

# What motivates students to read at school? Student views on reading practices in middle and lower-secondary school

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Reading amount is decisive for individual students' academic success as well as for the general strength of democratic societies. Still, the amount of both leisure-time and school-related reading is decreasing. To reverse this trend, more knowledge of what drives students' school reading is needed. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study is based on structured interviews with 259 students in Grades 6 and 9 from 14 different schools. Descriptive statistical analyses were made to map students' perceptions of themselves as readers and their school-related reading practices and to find out what regulates students' motivation for in-class reading. Although students express a strong will to become good readers, our data indicate that students are mainly driven by controlled motivation for their school-related reading; autonomous motivation was only expressed by a minority of students in Grade 6. What would make students read more are mainly text and instruction related factors such as more interesting texts and more time allocated to reading. Our results point to a great potential for more in-class reading across the curriculum, reading sessions that need to be regularly scheduled using carefully selected texts. In line with SDT, our findings highlight the importance of fulfilling students' need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy in order for them to develop more self-determined behaviour, such as leisure-time reading – which in turn will boost their reading self-concept.

**Keywords:** school reading, reading motivation, reading self-concept, student perceptions, Self-Determination Theory

## Highlights

### *What is already known about this topic*

- Students who practice reading more tend to become more competent readers and therefore develop a more positive relationship with reading and themselves as readers (reading self-concept).
- Autonomous motivation strongly predicts reading achievement, whereas controlled motivation negatively predicts reading outcomes.
- The amount of both leisure-time and school-related reading is decreasing in many parts of the western world, highlighting the need for schools to find new ways of engaging students in reading practices.

### *What this paper adds*

- Students want to be good readers and know that they need to read more to become good readers.
- In contrast to leisure-time reading, students' school-related reading practices are driven far more by controlled than autonomous motivation, especially by the time they reach secondary school.
- Students would read more if they were provided with more interesting texts, the possibility to choose, and if more class time were allocated to reading.

### *Implications for theory, policy or practice*

- Autonomy-supporting reading sessions need to be regularly and amply scheduled across the curriculum to ensure reading practices that can develop reader competence.
- Schools need to ensure that students have access to a variety of texts to choose from according to both personal interest and level of difficulty.
- Educators need to design reading practices that fulfil students' need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy in order for them to develop more self-determined behaviour and a more positive perception of themselves as readers.

Although students' total amount of reading is a key to developing the kind of reading skills needed to succeed in school (Hammerschmidt-Snidarich et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 1990), recent studies suggest that we are heading in the opposite direction. Leisure reading continues to decline among young people in many parts of the western world (Clark et al., 2020; Mullis et al., 2017; Twenge et al., 2018). In Sweden, too, there are alarming reports of less reading among children and adolescents as a result of growing competition from various screen media (Statens medieråd, 2021). It is also known from research that students spend relatively little time on reading at school to compensate for these changing media habits. In PIRLS 2016, Swedish teachers report that only 12% of the total time at school is devoted to reading, including reading across the curriculum (Mullis et al., 2017). A recent study by our research group (Vinterek et al., 2020) shows a clear trend from 2007 to 2017 of an increasing proportion of students in both primary and lower-secondary school who read less than one whole page of connected text during a regular school day, counting both nonfiction and fiction across the curriculum. Similar trends

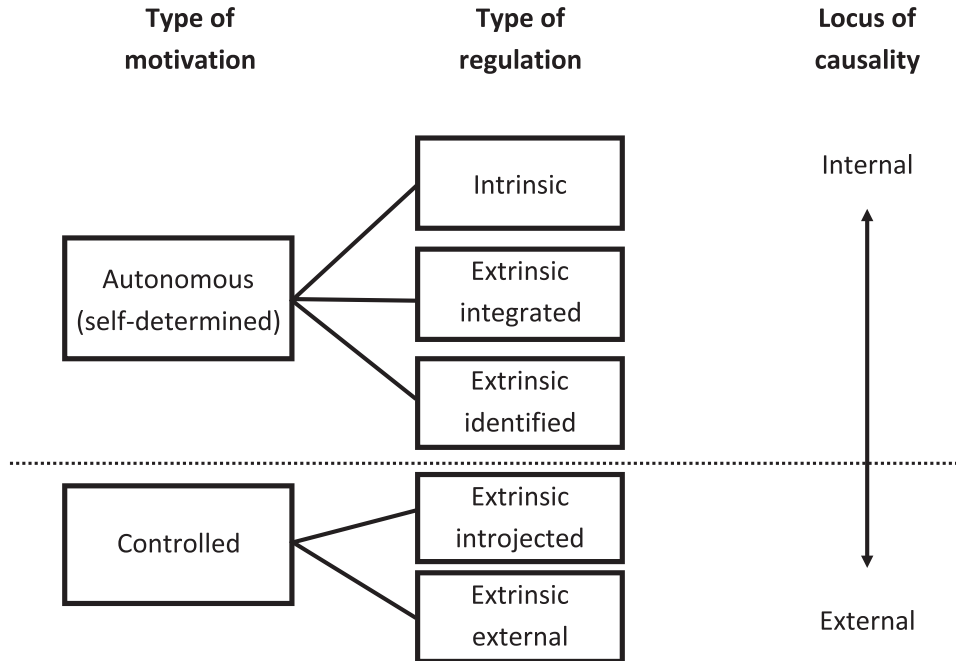
of decreasing levels of school reading have been noted internationally (Merga, 2013; Swanson et al., 2016).

