scream to Be Read*. Some students read the classic novels, but the ghost stories and scary stories proved to be more popular. After two months, most of the students reported that they had read one to four books during the sustained silent reading period.

Benefits of E-Readers

Motivation

Engagement is the key to successful reading and learning. In fact, time spent in engaged reading is “the best predictor of measures of reading achievement, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and reading speed, including gains in reading comprehension between 2nd and 5th grade” (Anderson, Fielding, & Wilson, 1988, p. 285).

In our study, pre- and post-assessments using the Motivation to Read Profile (tested by Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996) found significant gains in students’ attitudes about the value of reading and their view of themselves as readers, especially among the boys. Our follow-up interviews shed light on this phenomenon.

One boy said he liked the e-reader because the book he was reading was always available—he didn’t have to worry about someone else reading it or taking it out of the classroom. Another boy pointed out that the e-reader enabled him to read what he wanted without carrying around a lot of books.

We recognize that the novelty of a new gadget—especially a technology gadget—plays an important role in motivation. Certainly, the reluctant readers at Rivercrest Middle School were motivated to read partly because their classrooms had been specifically chosen for the e-reader experiment. With such enthusiasm, we were not surprised that students easily learned to manage the e-reader and its features. They quickly figured out how to adjust the font size, choose horizontal or vertical orientations, and play with the voice-to-text features. They learned how to bookmark their places and how to locate unknown words with the dictionary feature. Their interest in the new technology motivated many students to explore first and then settle into reading.

Easy Response to Text

Responding to text is one way that students establish comprehension and improve their skill in understanding, predicting, and critically analyzing what they read. Larson (2009, 2010) observed students spontaneously using the highlight feature of the Kindle called "My Clippings" to leave personal notes and questions about what they were reading. She concluded that such features were a valuable way for middle school students to demonstrate the reflection that must accompany meaningful reading.

Rather than write responses in spiral notebooks, students can leave a trail of responses on their e-readers. The response-to-text feature allows the reader to position the cursor at a desired entry point, type a personal note, and save the response. Once the responses are saved, students can share them with peers and teachers, and they can also see what other readers have written in response to the same section of text. They can even use the response-to-text feature as their own personal reference for writing a paper. To take full advantage of the power of e-readers to encourage student response to text, we recommend providing one e-reader for each student.

Extra Support for English Language Learners

English language learners and other students who read below grade level can improve their reading skills when they have opportunities to practice on lower-level texts (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). For middle school students, however, reading lower-level texts may be embarrassing, and the fear of what their fellow students will think may discourage them from reading.

E-readers enable teachers to provide appropriate texts to struggling middle school readers privately. The teacher can upload and assign easier-to-read texts, perhaps supplemented with some free-choice texts. Classmates need not be aware of what others are reading.

Voice-to-text is another feature of the e-reader that can support English language learners. Most of the students in our study were not fond of the voice-to-text feature because of the nature of the voice, which they found robotic. Two of the English language learners, however, brought their earphones so that they could listen to sections of their e-books. This feature seemed to help them gain confidence in English reading and speaking. With continuing improvements in technology, we expect that the voice-to-text feature will improve with newer editions of e-readers.

Increased Confidence with Technology

As technology tools like e-readers and e-books become more integrated into our lives, facility with such devices will be an increasingly important part of literacy learning. Today's students must learn how to use such tools, as well as to critically evaluate how technologies can aid or possibly hinder their learning. Many of the students at the middle school in our study came from low-income families, and their home use of technology was limited. This was all the more reason to give them ample opportunities at school to learn about, use, and evaluate technologies such as computers, flip cameras, video-making software, and e-readers.

Economic Advantages

Including e-readers and e-books in school and library budgets may reduce the amount of money spent on hard-copy texts and materials. Additional cost savings may come from reduced replacement costs for lost or damaged hard-copy texts.

However, we are not advocating e-readers and e-books as cost-saving measures. In fact, we hope that school administrators plan for sizable start-up costs that enable every student in reading improvement classes to have his or her own e-reader, rather than share with others in the class or school. We suggest that

administrators, librarians, and teachers think of the e-reader as one more important tool to help middle school students succeed at reading.

Students See the Benefits

Educators' reasons for using e-readers in middle school—enhancing student enjoyment and motivation, providing additional support for struggling students and English language learners, and so on—make good sense. But the reasons that middle school readers give for reading with e-readers are perhaps more powerful. After two months of using the e-readers, students in our study said,

- The e-reader has very good books.
- It's cool because it's like a computer.
- I like the dictionary.
- It is easy to use.
- It helps me read faster.
- I like to read more now because the stories are interesting to me.
- I better understand what I read.

It appears that struggling readers in middle school understand what they need for success in reading. They know that engagement is what it takes to become a better reader, and technology may hold the key to such engagement.

References

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Authors' note: Rivercrest Middle School is a pseudonym.

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