
Fostering Reading Motivation: Insights From Theory and Research

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Motivation has been widely researched by psychologists and educators in an attempt to understand this complex phenomenon. Although motivation has been studied extensively, there has been limited attention given to the role of motivation in reading development. Motivating students to read, however, is a practical concern and demanding task for classroom teachers and parents (O'Flahaven, Gambrell, Guthrie, Stahl, & Alvermann, 1992; Spiegel, 1981; United States Department of Education, 1986).

Research supports the notion that the depth and breadth of literacy learning are influenced by a variety of motivational factors (Ford, 1992; McCombs, 1991; Oldfather, 1993). Currently there is great interest in exploring factors that are specifically associated with reading motivation so that we can create rewarding contexts for literacy learning. In this article, we discuss what theory and research suggest about the role of motivation in reading development. First, we discuss the role of motivation in theories of learning. We then briefly review several major lines of research that have particular relevance for reading educators. Finally, we present theory and research-based suggestions for creating classroom climates that support and nurture students' motivation to read.

What is the Role of Motivation in Theories of Learning?

This discussion of motivation begins with a general focus on learning because learning and motivation are so closely intertwined in the literature. As Weiner (1990) noted:

The study of motivation for the educational researcher thus has been confounded with the field of learning; indeed, motivation often is inferred from learning, and learning usually is the indicator of motivation for the educational psychologist. This lack of separation, or confounding, between motivation and learning has vexed those interested in motivational processes in education, in part because learning is influenced by a multiplicity of factors including native intelligence. (p. 618)

For decades, researchers have been interested in human behavior and have devoted attention to the study of human motivation. During this time there have been major shifts in our thinking about what motivates people to act as they do (Nisan, 1985). The earliest theories of motivation centered round "psychological hedonism" (Berlyne, 1971). This theory posits that an individual is motivated to act if the consequences seem pleasant and is unmotivated if the consequences are perceived as unpleasant. Although this theory accounted for much human behavior, it failed to explain an individual's response in a situation which was completely unfamiliar. In other words, how would a person be expected to act if the consequences were unclear or unknown? The hedonic line of thought also fell short in explaining why people sometimes act in ways that produce unpleasant or even dangerous circumstances, such as putting oneself in peril to rescue another individual.

Researchers later began to focus on the role of instinct in behavior. Research on instinct often focused on nonhuman organisms and their relative activity levels, states of arousal, and attempts to alleviate disequilibrium (Weiner, 1990). For instance, researchers examined rats deprived of a need, thus restoring a state of balance or equilibrium. When humans were considered, theories of instinct did not account for the role of learning in their actions. It soon became clear that the complexities of human behavior could not be explained by instinct theory alone.

Behaviorists, on the other hand, viewed learning strictly in terms of an individual's response to external stimuli (Berlyne, 1971; Phillips & Soltis, 1991). They believed that what happens between the stimulus and response is not observable and, therefore, not within the realm of science. Learning, in their view, takes place as we become conditioned to certain stimuli. Classical conditioning ensues when a natural stimulus is linked with a response (such as a dog salivating at the sight of food). When another stimulus is substituted for the natural one (the sound of a bell for the sight of food), the response (salivation) will begin to occur as a result of the new, conditioned stimulus. Operant conditioning differs in that immediate reinforcement or reward will

encourage any response to any stimuli. This notion has more far-reaching implications than classical conditioning. In either type of conditioning, motivation is seen in terms of reinforcement. That is, individuals are motivated to act depending on how the behavior or task has been rewarded or punished previously. An obvious flaw in this theory is that it fails to explain an individual's response in a novel situation or one involving new information for which reinforcers are absent.

Like behaviorists, social learning theorists emphasized the importance of reinforcers in shaping behavior. Though related to the behaviorist line of thought, social learning theorists gave much credence to the role of experience (actual and vicarious) and imitation (Thomas, 1985). They sought to analyze the social aspects of learning, incorporating the influence of our own past experiences and those of others we have observed. Bandura (1989), one of the most prominent social learning theorists, also placed great emphasis on self-efficacy. He believed that our own feelings of competence also largely influence our decisions to act or seek a goal. The idea of social factors influencing human motivation surfaced repeatedly in various theories of learning over the next several years.