Thus, there is a need to develop knowledge about what factors that lie behind these changing school-related reading practices, that is, why most students read less today than 10 years ago, counting all types of school-initiated reading activities of connected text across the curriculum. In a previous large-scale survey study, we have found the relationship between students' general motivation for school-related reading and their amount of reading in class to be weak (Winberg et al., 2021). The results suggest that there are other types of autonomous as well as controlled reading motivation behind students' amount of school-related reading than there are behind voluntary leisure-time reading, where the relation between autonomous (self-determined) motivation and reading amount has been found to be strong (see, e.g. Troyer et al., 2019). The main objective of the present study is therefore to further understand what motivates students to read – and would make them read more – at school. To achieve this understanding of what regulates students' school-related reading practices, the study starts out by investigating students' views of themselves as readers and their reading practices.

### *Conceptual framework*

The present study draws primarily on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008) for its understanding of students' motivation for school-related reading. SDT was developed by Ryan and Deci to identify what distinct types, rather than amount, of regulation that moves a person to act, and to determine what specifiable consequences the different types of motivation have for learning, performance, personal experience and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Based on numerous empirical studies in various academic fields, SDT postulates that *intrinsic* motivation (doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable) results in higher-quality learning and creativity compared with *extrinsic* motivation (doing something because it leads to a separable outcome). However, not all forms of extrinsic motivation are seen as negative, as SDT distinguishes between different subtypes of extrinsic regulation to highlight those regulatory styles that have a more internal locus of causality, resulting in more autonomous, or self-determined, behaviour. Consequently, instead of differentiating between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, SDT makes a distinction between *autonomous* and *controlled* motivation, thus positing a more nuanced motivational theory that pays more attention to the perceived locus of causality and level of autonomy of human behaviour, rather than only focusing on the level of interest and enjoyment. The types of extrinsic regulation that SDT sees as autonomous are those that a person has either *identified* with ('I read because I know it is of importance to me') or fully *integrated* ('I read because I am a reader') as part of their own sense of self (Figure 1). These more internally and autonomously regulated types of behaviour are thus contrasted with the *introjected* ('I read to avoid looking bad in front of the others') and fully *extrinsic* ('I read because the teacher tells me to') types of regulation which are more externally regulated.

Moreover, according to SDT the degrees to which the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are supported or thwarted affect both the type and strength of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Thus, in order for students to develop more autonomous motivation and more self-determined behaviour – which in turn predicts



**Figure 1.** The principal components of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

outcomes such as psychological health and well-being, effective performance, creative problem solving and deep or conceptual learning – they need classroom conditions that enhance their experience of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). It is within this conceptual framework that the present study seeks to understand what drives students' school-related reading practices. To contextualise our study, a selection of previous research of relevance to our key questions is presented, research which will also help us to interpret our results in the discussion section, and to highlight the specific contributions of the study.

### *Literature review*

*Students' perceptions of themselves as readers.* Research has shown that students' conception of themselves as readers, often referred to as *reading self-concept* – including 'one's sense of competence and the role ascribed to reading as a part of one's personal identity' (Conradi, Jang, & McKenna, 2014 p. 154) – is strongly related to both reading performance and reading achievement (Chapman et al., 2000; Susperreguy et al., 2018). For example, Katzir et al., (2009) found that children with a positive reading self-concept performed higher on reading comprehension tests after accounting for their verbal ability and word reading. In the domain of reading, this correlation was confirmed by Retelsdorf et al., (2014) who found reciprocal effects between reading self-concept and reading achievement among secondary school students. Thus, there seems to be a

strong agreement among researchers that students' reading self-concept is a product of past experiences and a predictor of future achievement.

Studies have also shown that students' self-conception as readers tend to vary with age and gender. Girls tend to have a more positive view of themselves as readers than boys (McKenna et al., 2012; Schiefele et al., 2012). Concerning age differences, previous research has shown that young children's relatively strong reading self-concepts tend to become less positive and more differentiated as they grow older, a process that starts already when students are 2 to 3 years into their school-related reading practices (Chapman et al., 2000) and continues into adolescence (Guay et al., 2003). Considering the importance of students' conception of themselves as readers for their development of more self-determined behaviour and future success as readers, as evidenced by previous research, it becomes relevant for the present study to start by determining how the students in our sample perceive themselves as readers, an aspect addressed in research question 1 below.

