

Motivating Readers: Integrating Literacy Motivation Strategies into Preservice Teacher Preparation Programs

Lunetta M. Williams¹

¹University of North Florida

Abstract: Motivation is a critical factor in literacy development, yet it is often underemphasized in pre-service teacher preparation. To address this, preservice teacher education programs should include instruction on motivation strategies and offer structured opportunities for implementation during field placements. This article presents five research-based strategies that promote student motivation in literacy instruction: interest, technology, choice, social interactions, and game-based learning. Practical suggestions are included for implementing these strategies within small group instruction, with the goal of preparing future educators to create classroom environments where students are motivated to read.

Keywords: Pre-service Teacher Preparation, Motivation, Literacy

Introduction

The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report indicates that only 31% of fourth-grade students performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level, underscoring continuing challenges in literacy instruction (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). While the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) identified five essential components of effective reading instruction—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—an often underemphasized yet critical component is students' motivation to read (Brandt et al., 2021; Gambrell, 2011). As Marinak and Gambrell (2016) state, "Knowing how to read is not sufficient. Students must have both the skill and the will to read" (p. 33).

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Motivated readers are more likely to engage in frequent reading (Gambrell, 2011), and research reveals that increased reading volume contributes significantly to reading achievement (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021). Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) Reading Engagement Model emphasizes that both motivation and the strategic use of reading processes are essential for fostering engaged reading. The model posits that reading comprehension is not solely a function of ability; rather, it is deeply influenced by a student's motivation to interact meaningfully with text. In a subsequent study, Guthrie et al., (2001) found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and families with limited educational attainment who demonstrated high levels of reading engagement outperformed peers from similar backgrounds who exhibited lower engagement. These findings suggest that reading engagement may serve as a more influential predictor of reading achievement than socioeconomic status or parental education level. Gambrell (2011) described engaged readers as those who are "intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text" (p. 173).

Given the influence of student motivation on academic achievement, researchers have emphasized the need for preservice teacher education programs to embed motivation theory and practice within their curricula (Schürmann et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2021). Further, research indicates that many preservice teachers report having limited or no formal preparation related to student motivation (Schürmann et al., 2021). To address this, teacher education programs should include instruction on motivation strategies within literacy instruction, along with opportunities to apply these strategies during supervised field experiences. Equipping future educators with this knowledge and practical experience is critical as they create classrooms where students are not only able but also eager to read.

Motivation Strategies to Implement in Preservice Teacher Education Programs

While there are numerous motivation strategies that can foster a love of reading among elementary students, this article highlights five evidence-based strategies that could be implemented in a variety of classroom settings: interest, technology, choice, social interactions, and game-based learning. The following section provides an overview of each strategy within the context of small group instruction. Implementing motivation strategies in a small group setting can serve as an entry point for novice teachers, providing opportunities to build self-confidence and refine instructional practices before applying motivation techniques in a whole group setting.

Interest

Interest is rooted in Eccles and colleagues' (1983) expectancy-value theory, which identifies interest value as the enjoyment or intrinsic satisfaction a student derives from engaging in a task, such as reading. Preservice teacher education programs should inform future teachers that leveraging students' individual interests is a critical component of fostering reading motivation. Administering interest inventories (Gambrell, 2011) and tools such as the Motivation to Read Profile-Revised (Malloy et al., 2013) at the beginning of field experiences could further inform preservice teachers' instructional planning, including what

texts to use. To support the selection of interest-based texts at appropriate reading levels during small group instruction, preservice teachers can learn about websites such as Scholastic Book Wizard, Lexile.com, and Epic!® which provide searchable databases that include both thematic filters and readability measures. These tools would enable preservice teachers to form homogenous reading groups that align with students' reading abilities and personal interests. In situations where students share common interests but demonstrate varying reading levels, preservice teachers can be introduced to idea circles, a small-group instructional strategy that supports differentiated reading (Bennett, 2014). Idea circles engage students in reading texts on a shared topic, each at an individually appropriate reading level. These readings are followed by collaborative discussions, allowing students to share information from their texts and, as a result, deepen their collective understanding of the content.

Technology

In a study conducted by Brandt et al., (2021), technology was identified as one of seven key principles for motivating students to read. Examples of instructional practices highlighted in the study included the use of internet-based tools to research books, respond to reading, complete digital projects, and read digital texts. Similarly, Ciampa (2012) found that eBooks not only supported the development of reading skills but also enhanced students' motivation to read. Preservice teacher education programs should introduce platforms such as Epic!®, Hoopla®, and Meet Libby®, which provide access to a wide range of digital texts and audiobooks. Additional resources, such as Wonderbook®, a print book embedded with an audiobook feature, and Storyline Online, which features professional actors reading children's literature, offer other opportunities to integrate technology. These texts can be selected based on students' interests and reading level, as indicated in the previous section. Additional platforms such as Pear Deck and Nearpod, which integrate with Google Slides, could enable preservice teachers to develop lessons that foster active participation and engagement. These platforms offer features like embedded questions and polls that provide opportunities for immediate formative assessment, allowing preservice teachers to gauge student understanding and adjust instruction accordingly. Another platform to enhance motivation is Padlet, a digital bulletin board that allows students to post text, images, links, audio, or video in a shared space. During reading instruction, Padlet can serve as a collaborative tool that allows students to share ideas, respond to prompts, and reflect on texts in real time. For example, students could post their favorite quotes, make predictions, or ask questions about a shared story. By visually displaying student contributions, preservice teachers can use Padlet to help create a small group community where students' voices are valued, even for quieter students who may be hesitant to share their thoughts aloud.

