



# CHOICE CHANGES EVERYTHING

Choice is at the heart of Book Trust's approach to supporting literacy learning. Opportunities to choose books lead to increased motivation and more focused interest, both of which boost achievement. Because choosing well is a deceptively difficult skill to master, the regular practice and robust support from teachers and classmates students receive in Book Trust classrooms is crucial to their success, both as maturing readers today and self-directed learners throughout life.

## **Choice is key to motivation and interest, which are both key to achievement**

Helping students develop the habit of reading voluntarily, frequently, and at length is itself an important goal of literacy education. We want to create readers who use texts to understand and participate in the world, habitually and with relish. Increasing motivation is also a means to the end of making sure they can do so skillfully. The more motivated students are to read, and the more they do read, the higher their reading achievement.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most powerful ways to increase students' motivation to read is to allow them to choose their own books.<sup>2</sup> Rigorous experimental research demonstrates that providing students choice in literacy instruction leads to large gains in how motivated students are to read and how much they read on their own initiative; choice also increases motivation and performance on learning tasks across the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Choice gives students an experience of autonomy, developing attitudes and habits of mind that support self-directed learning across subject areas.<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons that choice stokes motivation is that it allows students read about topics in which they are interested. In the process, it helps young readers strengthen, expand and better understand their interests. As with motivation, cultivating interest is both an end of literacy instruction and means of increasing achievement. Research shows that level of interest directly influences reading comprehension.<sup>5</sup> Interest and competence are correlated over time; students with interests that are strong and focused earn better grades than those whose interests are weak or poorly defined.<sup>6</sup> Cultivating and understanding interests is key to developing career identity and contributes to psychological well-being.<sup>7</sup>

## **Choosing books well requires practice and support**

Just as students rarely enter the elementary school classroom with fully formed interests that they can articulate clearly, few are prepared to choose consistently books they will love and that will best advance their development as readers. Choosing the right books is a skill that requires modeling and practice to master.

On its face, the choice of a children's book may seem straightforward. Students simply need to pick books that are neither too easy or too hard. Multiple leveling systems are available to help (although the difficulty of ascribed to text can vary by up to three grade levels across them).<sup>8</sup> However, research shows that there is a complex set of factors that contribute to a fit between a book and its reader. Books most likely to motivate a child and accelerate their growth have not only at an appropriate level of textual complexity but also connect with their interests, preferences, existing knowledge, cultural experience, and personal goals for reading.<sup>9</sup> These factors interact. For example, a student can handle texts well above their tested "level" when they are highly motivated to read them, feel confident, have significant relevant prior knowledge, and/or are familiar with the genre.

Before such complex interactions can be taken into consideration, children need to be able to draw their choices from a wide enough variety of titles to account for their individual differences across the salient textual characteristics, several hundred books for a typical elementary school class.<sup>10</sup> But, too many options can be overwhelming, dampening rather than amplifying motivation.<sup>11</sup>

In short, choosing the right book is right difficult. Research demonstrates that providing support for book choice—such as teaching students strategies for choosing well, conferring with them individually about their goals, and guiding them in reflecting on their reading experiences—yields substantial gains in reading motivation and achievement from independent reading, in class during the year and at home over the summer.<sup>12</sup>

## Book Trust powerfully provides support for choice

Book Trust's program not only gives students in low income schools the chance to choose books but also helps teachers support students to take full advantage of that opportunity. Book Trust's approach combines ownership, practice, coaching & culture.

***From borrower to owner:*** Like a good library, Book Trust offers a wide selection of books from which students may choose. While Book Trust empowers teachers to create custom catalogs for their classes that make considering the options more manageable, they have thousands of titles from which to draw. However, Book Trust doesn't just loan books to students or contribute them to teachers' classroom libraries. The books students choose each month become part of their personal libraries. Book ownership contributes to motivation to a much greater extent than access alone, and its lastingness increases the chances choices will be psychologically satisfying.<sup>13</sup>

***From one-off to regular practice:*** Many programs provide books for children who need them through one-time opportunities, such as choosing a few books at an annual book fair or at the beginning of the summer to read over break. In contrast, Book Trust students choose books each month, throughout the school year. These regular, repeated opportunities to choose allow students to practice, building their skill at choosing well and their understanding of their own interests as they learn from the experience of reading the books they have selected.

***From player to coach:*** While in other programs leave students to fend for themselves during independent reading, Book Trust teachers help their students capitalize on the opportunity to practice choice by coaching them. Drawing on materials provided by Book Trust, teachers share selection strategies, consult with students individually, and encourage students to share their reading through writing and discussion.

***From "a one-off activity" to "how we do things here:"*** Monthly opportunities to select books to own establish consequential choice as the norm, not an exception. Similarly, Book Trust encourages teachers to create a classroom culture of literacy in which student choice and interest are integral, not just a special occasion or break from "real work." Book Trust classrooms are welcoming environments in which students take responsibility for themselves as readers alongside teachers and peers who guide, encourage, and celebrate them.

The choice of books offered to students, and the complexity they confront when choosing, reflects a larger challenge faced by us all. Increasingly, we get to make choices where past generations had few options, opening new horizons of possibility. Unfortunately, support for developing the capacity to benefit fully from these new opportunities is in short supply, yielding costly mistakes and widespread anxiety.<sup>14</sup> By supporting students as they embrace the complex challenge of choosing their own books, Book Trust's program not only sets them on the path to becoming engaged and joyful readers but also helps to prepare them to capitalize on the wider set of choices that await them throughout life.

## Endnotes

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