*Students' perceptions of school-related reading difficulty.* Students' reading self-concept is thus closely related to their perceptions of reading difficulty. Although textual properties such as vocabulary, syntax, cohesion and genre are decisive for how difficult students will find their school-related reading (Benjamin, 2012), research has also shown that reader-related factors (e.g. memory, attention and cognition) and context-related factors (e.g. community, ethnicity and teaching) are equally important for students' perceptions of reading difficulty (Mesmer et al., 2012). Thus, the kind of reading instruction and reading tasks that students are given before, during and after the reading will also affect their perception of reading difficulty (Valencia et al., 2014). Therefore, the present study follows Amendum, Conradi, and Hiebert (2018) and defines students' *perceived* reading difficulty, not diagnosed functional impairments, as referring to how easy or difficult a specific reading activity is perceived by readers in a given context. Students' perceived reading difficulty as well as to what they ascribe their difficulties are thus of relevance for the type of motivation they develop, issues that are addressed in response to research question 2 below.

*Students' motivation to read at school.* Most previous research on students' academic reading motivation has dealt with the relation between type of motivation and various reading *outcomes*, and a general agreement among these studies is that intrinsic motivation strongly predicts text comprehension and other types of reading achievement, whereas extrinsic motivation negatively predicts these reading outcomes (e.g. Troyer et al., 2019; Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Research has also shown that school-related reading motivation tends to vary due to age and gender. Students' general motivation to read, in terms of beliefs, values and attitudes, has been found to decline when students reach lower secondary school (Wigfield et al., 2016). Although using slightly different conceptual frameworks, studies have also shown that girls report greater intrinsic reading motivation than boys, in the USA (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), the UK (McGeown et al., 2012) and Germany (Becker & McElvany, 2018).

However, what type of motivation that regulates students' academic, or school-related, reading *practices*, that is, what they *do* rather than *can* do, has not been as well researched. Pitcher et al. (2007) have shown that students' experiences with academic reading and writing did not match their interests and needs, and Cox and Guthrie (2001) have shown that reading motivation contributes more to the amount of leisure-time reading than to

the amount of reading for school. In a previous study (Winberg et al., 2021), we found that students' school reading was driven by both autonomous and controlled motivation, although the level of autonomous motivation was significantly lower, especially among students in Grade 9 compared to Grade 6. The relationship between students' academic reading motivation and reading amount was very weak, explaining only 1–15% of students' total amount school-related reading.

Therefore, in response to research question 3 below, the present study not only investigates why students read at school, it also addresses the question of what, according to the students themselves, would make them read more school-related texts. In a similar study, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that the kind of reading practice that sixth-grade students valued the most were independent silent reading and the teacher reading aloud as part of instructional time. What would motivate them to read more at school were primarily better quality and diversity of reading materials rather than classroom setting or other people.

### *Research questions*

To build further on this body of research on what motivates students in their school-related reading practices, the following research questions are addressed in the present study:

- 1 How do students perceive themselves as readers?
- 2 How do students perceive their school-related reading difficulty?
- 3 What types of motivation for school-related reading do students express?

Significant differences according to age and gender are addressed in relation to each research question to enable comparisons with previous research in other settings.

## **Method**

### *The Swedish school system*

As the present study was carried out in a Swedish context, some basic background facts are provided. Compulsory school in Sweden is divided into Pre-school year, Grades 1–3, Grades 4–6 (middle school) and Grades 7–9 (lower secondary). Normally, children start the year they turn six. Since the early 1990s, Sweden has a system of 'free school choice' among both municipal and independent schools, which are fully funded through a public voucher system. In 2018, about 15% of all students in compulsory school attended independent schools (Skolverket, n.d.).

### *Design and participants*

The present study is part of a larger project that includes a large-scale survey measuring students' total amount of reading at school (Vinterek et al., 2020) and how that reading amount is related to students' type of motivation (Winberg et al., 2021). Based on the results of the survey ( $N = 3308$ ), 16 classes from different schools were chosen for this follow-up interview study including 259 students (124 boys and 135 girls). Because the overall aim of the present study was to find out what motivational factors that drive students' school-related reading practices, we wanted participants who read a lot despite low levels of motivation as well as those who did not read in spite of high levels of

motivation. Therefore, half of the respondents, both in Grade 6 and Grade 9, were selected from school units that on average scored high on reading amount (according to students' self-reported number of pages) but low on reading motivation, and the other half from school units that scored low on reading amount but high on reading motivation (Winberg et al., 2021). The average socioeconomic index of the selected school units reflected that of semi-rural Sweden. Among the students attending these schools, 27% had 'foreign background' (i.e. born abroad or both parents born abroad) and 49% had one or more parents with post-secondary education, compared to 25% and 58%, respectively, in Sweden as a whole. Among the students who were interviewed, 10% attended independent schools, which is below the national average of 15%. The socioeconomic as well as educational contexts of the independent schools, however, are in line with the national average.

The selection of schools thus ensures an even variation in terms of average reading amount and student motivation at the same time as it reflects the socioeconomic and demographic realities of the region. However, the sample was deemed too small to allow separate analyses based on these factors.

### *Procedures*

The 259 students were interviewed by five researchers during the spring of 2018. Four researchers interviewed in total 101 students in Grade 6 and 93 students in Grade 9, during or shortly after lessons in Chemistry (5 sixth graders and 2 ninth graders), Swedish (L1) (43 sixth graders and 44 ninth graders), History (31 sixth graders and 36 ninth graders) and English (L2) (22 sixth graders and 11 ninth graders). In order to receive more data, an undergraduate research assistant interviewed 65 sixth graders during and shortly after Swedish (L1) lessons. These four school subjects were chosen to obtain students' perceptions of potentially different types of reading practices across the curriculum, although separate analyses were not made for the different subjects in the present study as numbers were limited.