Later theories shifted the focus from instinctual or reinforced behavior patterns to additional factors that closely influenced human nature. Issues involving basic physiological concerns such as life, death, and pain avoidance were seen as driving behavior (Day, 1985). The basic premise behind these theories was that when an individual felt that a need wasn't being satisfied, he or she would be driven to satisfy that need. Hence, the theories came to be known as drive-reduction theories.

Soon, theories incorporated explanations for behavior in terms of basic needs such as hunger and shelter (Woodfolk, 1990). Maslow (1962), for example, described a hierarchy of needs that human beings experience. The most basic needs are those of survival and safety. Further up the hierarchy, Maslow discussed needs for belonging and self-esteem. These four needs he called deficiency-needs; when those needs are not satisfied, we become motivated to fulfill them. The three highest needs in this hierarchy, intellectual achievement, aesthetic appreciation, and self-actualization, Maslow called growth-needs. These are more concerned with personal fulfillment and, once met, we tend to continue our motivation toward further self-fulfillment.

The commonality in humanistic theories is the focus on basic human needs. These theories, however, did not address situational considerations which sometimes alter an individual's focus. That is,

people move up and down in a hierarchy of need, and occasionally they lower more basic need fulfillment in order to supplant a higher need. Humanistic theories also fall short in explaining unique individual reactions.

More recently, theorists have focused on cognitively based theories to explain complex human behavior more fully. Cognitive theorists are concerned with issues that are difficult to observe, such as perception, memory, and attention (Phillips & Soltis, 1991; Resnick, 1983; Thomas, 1985). In contrast to behaviorists, they believe that observable behaviors are not simply responses to external stimuli. Rather, these behaviors represent active mental structuring and organization of knowledge. Cognitive theorists do not view motivation solely in terms of how past reinforcement affects behavior or how an action might "feel" to an individual. Instead they see motivation as a process of thoughts and decision making. In their view, people actively make choices, attend to salient factors in their environment, and organize information in an effort to understand or to seek a goal.

Social and cognitive theories of learning and motivation seem to have the greatest potential for application to educational settings. These theories do not discard basic biological traits and instincts or environmental reinforcers as motivational forces. They do, however, expand on these theories by accounting for a myriad of factors that can influence an individual's behavior.

What Contributions Have Learning Theories Made to Our Understanding About Creating Motivating Classroom Contexts for Literacy Learning?

Theorists and researchers have posited a vast number of ideas in their attempts to explain human motivation. Although they come from different perspectives and disciplines, their ideas are not necessarily incongruent: Many are useful for informing a theory of motivation related to learning in general and reading in particular. The issues of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, value-expectancy theory, and goal orientation provide relevant insights for education.

Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Motivation theorists frequently make a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to forces that are external to an individual which influence their inclination to engage in a behavior. For instance, offering students a piece of candy for behaving appropriately in a classroom setting is an example of extrinsic motivation. Behavior that is motivated by internal needs or feelings is considered intrinsic. A child who behaved appropriately in a classroom setting because doing

so provided him or her with a sense of pride would be said to be intrinsically motivated. The concept of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation is very broad and can be applied to many aspects of behavior. Additionally, an individual's perception of the intrinsic or extrinsic value of a task is a factor in motivation.

Intrinsic motivation appears to be based on two components, both of which seem important to an individual's engagement in an activity (Spaulding, 1992). The first component, competence, involves an individual's knowledge that he or she is capable of the task at hand. The second component, self-determination, is the ingredient which makes the individual feel as if he or she has some degree of control over the task.

Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) have conducted numerous studies on motivation and developed a theory which they call self-determination. Self-determination theory expands on the concept of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation. Deci and his colleagues posit that motivated actions are "self-determined to the extent that they are engaged in wholly volitionally and endorsed by one's sense of self...whereas actions are controlled if they are compelled by some interpersonal or intrapsychic force" (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 326-327).

Deci and his colleagues found that individuals who are self-determined display greater conceptual learning and better memory at both elementary and college levels. In addition, they report that when children were informed that learning text material would help them on an upcoming test they did more poorly than students who were not told about the test. Students who were self-determined and intrinsically motivated had higher achievement, and they reported more positive classroom attitudes and enjoyment of school work than extrinsically motivated students.

The premise behind self-determination theory is that self-determined learning is a desirable goal that supports three inherent human needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Competence refers to an individual's feelings of capability for accomplishing a task. Relatedness is the development of relationships with others in the social context in which an activity occurs. The ability to initiate actions and regulate those actions independently is called autonomy.

