

Literature Review: Strategies to Increase Reading Motivation and Joy

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Introduction

Globally, studies show that young people are reading less. Cremin & Scholes (2024) indicate that youth in the UK and Australia self-report decreased reading enjoyment and note that when students are unmotivated to read they benefit less from reading instruction. It stands to reason that a student who does not enjoy reading outside of school will appreciate literacy development inside of school with less academic enthusiasm. Thus, the decline in reading for enjoyment impacts both the educational and home spheres. In the United States, trends indicate that students are motivated to read with significantly less frequency, and students in higher education are experiencing greater challenges comprehending challenging texts (Cooper, 2025). This decline in reading engagement, for pleasure and for academic purpose, is impacting literacy development.

A range of vital cognitive and social-emotional skills develop alongside reading. Research demonstrates that reading frequency correlates with greater comprehension of nuance, an increased ability to make inferences and identify bias and veracity in a text, stronger writing skills including organization of ideas and accuracy of grammar, enhanced vocabulary and higher reading achievement, and reduced hyperactivity and inattentiveness (Cooper, 2025; Cremin & Scholes, 2024). The development of such academic skills naturally translate to improved readiness for professional and personal experiences outside of school. Furthermore, literacy development has additional consequences for mental health and worldview. Research shows that frequent reading correlates to development of empathy, expanded perspectives and worldviews, and increased social-emotional wellbeing (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). Therefore, engaged readers learn how to read texts deeply, develop critical thinking skills, and construct meaning of the world around them including their own identity and wellbeing.

For educators interested in enhancing students' engagement with reading, it's necessary to understand "reading" and "motivation" as defineable constructs. Louise Rosenblatt's seminal transactional theory states that reading can be understood as an aesthetic experience shaped by the reader's identity, culture, and lived experience (Davis, 1992; Ryan & Dagostino, 2017). As a reader interacts with a text, they develop meaning through their own personal lens, constructing an experience of reading entirely unique to them. Wigfield & Baker (1999) build on this understanding of the reading experience by positing that motivation is a multidimensional construct that includes intrinsic interest, perceived competence and value, and social engagement. Aesthetic reading creates conditions for intrinsic engagement by centering the reader's identity and lived experience, or personal connection to the text. Likewise, when a person perceives themselves as a competent reader they are more likely to value reading. Finally, socialization around reading further builds reader identity and aesthetic experience. Thus, educators interested in enhancing students' motivation and joy for reading must intentionally design their instruction to cultivate reader identity, aesthetic experience, and meaningful social engagement around texts.

Context

Many factors influence the decline in reading engagement. At the macro level, increased exposure to digital media influences how students engage with reading. As society's access to digital content has increased, research shows that people's attention spans have decreased (Cooper, 2025). Furthermore, when people read text in digital formats, their eyes tend to skim the information rather than deep reading (Cooper, 2025). Thus, an increased digital world engages students with content that changes how they read and changes the frequency in which they practice deep reading. Another macro factor is the impact of political influence through educational gag orders and book bans. Cooper (2025) points out that book bans often eliminate books that represent marginalized communities, thereby limiting students' access to books that

represent their own or diverse cultural experiences and interests. When students are unable to access texts relevant to their lives, it diminishes their engagement with reading.

Factors at the meso and micro levels additionally influence students' engagement with reading. Educators are expected to teach to Common Core State Standards, standardized tests, and set curricula (Cooper, 2025; Cremin & Scholes, 2024; Ryan & Dagostino, 2017). These variables direct teachers' focus on benchmarks and standards achievement, rather than on cultivating students' enjoyment and motivation for reading. Rosenblatt's distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading provides a useful lens for understanding this shift. Efferent reading occurs when the reader focuses on extracting information from a text; conversely, aesthetic reading centers students' identities and experiences in their ability to make meaning of a text (Davis, 1992; Ryan & Dagostino, 2017). Gonzalez (2017) further suggests that reading programs in schools focus on efferent reading, which demands that students parse and respond to what they are reading by providing proof of comprehension. When students read with the goal of producing products of their comprehension, it shifts their attention from *enjoyment* of reading to *evidence* of their reading.

Finally, environmental factors within schools impact students' reading engagement. As more and more schools change or close their library spaces to make room for other types of workspaces, and as the number of trained librarians decreases in schools, students' access to books and staff trained to engage them with books also decreases (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). Schools funding choices, then, impact students' access to reading environments that foster enjoyment of reading. The community space and relationships that are built by librarians and through libraries is missing from some students' academic experience. Thus, research points to a varied and complex context affecting students' literacy development and love of reading.