The majority of interviews were conducted directly after reading practices in the preceding class to obtain students' immediate response. When this was not possible, students were interviewed during the ongoing lesson. All researchers followed a structured interview guide to ensure data consistency between groups. Student answers were documented by pen directly on the interview guide by the researcher and then transferred to a common Excel file. The open-ended answers were further analysed and coded in NVivo.

### *The instrument*

The interview guide consisted of 24 questions and items assessing students' views of themselves as readers and their school-related reading practices, out of which nine were selected to achieve the purpose of this study and to answer our three research questions. To gain knowledge of students' perceptions of themselves as readers (RQ 1), we included four statements which students responded to on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): 'I see myself as a good reader', 'I want to be a good reader', 'I know how to be a good reader', and 'I read a lot in leisure-time'. Further, to find out what students put into the concept of 'a good reader', we asked what they themselves could do to become a better reader, as an open-ended question.



To learn more about how students perceived their school-related reading (RQ 2), we asked if they found the reading during the preceding class ‘difficult’, ‘in-between’ or ‘easy’. In a follow-up open-ended question, we asked the students to specify *why*. The reason why we chose to operationalise this RQ with these two very specific interview questions was that we wanted to capture students’ immediate response to a particular reading activity, rather than letting them choose themselves which type of reading practice to base their answer on.

To find out what regulates students’ motivation to read in class (RQ 3), we asked them first to respond to why they had read the text during the preceding class. The students were given five alternatives to choose from, two indicating autonomous and three indicating controlled motivation (see Results section). To encourage students to come up with their own suggestions as to what factors would make them read more at school in general, we also included the open-ended question ‘What would make you read more at school (in all subjects)?’. The interview guide was tested in a sixth-grade class and modified before conducting the interviews.

### *Data preparation and analysis*

To answer the research questions, analyses were carried out in IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. The student answers to the open-ended questions were first inductively analysed and coded according to content to map the breath of responses, and then clustered into categories with one response per student to enable statistical comparisons. Responses to the motivation-related questions were analysed and categorised according to the SDT concepts autonomous and controlled motivation as defined in the introduction. All coding and categorising of responses to the open questions were done jointly by a team of two or more researchers to ensure coding consistency and reliability. Further descriptions of the analytical process are given in the Results section.

### *Ethical considerations*

The research project adheres to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). Before the main study was launched, informed consent was ensured from the local school authorities of each of the participating municipalities. All principals and teachers of the classes involved were informed about the project. The students and their legal guardians were also informed about the aim of the project, the research methods, that participation would be anonymous and voluntary, and of their right to decline or cease participation at any time. This information was also repeated when the students participating in this follow-up study were asked to be interviewed. The questions asked were not considered to be sensitive or of the kind that risked exposing the students to any harm.

## **Results**

### *Students’ perceptions of themselves as readers*

Although the students indicated that they do not read a lot in their leisure time, they definitely wanted to be good readers. Data from our items on students’ views of themselves as



readers indicated that, on average, students both knew how to become, and saw themselves as, good readers (Table 1). Further, analyses (one-way ANOVA) showed that there were some statistically significant differences between male and female students on these items. On average, girls scored higher in response to the two statements ‘I want to be a good reader’  $F(1, 254) = 5.64, p = .02$  and ‘I read a lot in leisure time’  $F(1, 254) = 6.42, p = .01$ . When analysing the differences between Grades 6 and 9, we found a statistically significant higher mean value and less variation for Grade 9 than for Grade 6 on ‘I want to be a good reader’  $F(1, 254) = 4.46, p = .04$  and ‘I know how to become a good reader’  $F(1, 254) = 5.54, p = .02$ . Students in Grade 9 thus seem to have internalised the importance of high-level reading skills and to be more aware of how to improve their skills. Concerning students’ estimate of their amount of leisure-time reading, both genders had a mean value below three, indicating that they did not see themselves as avid leisure-time readers, boys even less than girls, a difference that was statistically significant  $F(1, 254) = 6.423, p = .01$ .

To learn more about what students put into the concept of ‘a good reader’, we also asked what they could do to become a better reader. As the question was open ended, we received more than one answer from many of the students. From the group of 259 students, we identified in total 225 answers from Grade 6 and 135 from Grade 9. These answers were coded into three main categories: two qualitative and one quantitative measure to become a good reader. Coded as qualitative measures were answers that highlighted the importance of improving either technical reading skills or reading comprehension. Answers coded as improving reading skills were mainly focused on decoding and reading fluency, whereas those coded as improving reading comprehension focused on the importance of understanding new vocabulary and text content. Coded as quantitative measures were all answers relating to reading more.

As shown in Table 2, the most frequent answer to how to become a better reader, in both grades, were those coded as ‘Read more’ with an even higher proportion of Grade 6 students than Grade 9 students. When it comes to qualitative measures, more than half of the Grade 9 students indicated improving one’s reading comprehension as a key to becoming a better reader, whereas only one in four of the Grade 6 students indicated reading comprehension as central. We can also note that improving one’s more technical reading skills almost disappeared as a measure to become a better reader among students in Grade 9.

