



The Role of Learning Motivation in Early Literacy Development: A Phenomenological Study of Elementary Students' Reading and Writing Experiences

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Abstract:

Although learning motivation has been widely examined through psychological and self-determination perspectives, less is known about how young children actually experience and constitute motivation during everyday reading and writing activities. This phenomenological study aimed to describe the essential structures of learning motivation as experienced by elementary students during early literacy activities. Employing Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological approach, the study involved 18 first- through third-grade students from three public elementary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured phenomenological interviews, participant observations, stimulated recall using video recordings, and reading logs and writing journals. Analysis followed the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, yielding four invariant themes: felt competence as embodied satisfaction, social visibility of literacy achievement, perceived meaningfulness of the literacy task, and temporal flow between engagement and disengagement. Together, these themes reveal that motivation is not merely an internal trait but a dynamic, context-sensitive, and embodied relationship between children and literacy activities. Motivation developed through a self-reinforcing cycle in which successful performance generated embodied competence, competence became socially visible, social recognition enhanced task meaningfulness, and meaningful engagement facilitated temporal absorption. Disruption of any component increased the likelihood of disengagement. The findings extend Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by showing how competence, relatedness, and autonomy are experientially interconnected in children's literacy activities, while also highlighting embodied satisfaction and temporal absorption as important dimensions of motivated experience. The study contributes a phenomenological understanding of early literacy motivation and suggests that instruction should foster successful performance, meaningful tasks, positive social recognition, and sustained engagement.

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Introduction (مقدمة)

Early literacy development constitutes a critical foundation for children's subsequent academic achievement, as the reading and writing competencies acquired during the elementary school years shape learning across subject areas and influence children's capacity to participate effectively in educational activities (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2020). Despite the widely recognized importance of literacy, international assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) continue to indicate that many elementary-age students experience difficulties with foundational reading comprehension and related literacy tasks. These persistent challenges have encouraged researchers to look beyond instructional methods and curriculum design toward learner-related factors that may shape literacy development (Gonçalves et al., 2023). Among these factors, learning motivation has increasingly been recognized as an important dimension because children's willingness to engage, persist, and invest effort in reading and writing may determine not only how frequently they participate in literacy activities but also how they experience and develop literacy competence.

A substantial body of empirical research has established an association between learning motivation and literacy achievement. Studies have reported that intrinsically motivated students tend to demonstrate stronger reading comprehension, greater writing fluency, and more sustained engagement in literacy activities both inside and outside the classroom (Vaknin-Nusbaum et al., 2020). Self-determination theory has further provided an influential framework for explaining how the satisfaction or frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs can facilitate or constrain children's engagement in literacy learning. Other studies focusing on specific motivational constructs, including reading self-concept, value beliefs, and achievement goals, have likewise demonstrated that motivational variables explain meaningful variation in literacy outcomes even after cognitive abilities and prior achievement are considered (De Smedt et al., 2020). Collectively, these studies have established that motivation is not peripheral to literacy development; rather, it is closely associated with how children engage with and perform literacy tasks.

However, what is known about the motivation-literacy relationship has been shaped predominantly by quantitative approaches. Much of the existing literature has operationalized motivation through standardized questionnaires, rating scales, achievement measures, and correlational models. Such approaches are valuable for identifying the strength, direction, and predictive significance of relationships among variables, but they provide limited insight into what motivation actually feels like for children while they are reading and writing (Medina-Hinostroza et al., 2024). In other words, previous research has largely addressed how much motivation children have, which motivational factors predict literacy outcomes, and whether motivation changes over time, rather than how children themselves experience being motivated or unmotivated during particular literacy encounters. This distinction is important because

motivation is not necessarily experienced as a fixed psychological quantity. For young learners, motivation may be embodied in feelings of confidence, frustration, curiosity, enjoyment, hesitation, recognition, belonging, or perceived meaningfulness that emerge in relation to specific literacy activities and classroom interactions (García Lebroc et al., 2026).

Longitudinal research has, for example, documented changes and declines in students' motivation across elementary school years, yet quantitative trajectories cannot fully explain how children interpret these changes from their own perspectives (Vaknin-Nusbaum & Tuckwiller, 2022). Similarly, intervention studies intended to enhance reading motivation have produced mixed findings, with some interventions demonstrating positive effects while others producing limited, null, or even negative outcomes (Istifariana, 2025). These inconsistencies suggest that motivational engagement may be highly dependent on the meanings children attribute to particular literacy tasks, social relationships, classroom conditions, and perceptions of competence. Consequently, an exclusive focus on measurable motivational constructs may overlook the experiential processes through which motivation is constituted in everyday literacy learning.

Qualitative scholarship has begun to address children's perspectives and experiences of literacy, demonstrating the value of examining literacy as a situated and socially embedded activity. Nevertheless, an important gap remains. Existing qualitative studies have more commonly examined children's literacy practices, perceptions, attitudes, or learning experiences than the essential structure of motivation as a lived experience of reading and writing. In particular, relatively little phenomenological research has investigated how elementary students experience motivation in the immediate, embodied, and situated moments of engaging with literacy tasks (Apriliana et al., 2022). The distinction between studying children's perceptions of literacy and studying the lived experience of motivation is consequential. A phenomenological inquiry does not simply ask whether children like reading, perceive themselves as competent readers, or report positive attitudes toward writing. Rather, it seeks to understand how motivation is experienced before it is reduced to a predefined psychological construct: how a task becomes inviting or discouraging, how competence is felt in the body, how recognition from teachers or peers shapes engagement, how difficulty is interpreted, and how the perceived meaningfulness of an activity influences children's willingness to continue (Puspita et al., 2026).

