



Longitudinal relations between reading motivation and reading comprehension in the early elementary grades[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 November 2015
Received in revised form 16 July 2016
Accepted 19 August 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Reading motivation
Reading comprehension
Elementary school students
Longitudinal study

ABSTRACT

Although previous research has documented significant and substantial relations between reading motivation and reading comprehension for late elementary and secondary school students, there is a lack of studies involving students in the early elementary grades and applying longitudinal designs. Accordingly, we conducted a longitudinal study with 1051 second- and third-grade students and measured their reading motivation and reading comprehension performance at two different time points one year apart. The results confirmed reciprocal relations between involvement (a component of intrinsic reading motivation) and reading comprehension at the word and sentence levels but not at the passage level. Competition-oriented reading motivation (a component of extrinsic reading motivation) did not predict reading comprehension but was itself negatively affected by reading comprehension. In sum, the findings suggest that even at early stages of learning to read, intrinsic reading motivation contributes to students' development of reading competence.

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1. Introduction

The early elementary school years are a crucial time for the development of reading skills. Reading performance in those years is highly predictive of reading performance in later years (Butler, Marsh, Sheppard, & Sheppard, 1985; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). For example, students who are experiencing problems in the stages of early reading acquisition are likely to struggle all throughout school (Butler et al., 1985; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Hanson & Farrell, 1995). Moreover, there is evidence for an increasing gap in reading skills between good and poor readers over time (Bast & Reitsma, 1997; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; McCoach, O'Connell, Reis, & Levitt, 2006). Accordingly, children who started out as relatively good readers will continue to display higher reading growth than their classmates who started out as poor readers. Moreover, there is evidence that the gap between good and poor readers is reinforced in the early elementary school years, and from then on remains relatively stable (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Retelsdorf & Möller, 2008; Scarborough & Parker, 2003). This makes it all the more imperative to examine early relationships between reading skills and related motivational, behavioral, or cognitive factors that may catalyze these life-long trajectories (Bast & Reitsma, 1998).

2. Intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation

One factor that has been shown to be significantly associated with reading comprehension is reading motivation (Becker, McElvany, & Kortenbruck, 2010; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Retelsdorf, Köller, & Möller, 2011; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006; see overview by Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012). Reading motivation is usually defined in terms of the incentives the reader attaches to reading (e.g., involvement, social recognition). Furthermore, in line with more general motivation theories (e.g., Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2014), reading motivation is categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for reading. Intrinsically motivated readers read for enjoyment and because they find the process of reading rewarding in itself, whereas extrinsically motivated readers read in order to achieve goals that lie beyond the actual process of reading (e.g., receiving praise for being a frequent reader). Although a wide variety of dimensions of reading motivation have been proposed (Schiefele et al., 2012; Watkins & Coffey, 2004; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), most researchers have used unitary measures or have combined individual dimensions into composite scores of intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation. Based on the influential work of Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) (see also Guthrie et al., 1999; Wang & Guthrie, 2004), we suggest the following core dimensions of reading motivation: *curiosity* (to learn more about topics of one's interest) and *involvement* (to get lost in a story or experience imaginative actions) as indicators of intrinsic reading motivation, and *grades* (to improve one's grades in school, particularly in reading), *competition* (to reach higher levels of school achievement than other students, particularly in reading), and *recognition* (to get praise for

[☆] The research reported in this article was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG; GRK 1668/1).

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good reading performance) as indicators of extrinsic reading motivation (see also Schiefele et al., 2012). Wigfield and Guthrie have based their framework on various motivation theories including expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and intrinsic motivation theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition, their framework was informed by a qualitative interview study on third- and fifth-grade students' motivation to read (Guthrie, Van Meter, McCann, & Wigfield, 1996).

The relation between intrinsic reading motivation and reading comprehension has been consistently found to be positive, whereas extrinsic reading motivation appears to have a negative or a nonsignificant relationship with reading comprehension (Andreassen & Bråten, 2010; Becker et al., 2010; Law, 2008, 2009; Retelsdorf et al., 2011; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006; Wang & Guthrie, 2004). However, most of the previous evidence on the motivation-comprehension relation has been obtained for samples of older students (Grade 4 or higher). Pertaining to younger students (below Grade 4), two studies (Hamilton, Nolen, & Abbott, 2013; Law, 2008) have confirmed the assumed negative relation between measures of extrinsic reading motivation and reading comprehension in samples of second-grade students. In contrast, previous studies involving students in the early elementary grades did not observe significant positive relations between intrinsic reading motivation and reading comprehension at the word level (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995), at the word and sentence levels (Nurmi & Aunola, 2005), and at the passage level (Hamilton et al., 2013). As an exception, McElvany, Kortenbruck, and Becker (2008) reported a significant correlation between intrinsic reading motivation and passage-level comprehension in a sample of third-grade students.