**Table 1.** Students’ views of themselves as readers compared between boys and girls, and Grade 6 and Grade 9

Total ( <i>N</i> = 256)		Boys ( <i>n</i> = 122)	Girls ( <i>n</i> = 134)	<i>p</i>	Grade 6 ( <i>n</i> = 165)	Grade 9 ( <i>n</i> = 91)	<i>p</i>
Statements	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )		<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	
I see myself as a good reader	3.62 (1.06)	3.55 (1.09)	3.69 (1.02)	.299	3.57 (1.04)	3.71 (1.09)	.295
I want to be a good reader	4.45 (.92)	4.31 (1.02)	4.58 (.80)	.018	4.36 (.97)	4.62 (.83)	.036
I know how to be a good reader	3.70 (1.23)	3.65 (1.33)	3.75 (1.14)	.495	3.57 (1.31)	3.95 (1.04)	.019
I read a lot in leisure time	2.52 (1.32)	2.30 (1.31)	2.72 (1.30)	.012	2.44 (1.30)	2.66 (1.34)	.208

Note: The scale range = 1–5.

**Table 2.** Proportion of student responses to the question ‘What can you do to become a better reader?’

Grade	Qualitative measures		Quantitative measures	Do not know
	Improve reading skill (%)	Improve reading comprehension (%)	Read more (%)	(%)
6 ( <i>n</i> = 166)	15	26	90	4
9 ( <i>n</i> = 93)	7	54	83	2

Note: Number of students = 259, number of answers = 360 (Grade 6 = 225, Grade 9 = 135).

### *Students’ perceptions of school-related reading practices*

A clear majority of the students found the school-related reading practice performed during the preceding class easy (70%) or in-between (24%), while only a small proportion indicated that it was difficult (6%). A Pearson’s  $\chi^2$  test showed that there were no significant differences between boys and girls,  $\chi^2(2, N = 227) = .85, p = .65$ . However, when comparing the responses given by students in Grade 6 and Grade 9, we could see that a larger proportion of the younger students found the reading easy compared to the older students, among whom as many as one third had indicated in-between (Table 3). By  $\chi^2$  testing and calculating the adjusted standardised residuals, we found that the distribution among the two categories in-between and easy differed significantly ( $\alpha = .05$ ; i.e. adjusted standardised residuals  $> 1.96$ ) between Grade 6 and Grade 9 (Table 3).

When analysing students’ responses inductively as to why they found the reading difficult, in-between or easy, a pattern emerged where we could detect three different types of answers. The most frequent category was that which we have coded as text related, followed by reader related and instruction related. Answers coded as instruction related pointed to the importance of teacher-initiated strategies, for example, ‘We read every morning’, ‘We have worked with this topic before’ or ‘It was noisy in the classroom’. Answers coded as text related brought up the length or complexity of the text, such as ‘short text’, ‘difficult text’ or ‘interesting text’. Answers coded as reader related tended to highlight the student’s own reading ability, such as ‘I’m a good reader’, ‘I have a good vocabulary’ or ‘I’m not good at reading’.  $\chi^2$  statistics showed that there were no significant differences between girls and boys as to why students found the reading difficult, in-between or easy,  $\chi^2(3, N = 223) = 5.4, p = .15$ . Neither were there any significant differences in distribution between the two grades (Table 4).

Next, we conducted cross-tabulation analyses to find out whether there were any noticeable differences, concerning the aforementioned reasons, between students who found the

**Table 3.** Number of Students Indicating the Reading as Difficult, In-Between, or Easy.

Grade	Difficult (%)	In-between (%)	Easy (%)
6 ( <i>n</i> = 150)	9 (6) (−.1)	28 (19) (−2.5)	113 (75) (−2.4)
9 ( <i>n</i> = 77)	5 (6) (.1)	26 (34) (2.6)	46 (60) (−2.4)

Note:  $\chi^2(2, N = 227) = 6.7, p = .04$ . Adjusted standardised residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

**Table 4.** Number of student responses coded according to why they perceived the reading as difficult, in-between or easy

Grade	Instruction related (%)	Text related (%)	Reader related (%)	Do not know (%)
6 ( $n = 146$ )	9 (6) (-.5)	93 (64) (-.6)	42 (29) (.7)	2 (1) (1.0)
9 ( $n = 77$ )	6 (8) (.5)	52 (68) (.6)	19 (25) (-.7)	0 (-1.0)

Note:  $\chi^2(3, N = 223) = 1.68, p = .64$ . Adjusted standardised residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

reading difficult, in-between or easy. Although  $\chi^2$  with post hoc tests showed that the pattern was not statistically significant (Table 5), our results suggest that text-related reasons were relatively more frequent among the group of students who found the reading difficult or in-between, compared to those who found it easy. Reader-related reasons, on the other hand, were more frequent among the students who found the reading easy or in-between. In short, the more difficult a student found a specific reading practice, the more likely he or she was to trace that difficulty to the text itself, and conversely, the easier a student found the reading, the more likely s/he was to connect it to his or her own reading ability. As no major differences were seen between grades or gender, the student responses are here presented together.

