The importance of cognition and motivation in reading

A summary for teachers

Background: There is considerable research evidence highlighting important roles for decoding, language skills and memory for children’s reading comprehension; however there is less evidence of the importance of motivation on comprehension.

Aim: This study examined the importance of both cognitive and motivational factors for children’s reading attainment. Furthermore, the nature of motivation that contributes to children’s reading attainment was examined: whether domain specific (reading motivation) or general (school motivation).

Participants and details of study: 105 children (average age 8 years 8 months, .28 SD) participated in this study. Children completed assessments of reading comprehension, language skills, phonological decoding, memory and reading and school motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic motivation).

Results:

Reading comprehension skills correlated with language skills (r = .56**), decoding (r = .60**), memory (r = .52**), intrinsic reading motivation (r = .27**) intrinsic school motivation (r = .27**) and reading confidence (r = .47**).

After taking into account language skills, decoding skill and memory, reading motivation and reading confidence predicted additional variance in reading comprehension skill.

Discussion and educational implications: Children’s reading motivation and reading confidence are important factors which predict reading comprehension skills, after taking into account cognitive abilities known to be important for comprehension (i.e., language, decoding and working memory). Intrinsic reading motivation (i.e., being motivated from internal factors – e.g., curiosity) and not extrinsic reading motivation (i.e., being motivated by external factors – e.g., grades) was a significant predictor, therefore efforts to enhance intrinsic motivation may be particularly effective on reading attainment.

In addition, reading motivation and confidence, but not school motivation and confidence, predicted reading comprehension after taking into account cognitive abilities; therefore, efforts to enhance intrinsic reading motivation specifically and not school motivation more generally, will be necessary to enhance reading skills.

Reading instruction and support in schools should focus on fostering positive reading motivation and reading confidence, in addition to developing important cognitive abilities. At present, there is a lack of research understanding effective approaches to enhance reading motivation and confidence.