The findings of Deci et al. (1991) indicate that a social context which enhances opportunities for meeting the needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy will foster self-determination. They suggest that

general motivation might be increased by attending to any of the factors in isolation. However, in order to develop intrinsic motivation, it is critical that all three elements be addressed--especially autonomy. A social context which is seen as encouraging choice and responsibility as opposed to control is more "autonomy supportive" and is essential for the development of intrinsic motivation.

Studies on the use of external incentives have had interesting and diverse results (Myers, 1986). It appears that when external rewards are offered for behaviors that are inherently motivating to begin with, individuals tend to cease engaging in the activity once the rewards are removed. On the other hand, if the activity is not inherently interesting to an individual, extrinsic rewards can have a positive effect on encouraging or eliciting the desired behavior.

Some researchers posit that an individual's perception of a reward determines their reaction to it. If the reward is seen as controlling, it will sometimes be detrimental. However, if the reward is seen as providing useful information, it may be beneficial (Deci et al., 1991). Based on the results of this research, Myers (1986) suggests that to enhance intrinsic motivation we need to provide challenge and encourage creativity; to inform but not control.

Value-expectancy theory. Value-expectancy theory is comprised of two components (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Wigfield, 1994). The first component relates to the value an individual places on the outcome of a particular action. The second component, expectancy, relates to the individual's perception that he or she will achieve the desired outcome. These two components work together and are critical elements in motivation. A valued goal may not be attempted if the individual feels that the goal is not attainable for some reason (e.g., task difficulty). Conversely, a goal that is easily reached might be neglected if its value to the individual is perceived as minor or unimportant.

Value-expectancy is supported by a number of research studies which suggest that students who believe they are capable and competent readers are more likely to outperform those who do not hold such beliefs (Paris & Oka, 1986; Schunk, 1985). In addition, there is evidence which suggests that students who perceive reading as valuable and important and who also have personally relevant reasons for reading will read in a more planful and effortful way (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck, 1986; Paris & Oka, 1986).

Attribution theory is grounded in value-expectancy theory (Weiner, 1992). This theory goes a step further by attempting to explain causes

for an individual's response in a situation. Self-evaluations and explanations for success and failure determine decisions and future actions. Weiner posits that causality has three dimensions. Individuals respond to a given situation based on their past experiences and these three dimensions. Locus, the first dimension, refers to the origin of a cause as internal or external to an individual. Ability is an internal cause; fear of punishment is external. If an individual attributes success to an internal factor such as ability, he or she will be encouraged to attempt the task in the future. The second dimension of causality is stability. Causes which are stable do not change over time. Ability may be considered a stable cause of success but luck would not because it is subject to change. Control, the third component influencing attributions, concerns the individual's perception of how much control he or she has over the outcome and his or her own degree of responsibility for achieving it.

These three dimensions combine in rather complex ways to determine an individual's motivation to act. For example, if a person attributes a successful outcome to ability, this is an internal cause. However, for some people ability is stable and for others it is unstable. The determination of the cause as stable or unstable might affect the third dimension, control. For instance, if a person believes that ability is a stable factor and perceives that a failure is due to ability, that person will feel less control over similar outcomes in the future. If the person believes, however, that ability is subject to change, perhaps through education, he or she will view future similar outcomes with more optimism.

Performance goals versus learning goals. Dweck (1986) suggests that there are a number of cognitive variables that influence motivation and that the adoption of performance goals or learning goals influences motivation. Performance goals are adopted by an individual when emphasis is on evaluating the competence with which a task is achieved. Since the focus is on judging the individual's competence, this stance can be threatening. Individuals with this orientation tend to perceive ability and intelligence as fixed traits which lead to certain interpretations. For example, when a person with a performance goal fails to achieve a desired goal, he or she sees their innate ability as the cause of failure. The result may be a lowering of confidence and a tendency not to engage in similar future activities for fear of failure. Learning goals, on the other hand, are those in which emphasis is on content mastery. Dweck's work has demonstrated that individuals who adopt learning goals value learning for its own sake and tend to interpret failure in terms of the amount of effort that was expended rather than ability.

Ames and Archer (1988) found similar results. Students in their study were asked to respond to questions about whether their class was learning-goal or performance-goal-oriented. When students perceived their class as learning-goal-oriented, they reported using effective strategies for learning more often than students who perceived their class as performance-goal-oriented. The learning-goal-oriented students also attempted more challenging tasks and appeared to enjoy their classes more. These students also tended to attribute their success to the effort that they expended. These findings are similar to Nolen's (1988). Students in her study who were more task-oriented valued and utilized deeper processing strategies than students who were performance-oriented.