#### *Students' types of motivation for school-related reading*

To find out what regulates students' motivation to read in class, we first asked them to respond to why they had read the text for or during the preceding class. Based on the SDT framework, the students were given five alternatives to choose from, two indicating autonomous motivation ('I want to learn' and 'I like to read/work') and three indicating controlled motivation ('The teacher said so', 'I'm told I must read' and 'Grades'). As the students were able to give more than one reason for reading, we identified in total 279 motives from the 204 students who answered this question. By far the most common reason given was 'The teacher said so', which was provided by a clear majority of students in both Grade 6 (60%) and Grade 9 (91%). The other types of external regulation were less frequently indicated: 'Grades' (22% in Grade 6 and 9% in Grade 9) and 'I'm told I must read' (14% in Grade 6 and 9% in Grade 9). Concerning the more internal regulators for reading in class, these were only expressed by students in Grade 6 ('I want to learn' 17% and 'I like to read/work' 13%).

As seen in Table 6, more than three quarters of the students in Grade 6 indicated that their school-related reading was regulated externally through controlled motivation, while only one out of four indicated autonomous motivation. In Grade 9, none of the students indicated that they were autonomously motivated for their reading.  $\chi^2$  with post hoc tests indicated that there was a statistically significant ( $\alpha = .05$ ) difference between Grade 6 and Grade 9 (Table 6). However, there were no significant differences in relation to gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 204) = .04, p = .84$ .

In the second motivation-related question we wanted students to come up with their own suggestions as to what regulates their school-related reading practices. In contrast to the student answers reported and analysed in Table 6, which were given in response to the specific reading they had done before or in the preceding class, the answers analysed and

**Table 5.** Number of students indicating instruction-related, text-related or reader-related reasons for their perceived level of reading difficulty

Reading difficulty	Instruction related (%)	Text related (%)	Reader related (%)	Do not know (%)
Difficult ( $n = 13$ )	0 (-1.0)	10 (77) (.9)	3 (23) (-.4)	0 (-.4)
In-between ( $n = 54$ )	5 (9) (.8)	39 (72) (1.3)	10 (19) (-1.7)	0 (-.8)
Easy ( $n = 155$ )	10 (7) (-.3)	95 (61) (-1.7)	48 (31) (1.8)	2 (1) (.9)

Note:  $\chi^2(6, N = 222) = 5.67, p = .46$ . Adjusted standardised residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

presented here were given in response to the more open-ended question of what would make students read more at school in general, across the curriculum. From the 259 respondents we identified in total 358 suggestions (boys: 150 and girls: 208) which were coded into 14 different codes based on an inductive content analysis (Figure 2).

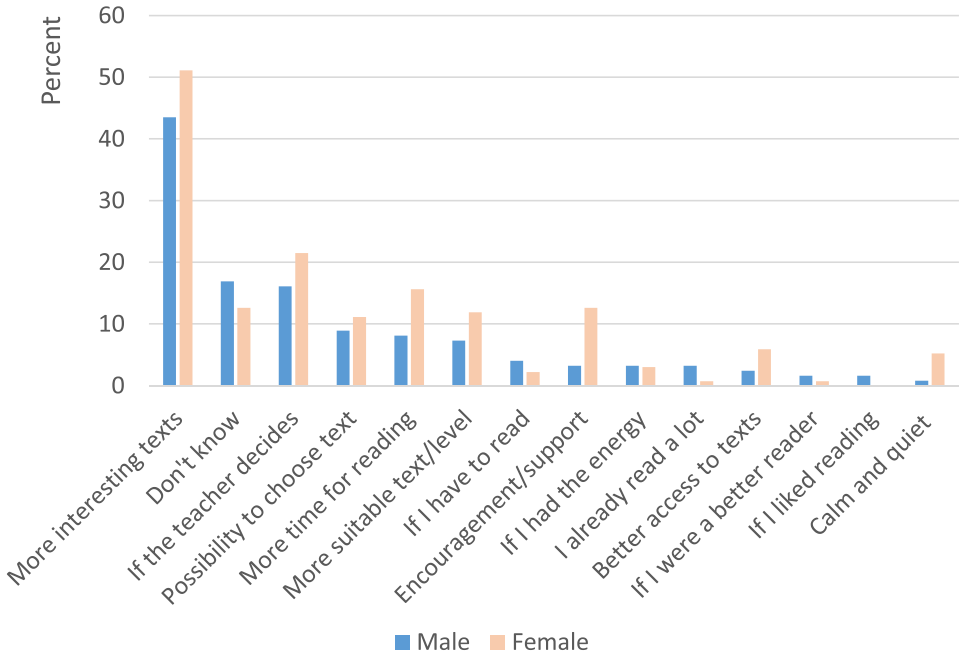
Girls gave more suggestions in response to what would make them read more at school, which is illustrated by the taller bars for girls on all factors except for those that were reader related. Still, 'More interesting texts' was by far the most frequent answer given by both boys and girls.