Themes

Theme: Defining Reading Motivation and Reader Identity

In order to engage students with reading, educators must cultivate opportunities for students to experience reading as personally meaningful. Rosenblatt's transactional theory centers the reader's identity, culture, and life experiences as integral to the process of interpreting text (Davis, 1992; Ryan & Dagostino, 2017). Given that meaning is a co-construction between reader and text, educators need to provide opportunities for students to leverage their own lenses and unique understandings as valid tools for reading engagement.

Rosenblatt's distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading is a key consideration for classroom teachers. When classrooms emphasize efferent reading, students approach reading as an academic task. Conversely, emphasizing aesthetic reading centers students' reading experiences, thereby engaging their personal curiosities, preferences, and connections to a text. These characteristics of aesthetic reading align closely with Baker and Wigfield's (1999) dimensions of motivation that highlight intrinsic factors such as interest, self-efficacy, and social relevancy. Teachers can leverage aesthetic reading as a means of nurturing students' intrinsic motivations to read.

Reader identity emerges from these experiences. Gonzalez (2017) argues that when students are denied choice in reading, they are unable to "develop their reading identity". When students are given a choice in their reading and opportunity to voice their experience of reading, they develop reading preferences, recognize their literacy strengths, and understand the role reading plays in their lives. This echoes Baker and Wigfield's (1999) emphasis on reading dimensions that highlight students' motivations driven by interest, perceived competency and value, and social connection. Altogether, the research suggests that reader identity is cultivated when students: 1) engage in aesthetic, or experiential, reading; 2) perceive themselves as capable interpreters of text; 3) leverage agency in selection of texts; and 4) participate in social

interactions that accentuate their views and preferences of texts. This study defines reader identity as the evolving self-concept students believe about themselves as readers, shaped by aesthetic experience, choice reading, perceptions of competence, and meaningful participation in a classroom reading community.

Theme: A Practice of Independent Reading

One way to engage students with reading is to make independent reading time a classroom routine. Research shows that promoting reading through encouraging student agency and building classroom reading routines correlates to increased reading achievement (Cremin & Scholes, 2024; Zygouris-Coe, 2021). This cultivates students' fluency, stamina, and love of reading (Gonzalez, 2017; Tricario, 2025). When students are given the agency to read freely and independently, it gives them time to develop their reading skills in a low-stakes environment that puts the emphasis on reading for reading's sake. In this way, students develop an understanding of the inherent value of reading, and as Ferlazzo et al. (2020) suggest, it cultivates students' belief that reading is important, interesting, and useful.

A strategy commonly suggested by research for promoting reading is to start each class with a reading routine. Many educators dedicate the first 10-minutes of class to independent reading time (Gonzalez, 2017; Tricario, 2025). This amount of time allows for students to develop a practice of reading while still leaving instructional time for other learning tasks. For teachers interested in increasing students' reading stamina, Gambrell (2011) recommends starting in increments of 10-minutes and gradually increasing the amount of reading time until students have developed a more sustained practice. Regardless of the increment of time chosen, research demonstrates a clear trend that encourages the practice of routine independent reading.

Theme: The Importance of Student Agency

In addition to the importance of setting aside time for reading, promoting student agency is vital. Research suggests that student choice and interest matters when cultivating motivation

and love of reading (Gambrell, 2011; Gonzales, 2017; Rice & Richardson, 2022; Tricario, 2025; Zygouris-Coe, 2024). Encouraging students to choose preferred texts engages them with reading materials that match their interests and curiosities, supporting the development of reader identity. Gonzalez (2017) further asserts that educators can encourage students to abandon texts that do not resonate with them, reinforcing the idea that reading is a personal and evolving experience.

Student agency also strengthens perceptions of competence. When students exercise choice, and successfully identify texts that align with their interests, they are more likely to view themselves as capable readers. Cremin & Scholes (2024) note that students who perceive themselves as competent are more inclined to read for pleasure and select increasingly challenging texts. This sense of agency and success contributes to what Ferlazzo et al. (2020) describes as “belonging”, when students recognize that reading can align with their identities and experiences. Hence, student agency and sense of belonging support the development of motivation and reader identity.

Theme: Building a Reading Community

Building a reading community in the classroom is another essential component to motivating students and cultivating reading enjoyment. This includes both teacher-student and peer-to-peer relationships centered around sharing of reading experiences (Cooper, 2025; Gambrell, 2011; Gonzalez, 2017; Zygouris-Coe, 2024). When students engage with their teachers and peers in conversations about their reading likes and dislikes, it enhances their reading motivation and enjoyment. Strategies for building reading community are varied and include ideas such as: book clubs, author talks, reading challenges, library tours, book recommendation sessions, and teacher-student or peer-to-peer book talks (Cooper, 2025; Gambrell, 2011; Gonzalez, 2017; Tricario, 2025; Zygouris-Coe, 2024). All of these

community-building strategies prompt curiosity and generate excitement around reading materials. A student might start reading a book simply because a friend enjoyed it.