How Does Theory and Research Inform Literacy Instruction?

There are a number of important ways in which the above theory and research provide insights for educational practice.

Fostering the intrinsic desire to read. Results of current research suggest that there is much we can do to instill in students an intrinsic desire to read. Providing students with opportunities to be successful at challenging reading tasks and having control through choice are two ways teachers can foster intrinsic motivation. Feelings of competence are increased when students experience success at challenging tasks that require effort. Such experiences reinforce students' positive self-concept as readers and increases the likelihood that they will be intrinsically motivated to engage in subsequent reading tasks. Providing students with opportunities to be in control of their own learning also fosters intrinsic motivation. Letting students choose what they read and even when and where they read increases intrinsic motivation. Younger and less mature students can be supported in making good choices through the use of "bounded choice." The concept of bounded choice is a simple but very useful one. For readers who have difficulty choosing texts that are appropriate, the teacher might employ bounded choice by selecting several appropriate books and allowing the student to choose from among them. Another example would be to give several ways to complete an assignment and let students choose which task they complete.

Helping students learn to value reading. Value-expectancy theory has helped us understand the importance of two aspects of motivation: an individual's value system and expectations for success or failure. If we want to help our students learn to value reading, we must take a careful look at what the classroom context suggests about the value placed on literacy activities. For example, one teacher might say to a class who has had a pleasant and enjoyable recess time, "Class, you did such a nice job of playing together, I'm going to give you 10

extra minutes of recess time." This teacher is communicating that a high value is placed on recess. Another teacher might say, "Class, you did such a nice job of playing together, I'm going to let you read for 10 extra minutes during Sustained Silent Reading Time." This teacher is demonstrating that reading is valued and is to be celebrated. We need to think more carefully about how we communicate to our students that reading and literacy activities are worthwhile and enjoyable.

Value-expectancy theory also suggests the importance of self-perceptions about reading competence. We need to help students realize the critical link between effort and success. Helping students reexamine their attributions for success and failure may help them change negative perceptions of themselves as learners and readers. This may be especially important for students who have experienced repeated failure or developed negative attitudes about reading.

Create a classroom context that fosters motivation to read. The research by Deci et al. (1991) supports the need for an environment that is "autonomy supportive". This kind of support begins with teachers taking a student's frame of reference in order to understand the student's motivational and cognitive starting point as well as relating to the student in a way that encourages internal motivation for reading. Our own research has been focused on classroom contexts that promote reading motivation. This work (e.g., Gambrell, Codling, & Palmer 1996; Palmer et al., 1994) has demonstrated the value of using questionnaires and conversational interviews to identify useful insights about how children become active and engaged readers (see also Weisendanger & Bader, 1989). This line of research reveals that asking students about what does or does not motivate them to read can provide specific information that can be helpful in creating autonomy-supportive classroom contexts for literacy learning.

The findings from a large-scale motivational study we conducted with third and fifth grade students (Gambrell, 1995; Palmer, Codling & Gambrell, 1996) suggest that teachers help students develop the reading habit and an intrinsic desire to read. This observational and interview research (Gambrell, 1995; Oldfather, 1993; Turner, 1995) revealed three very basic considerations for creating motivating contexts by providing a book-rich classroom environment, opportunities for students to engage in self-selecting reading materials, and time for students to socially interact with peers about personally interesting books, stories, and texts.

In addition, motivational theory and research support the following suggestions for nurturing students' reading development:

- Create a classroom environment in which learning to read for its own sake is emphasized over performance and competition;
- Provide students with opportunities to develop competence in reading skills;
- Communicate as often as possible the value of reading for pleasure and information;
- Ascertain how students perceive classroom reading activities, tasks, and materials by asking the students themselves.

Concluding Remarks

There is abundant research to support the contention that motivation plays a major role in learning to read. We must do everything humanly possible to support and foster students in developing both the skill and the will to read. Although the practical suggestions for creating motivating contexts for literacy learning that have been drawn from motivational theory and research may appear to be basic, they are not always easy to implement in the classroom.

Clearly, motivation should be a central consideration in the reading curriculum because it often makes the difference between learning that is superficial and shallow and learning that is deep and internalized. It is also abundantly clear that more research is needed in this area so that we can understand more fully how individuals develop into active, engaged readers.

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