These responses as to what would make students read more at school were then clustered into the same three categories as before: instruction-related (e.g. 'If the teacher decides' and 'Calm and quiet'), text-related (e.g. 'More interesting text' and 'More suitable text/level') and reader-related answers (e.g. 'If I had the energy' and 'If I liked reading'). We carefully went through each response as to understand and interpret if they were related to text, instruction or to the reader himself or herself. A cross-tabulation showed that text and instruction-related answers dominated, among boys and girls, both in Grade 6 and Grade 9 (Table 7). A total of 8 out of 10 students said they would read more if they either had more interesting texts to read or were given more time and support by the teacher, while very few students answered that they themselves could be a factor for reading more at school. Further analyses ( $\chi^2$  with post hoc tests) showed that boys, to a significantly higher degree than girls, indicated a reader-related answer ( $\alpha = .05$ ). We also detected a slight gender difference (although not statistically significant) in that girls more than boys seemed to value classroom instruction as a factor that would make them read more at school. Similarly, when comparing the two age groups, we saw that students in Grade 9 indicated classroom instruction as a more important factor for reading more than did the younger students ( $\alpha = .05$ ). When it comes to text-related answers, we saw the opposite

**Table 6.** Number of student responses categorised as autonomous or controlled motivation for having read during the class

Motivation category	Grade 6 ( $n = 137$ ) (%)	Grade 9 ( $n = 67$ ) (%)
Autonomous motivation	32 (23) (4.3)	0 (-4.3)
Controlled motivation	105 (77) (-4.3)	67 (100) (4.3)

Note:  $\chi^2(1, N = 204) = 18.56, p = .00$ . Adjusted standardised residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.



**Figure 2.** Proportion of student responses within each gender to the question: What would make you read more in different school subjects?

pattern, with a higher proportion of Grade 6 students indicating that they would read more if they were given more interesting texts to read ( $\alpha = .05$ ) (Table 7).

### Discussion

Our intention was to develop in-depth knowledge of how students at the end of middle school and lower-secondary school perceive both themselves as readers and their school-related reading practices. Based on interviews with a group of students representing a proportionate variety of academic contexts and socioeconomic backgrounds, our results

**Table 7.** Number of student responses to the question ‘what would make you read more at school (all subjects)?’

Category	Boys ( <i>n</i> = 124) (%)	Girls ( <i>n</i> = 135) (%)	Grade 6 ( <i>n</i> = 166) (%)	Grade 9 ( <i>n</i> = 93) (%)
Instruction related	39 (32) (-1.7)	56 (42) (1.7)	52 (31) (-2.4)	43 (46) (2.4)
Text related	53 (43) (.1)	57 (42) (-.1)	78 (47) (2.0)	32 (34) (-2.0)
Reader related	8 (7) (2.1)	2 (2) (-2.1)	5 (3) (-.9)	5 (5) (.9)
Do not know	24 (19) (1.0)	20 (15) (-1.0)	31 (19) (1.0)	13 (14) (-1.0)

Note: Difference between boys and girls  $\chi^2(3, N = 259) = 6.70, p = .08$ . Difference between Grade 6 and 9  $\chi^2(3, N = 259) = 7.47, p = .06$ . Adjusted standardised residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

have enabled us to draw a broad picture of what makes, and would make, students read more at school, even though this picture needs more research to be further validated.

Regarding students' perception of themselves as readers, addressed in research question 1, our study indicates that generally students want to be good readers, and by the time they reach ninth grade also believe they know how to become better readers (Table 1). In line with previous studies (e.g. McKenna et al., 2012; Schiefele et al., 2012), our results indicate that girls, on average, show an even stronger will to become good readers and read slightly more in their leisure time than boys do. We did not, however, find the same drop in the older students' self-concept as reported by Guay et al. (2003). Although a majority of students in our study say they do not read a lot in their leisure time, thus confirming recent studies (Statens medieråd, 2021), both age groups are still in agreement that 'reading more' is the key to becoming a good reader (Table 2). Taken together, our results also indicate that the older students have learnt that becoming a good reader requires more than just reading practice for fluency and speed: more than half of the students in ninth grade indicate that becoming a good reader also requires qualitative measures to improve reading comprehension. Our results here are in line with Smith et al., (2012) who found that whereas students in Grade 4 identified skills like learning difficult words and listening to the teachers as important to be a good reader, students in Grade 8 emphasised enjoying reading books and thinking about what they had read. In other words, students in secondary school seem to have internalised that it takes both 'skill and will' to become a good reader, as both Pressley (2002) and Wang and Guthrie (2004) have shown.

These results regarding students' views of themselves as readers are interesting in light of recent findings showing that a majority of students in these grades read much less in Swedish schools today than they did a decade ago (Vinterek et al., 2020). Based on our results in response to research question 1, we can conclude that the trend of decreasing amounts of school-related reading practices cannot easily be explained by students' lack of awareness or expressed will to become better readers by reading more.