Choice

Choice is a motivation strategy that provides students with opportunities to select between two or more options (Turner & Paris, 1995). Research indicates that when students perceive the control in their learning, their motivation tends to increase (Jang et al., 2010).

In preservice teacher education programs, future teachers could be introduced to practical approaches for offering choice in a small group setting such as allowing students to select their reading partners or vote on which book should be read aloud first. Another effective method is allowing students to choose the text they will read during small group instruction (Guthrie et al., 2007). This can be implemented through bounded choice, in which students are presented with a curated selection of four to five texts that are aligned with their reading levels (Gambrell, 2011). The group then votes on which text to read. Alternatively, each student could self-select a text for independent reading. In such cases, preservice teachers can learn to apply the Scaffolded Silent Reading (ScSR) model, which supports students in transferring oral reading skills to silent reading practice (Reutzel et al., 2008). In ScSR, preservice teachers would guidebook selections to ensure appropriate text complexity, student interest, and genre variety. Student progress can be monitored through individual reading conferences where students read aloud, engage in book discussions, respond to comprehension questions, and set goals for book completion. During this time, preservice teachers could use a data collection sheet to indicate strengths and needs for fluency and comprehension skills. Finally, students work together with the preservice teacher to select a reading response project, such as a character wanted poster or story map, to share with their peers.

Social Interactions

The role of social interactions as a motivation strategy in reading instruction is well established in the literature. Reutzel et al. (2010) found that students' engagement in reading increased when opportunities for social interactions were embedded into literacy activities. Similarly, Brandt et al., (2021) reported that teachers observed benefits when social interactions were integrated into reading instruction. They noted that "students became more enthusiastic about books and reading. They spent more time reading and were excited to participate in related activities. Even struggling readers increased in efforts and improved in attitudes toward reading" (p. 729). Preservice teachers can be taught to intentionally plan for meaningful peer interactions. For example, they might implement peer book recommendations or utilize "turn and talk" routines, in which students briefly discuss a shared text with a partner. Before implementing these routines, preservice teachers should learn to model effective social interactions by engaging in a sample discussion with a student. During modeling, they could incorporate structured "talk moves" (O'Brian, 2019), such as using sentence stems like "Can you say more about that?" or "Let me see if I understand what you are saying..." to guide conversations. An additional strategy that fosters social interaction and reading motivation is the use of literature circles. Preservice teacher education programs can introduce this strategy in which students read a common text, write in response journals, and then use their reflections as a springboard for group discussions that demonstrate comprehension (Brandt et al., 2021). To support active engagement, students could be assigned roles, such as predictor, questioner, or summarizer, with the preservice teacher serving as facilitator. Preservice teachers could even learn to increase the level of challenge by assigning students two roles to rotate through in a single session.

Game-based Learning

Research supports the use of games as an effective method for enhancing student motivation. Students tend to find games more enjoyable and are more actively engaged when compared to traditional drill-and-practice activities (Jackson & McNamara, 2013). Moreover, games offer immediate performance feedback, prompting learners to adjust their behaviors in response to game outcomes, which can enhance motivation (James & McNamara, 2013). In a recent study, Syal and Nietfeld (2024) found that game-based learning positively influences both reading comprehension and student motivation. To prepare preservice teachers for diverse classroom settings, teacher education programs should introduce both non-digital and digital examples of game-based learning. For non-digital formats, Erickson et al., (2021) recommend utilizing activities from the Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR), which are designed to be easy to implement and include step-by-step directions and accessible materials. These literacy activities span PreK through fifth grade and provide resources for differentiated instruction in field placements. One such activity, "Wordo," mirrors the format of Bingo but incorporates sight words to reinforce phonics skills in an engaging way. In addition to non-digital tools, preservice teachers can learn about digital platforms that support literacy development through game-based learning. Two accessible options for preservice teachers are Teach Your Monster to Read and Kahoot!. Teach Your Monster to Read guides students through progressively challenging reading games designed to build foundational literacy skills, including letter recognition, phonemic awareness, blending, and sentence reading. During small group instruction, preservice teachers can utilize the platform's built-in tracking features to monitor skill progression, time spent on activities, and current game levels. These data enable preservice teachers to identify both individual and group learning needs which could assist them in further tailoring instruction. Another digital option, Kahoot!, enables preservice teachers to create game-based learning experiences using polls and multiple-choice questions during small instruction. These games can transform traditional vocabulary practice or reading comprehension reviews into engaging classroom activities. Additionally, Kahoot! provides immediate feedback by displaying students' answers and scores after each question, supporting formative assessment while helping to maintain student motivation.

Conclusion

Given the critical role motivation plays in literacy development, it is essential that preservice teacher education programs incorporate content on motivation strategies and offer opportunities for practical application during field placements. Five research-based strategies should be considered: interest, technology, choice, social interactions, and game-based learning. Preservice teacher education should emphasize small group instructional approaches for implementing these strategies, as this context can provide novice teachers with a supportive setting to build confidence and refine decision-making skills. This not only strengthens preservice teachers' immediate teaching practice but also builds a foundation for broader application when they assume full responsibility in their own classrooms.

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SRATE Journal

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About the Author

Lunetta M. Williams is a professor at the University of North Florida. Her research focuses on motivating students to read as well as children's literature and preservice-teacher professional learning.