Likewise, research suggests that students' engagement with reading increases with teacher affirmations. When teachers give specific and genuine feedback to a student about their reading accomplishments, it encourages and inspires reading enjoyment (Ferlazzo et al., 2020; Gambrell, 2011). In addition to these affirmations, Gambrell (2011) points out that students need to see themselves as reading challenging texts. Thus, the experience of achievement begets greater achievement.

Theme: Access to Diverse Representation

Access to a diverse range of books that meet students' reading needs is necessary to engage students with reading. Students need books that are relevant to their lives, as well as books that expand and challenge their worldview (Cooper, 2025; Cremin & Scholes, 2024; Gambrell, 2011; Zygouris-Coe, 2024). Students are more likely to enjoy reading when they have access to books that matter to them, connect to their life experiences, and give them new perspectives that help them navigate the world.

Teachers can create classroom library spaces rich with student interest texts. The ideal classroom library offers high-quality and high volume options for reading that meet a range of students' interest. Gonzalez (2017) gives the example of a classroom library containing several thousand books, and Rice & Richardson (2022) suggest that classroom libraries should contain approximately 300 total books, or approximately 10 books per student. A diverse range of texts that the students find interesting and relevant will entice students to read.

The classroom library itself should be an inviting space. Welcoming library spaces signal to students that literacy is important. Rice & Richardson (2022) advocate for environments that are physically comfortable, organized and accessible, with a variety of books to meet diverse student interests. Both the physical space of the library and the selection of texts invite students

to interact and engage. The classroom library becomes a physical representation that reading matters.

Research Conflicts & Gaps

The research highlighted inequities, barriers, and conflicts that need to be taken into consideration when applying strategies to enhance reading engagement. Cremin & Scholes (2024) found that students from economically disadvantaged school contexts do not benefit from reading for pleasure to the same degree as students from economically advantaged contexts. Furthermore, students participating in free meal programs within schools were less likely to have access to library spaces or own a book than peers who were not receiving free meals (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). These examples highlight that socioeconomic and systemic inequalities impact students' reading achievement, and not all students experience the benefits of reading equally. More research is needed to understand the unique supports needed to address gaps in reading achievement for students in communities furthest from justice.

While the research resoundingly advocated for robust classroom libraries with a diverse selection of texts, little information was provided for how classroom teachers can fund their developing libraries. Gonzalez (2017) noted the example of sourcing books through Scholastic, library sales, and parent donations. Cost of books is a significant barrier to offering a diverse range of texts, particularly for teachers without the personal funds to grow their libraries, and/or teaching in communities that may not have the resources to donate books, and/or in schools that have reduced or eliminated their library funding.

Finally, one conflict identified in the research was the benefits of intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards. Gambrell (2011), noted that the research on external rewards is mixed, and recommended that any incentives directly link to the desired accomplishment, such as offering book marks or extra reading time as reward. Conversely, Tricario (2025) gave the example of grading independent reading time by giving students 20/20 and only reducing points if a student

does not bring their reading material or chooses not to read during the allocated time. Thus, it is not clear whether it is better to engage students simply by extolling the intrinsic benefits of reading or if extrinsic rewards may be motivating factors. More research is needed in this area to make an informed opinion.

Method

The research method for this review focused on gathering credible sources. The majority of the research was peer reviewed. The remaining research was written by educators with proven expertise in their field. All chosen resources were rooted in student-centered methods that affirm students as readers and focus on how teachers can design pedagogies to best support reading motivation and enjoyment.

Conclusion

Research indicates that young people are less motivated to read and report decreased enjoyment from reading, which corresponds to gaps in reading achievement. However, research suggests that pedagogical shifts and instructional design may influence reading motivation. Strategies that center students' identities and experiences as meaningful lenses for interpreting text, encourage independent reading, affirm student agency, and build class community around reading through teacher-student and peer-to-peer interactions, contribute to an educational environment that fosters reader identity and increased motivation. When students are given time to read, access to texts that are relevant to their identities and experiences, freedom to choose their reading materials, and a community that affirms their evolving identity as readers, they are more likely to experience reading as valuable and enjoyable.

That being said, it's important to consider the limitations of this research, which demonstrated that the benefits gained from these strategies extended more to students from economically advantaged contexts. Additional research is needed to understand the reading needs of students from economically disadvantaged contexts. Furthermore, the research that

informed this study was unclear on how teachers should fund their classroom library spaces, and whether they should focus on intrinsic or extrinsic rewards to engage students.

Despite these conflicts, the research offers hope that decreases in reading achievement are reversible, and that cultivation of reading motivation and joy is attainable through intentional instructional strategies. By designing classroom environments that prioritize aesthetic engagement, agency, competence, and belonging, educators may foster the development of reader identity and intrinsic motivation. This study seeks to understand how instructional designs and strategies can be leveraged to cultivate students' motivation and joy in reading.

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