In our view, a possible cause for the lack of significant relations between elementary students' intrinsic reading motivation and reading comprehension refers to the assessment of intrinsic reading motivation (cf. Stutz, Schaffner, & Schiefele, 2016). Specifically, Chapman and Tunmer (1995) and Nurmi and Aunola (2005) used measures that were not based on empirically or theoretically founded dimensions of intrinsic reading motivation and instead relied on ad hoc instruments that defined intrinsic reading motivation as liking of reading. In contrast, Stutz et al. (2016) indicated intrinsic reading motivation by a scale capturing *involvement* and observed significant correlations between that scale and measures of word, sentence, and passage comprehension in students at Grades 1–3.

3. Direction of effects between reading motivation and reading comprehension

The evidence for significant motivation-comprehension associations in older students (Grade 4 and higher) is largely based on cross-sectional data and, thus, does not address the direction of the relation between reading motivation and reading comprehension (Becker et al., 2010). Theoretically, the relationship between reading motivation and reading comprehension is thought to be bidirectional (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Schiefele et al., 2012). On the one hand, children who fail repeatedly at reading are likely to think of reading as a frustrating experience, thus developing a detrimental motivational pattern towards this activity (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). In line with this assumption, studies suggest that beginning readers' difficulties in reading negatively influence their reading-related self-perceptions and motivation (Chapman & Tunmer, 2003; Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2000). On the other hand, a detrimental motivational pattern with respect to reading is likely to result in poor reading skills (Schiefele et al., 2012).

In the case of intrinsic reading motivation, the effect on reading comprehension has been explained by assuming that intrinsically motivated readers are likely to read more on their own accord and, thus, practice comprehension processes to a larger degree (Guthrie et al., 1999). Concurrently, children who succeed at reading feel more confident and efficacious and are therefore more intrinsically motivated than children who fail at reading (Chapman et al., 2000). A similar chain of effects

may be assumed for the negative relation between extrinsic reading motivation and reading comprehension. Extrinsically motivated children are likely to read only when it is necessary, for example, in order to achieve well in school or to please their parents. Because leisure-time reading is strongly under the control of intrinsic incentives, the reading amount and comprehension performance of readers with high extrinsic motivation will be not different or even lower when compared to less extrinsically motivated readers (Becker et al., 2010; Schaffner, Schiefele, & Ulferts, 2013; Wang & Guthrie, 2004). At the same time, children who start out as poor readers often avoid reading and the negative feelings that they associate with this activity (Stanovich, 1986). As a result, these children tend to be extrinsically motivated and read mainly in order to attain extrinsic incentives such as praise by significant others or good grades in school.

The assumed reciprocal relation between reading motivation and reading comprehension has been rarely addressed directly (cf. Schiefele et al., 2012). A few studies have controlled for prior reading performance when examining the association between reading motivation and later reading comprehension. For example, Retelsdorf et al. (2011) were able to demonstrate that intrinsic reading motivation in Grade 5 significantly predicted growth of comprehension performance from Grades 5 to 8. Similar findings were reported by Wang and Guthrie (2004) and Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, and Guthrie (2009)¹ for fourth-grade students and by Froiland and Oros (2014) for fifth-grade students. Wang and Guthrie also showed a significant negative effect of extrinsic reading motivation on reading comprehension when controlling for prior reading achievement. However, in all of these studies, the reverse effects of comprehension performance on reading motivation were not analyzed.

In terms of the examination of reciprocal relations between reading motivation and comprehension, we have only identified two studies. In the first study, Guthrie et al. (2007) analyzed a small sample of fourth graders during a three-month period between September (T1) and December (T2) of a school year. In order to assess reading motivation, the authors interviewed students by addressing their intrinsic reading motivation (e.g., interests in different kinds of books), social reading motivation (e.g., talking about books with friends), and reading efficacy. Separate regression analyses revealed that all three indicators of intrinsic reading motivation (interest, choice, and involvement), but not social motivation and efficacy, significantly predicted comprehension growth between T1 and T2. However, the effect of intrinsic reading motivation was only found when comprehension was measured by a standardized comprehension test but not when using an investigator-developed test. Moreover, both measures of comprehension did not contribute to growth in reading motivation. It should be noted that Guthrie et al.'s study is not typical in several ways and should be interpreted with care. Specifically, the sample size was rather small ($n = 31$), the indicators of reading motivation were generated by means of interviews, and all students participated in a training program that was designed to increase both intrinsic reading motivation and reading comprehension.

In the second study addressing reciprocal relations, McElvany et al. (2008) examined the development of reading comprehension and intrinsic reading motivation of third-grade students by means of a cross-lagged panel design involving three waves of measurement (at grade levels 3, 4, and 6). The findings confirmed a reciprocal relation between reading motivation and comprehension. Specifically, McElvany et al. reported a significant effect of Grade 3 intrinsic reading motivation on Grade 4 comprehension, and significant effects of Grade 3 comprehension on intrinsic reading motivation at both Grades 4 and 6. Extrinsic reading motivation was not included in that study.

¹ It should be noted that Taboada et al. (2009) did not use self-report measures of students' motivation but instead had teachers rate their students' "internal" reading motivation (involving aspects of intrinsic motivation, efficacy, and social collaboration).

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