In response to research question 2, a clear majority of both boys and girls found their school-related reading easy, especially in Grade 6 (Table 3), and the main reason *why* was indicated to be related to properties of the text itself (Table 4), which is in line with findings by Benjamin (2012). While it is positive for students' reading self-concept to feel confident in their reading, we also know that students need well-balanced challenges to develop their competence further (Pressley, 2002). Very few students mentioned classroom instruction as a reason for why it was difficult or easy, which suggests that they are not fully aware of the potential of text and reader specific instruction for supporting students' competence to deal with text complexity, as pointed out by Valencia et al. (2014). Instead, a relatively large proportion of the students who found the reading easy trace it to themselves as readers (Table 5) (cf. Mesmer et al., 2012), indicating that they have a strong reading self-concept (cf. Katzir et al., 2009). In SDT terms, these students seem to have fully *integrated* the importance of being a good reader as part of their self-identity ('I am a good reader') and are thus susceptible for more classroom autonomy and self-determined behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, students who perceived the reading as difficult tended to trace the difficulty to the text itself rather than to their own reading ability. Admittedly, if the text choice was made by the teacher, it can, of course, be seen as part of instruction. In this sense, our results point to the importance of teachers' awareness of student perceptions and the possibility for individual text choice pointed out by previous research (Pitcher et al., 2007; Pflaum & Bishop, 2004). In response to research question 2, our results suggest that a large proportion of students in Grade 6 may be

under-challenged in their school-related reading, which, in turn, may have consequences for how they manage the more challenging disciplinary reading practices required in secondary school, as pointed out by Swanson et al. (2016).

Concerning students' type of motivation for school-related reading, addressed in research question 3, our results (Table 6) confirm those made in our previous large-scale study on the relation between motivation and reading amount (Winberg et al., 2021): autonomous motivation is not the driving force behind students' school reading that it ought to be to promote students' performance, engagement and comprehension according to previous research (Troyer et al., 2019; Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Wigfield et al., 2016). Neither did we detect any significant gender differences, as noted in the literature (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; McGeown et al., 2012; Becker & McElvany, 2018). Instead, our results indicate that students are mainly driven by controlled motivation for their school-related reading, ninth graders even more so than sixth graders. That students' autonomous motivation declines when students reach lower secondary school is in line with previous studies (Wigfield et al., 2016), but indication that controlled motivation takes over to such a large extent in the higher grades is a finding that we have not seen in previous research, even though possible explanations for this trend, such as increased educational accountability and focus on measurable student results, have been suggested (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016).

However, the fact that none of the students in ninth grade and only a quarter of those in sixth grade were driven by autonomous motivation in their class reading does not mean that autonomy is irrelevant to students' school-related reading motivation. On the contrary, half of the students claim that they would be motivated to read more at school had they more interesting texts to read (Figure 2), results that are in line with previous research (Ivey & Broadbuss, 2001; Pitcher et al., 2007). In light of SDT, our results also highlight the importance of fulfilling students' basic needs for autonomy (by promoting student choice), competence (by selecting texts at the right level that build on students' prior knowledge) and relatedness (by finding texts of personal interest that students can relate to) in order to enable more self-determined behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

In other words, our results indicate that there is a dormant potential among a large proportion of students waiting to be awakened by teachers who can address both their external *and* internal types of regulation for school-related reading, by stressing both the importance of scheduled reading sessions *and* room for student autonomy through a wide selection of texts. As seen in Table 7, close to half of the students (especially girls and ninth graders) would read more if they were externally instructed to do so, while close to the other half (especially boys and sixth graders) would read more if they had access to more interesting texts and an opportunity to choose (cf. Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Consequently, when teachers, already in the early grades, make sure that students read extensively to develop their competence and encourage and challenge them to read what they see as interesting and meaningful texts, students are more likely to start to identify themselves as readers and to develop more autonomous motivation and self-determined behaviour. As seen earlier, our results indicate that students want to be good readers, and in line with SDT, schools must strive to make them feel like good readers, since positive experiences will have an impact on their future level of motivation and, in turn, affect their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions (Allred & Cena, 2020; Guthrie et al., 2001).

To conclude, our study suggests that it is not the students who are responsible for the decreasing amount of school-related reading (Vinterek et al., 2020). On the contrary, our results imply that most students want to become good readers and are aware of the



importance of reading more to develop their reading ability. As most intentional behaviours are multiply motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2020), schools therefore have a huge potential in initiating reading practices that appeal both to students' sense of duty and external expectations *and* their internal drive for more autonomy and personal interest concerning text choice in order to increase students' reading amount and thereby strengthen their self-conceptions as readers.

### *Limitations and future directions*

As this study is limited in scope, it needs to be repeated on a larger scale to validate and further develop the knowledge gained so far about what regulates students' school-related reading practices. The construction of reading self-concept was limited as it was based on just one item. Items measuring students' autonomous motivation also needs to be developed to better capture and understand the type of self-determined regulation where students choose to read even though the text itself is not perceived as inherently interesting, or the act of reading as intrinsically enjoyable, that is, the type of extrinsic regulation that SDT labels *identified* and *integrated*. Understanding what kinds of classroom environment and instructional practices that foster these types of autonomous motivation is key to increasing students' total amount reading across the curriculum.

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### **Data availability statement**

Research data are not shared.

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