Thus, the principal research gap is both empirical and methodological. Empirically, the literature provides substantial evidence concerning the relationship between motivation and literacy achievement but offers comparatively limited knowledge of the meanings and experiential structures underlying that relationship. Methodologically, the dominance of quantitative designs has left insufficient space for children's first-person accounts of how motivation emerges, changes, and is sustained within authentic literacy situations. Although previous qualitative studies have demonstrated the importance of attending to learners' voices and situated literacy experiences, the phenomenological dimension of motivated reading and writing particularly the invariant experiential structures shared across different literacy situations remains insufficiently explored (Kara et al., 2025). This limitation is theoretically significant because without understanding how motivation is lived, researchers and educators may risk treating motivation as a stable individual trait rather than as a dynamic relationship between the learner, the literacy task, and the surrounding social and pedagogical environment.

The present study addresses this gap by examining learning motivation through the lived experiences of elementary students engaged in reading and writing activities in their natural classroom settings (Aminuriyah et al., 2023). The study is situated in regular elementary school classrooms in, where students participate in daily literacy instruction within standard curricular frameworks (Syarifah Aeni Rahman et al., 2025). Rather than beginning with predetermined motivational categories, the study adopts a transcendental phenomenological perspective to

return to students' first-person experiences and identify the essential structures underlying motivated and unmotivated engagement with literacy (Raoda et al., 2023). This approach is particularly appropriate because it enables the investigation of phenomena as they are experienced by learners while suspending, as far as possible, assumptions derived from established motivational theories and measurement frameworks.

Accordingly, this study pursues three objectives: (1) to describe the essential structures and meanings of learning motivation as experienced by elementary students during reading and writing activities; (2) to identify how motivational experiences vary across different literacy tasks and classroom conditions; and (3) to develop a phenomenological account of the relationship between subjective motivational experience and early literacy development. The unit of analysis is therefore not motivation as a measurable trait but students' first-person lived experiences of being motivated or unmotivated while reading and writing in school contexts. The study proceeds from the proposition that learning motivation in early literacy development is better understood as a dynamic and context-sensitive intentional relationship between the child and the perceived meaningfulness of literacy activities than as a stable disposition or simple cost-benefit calculation (Abidin et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in shifting the analytical focus from the measurable relationship between motivation and literacy achievement to the lived structure of motivated literacy experience itself. Whereas previous studies have primarily established motivational predictors, correlations, developmental trajectories, and intervention effects, this study seeks to reveal how elementary students experience motivation through embodied feelings of competence, social recognition, task meaningfulness, emotional responses, and classroom interactions as they actually engage in reading and writing. By using transcendental phenomenology to foreground children's first-person experiences, the study contributes an experiential dimension that remains underdeveloped in the existing motivation-literacy literature. Its contribution is therefore not to propose another motivational scale or predictor model, but to provide foundational phenomenological knowledge that can refine understandings of literacy motivation and support more developmentally responsive approaches to literacy pedagogy. In this respect, the study responds directly to the limitations of predominantly quantitative accounts and extends existing scholarship by making children's lived motivational experiences central to the understanding of early literacy development. The remainder of this article presents the relevant literature on learning motivation and early literacy, explains the transcendental phenomenological methodology employed in the study, reports the findings according to the essential themes emerging from students' lived experiences, and discusses the theoretical and pedagogical implications of these findings.



Method (منهج)

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach, drawing on Husserl's phenomenology (1931/2013) and Moustakas's (1994) methodological development, to explore the essential structures of elementary students' lived experiences of learning motivation during reading and writing activities (Tuffour, 2017). This approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand motivation from children's first-person experiences rather than infer it solely from observable behavior or external measures (Aisyah & Rahmatullah, 2024). Transcendental phenomenology emphasizes the description of experience as it is lived while requiring the researcher to engage in *epoché*, or the systematic suspension of preconceptions, before interpreting the phenomenon. Accordingly, the study focused on identifying invariant meaning units and synthesizing them into the essential structure of motivated literacy experience (Syamsul Aripin & Nana Meily Nurdiansyah, 2022).

The study was conducted in three public elementary schools within the SDN Percontohan Mandailing Natal area. The schools were purposively selected to provide variation in students' socioeconomic backgrounds while maintaining broadly comparable literacy curricula and instructional structures (Aisyah & Rahmatullah, 2024). Data collection was conducted over four months, enabling the researcher to observe students across different reading and writing activities and to conduct repeated interviews. The literacy classrooms involved first- through third-grade students and incorporated guided reading, independent reading, shared writing, and word-study activities. The researcher served as the primary research instrument and had received graduate-level training in qualitative and phenomenological interviewing. Before and throughout fieldwork, the researcher maintained an epoche through reflexive journaling, weekly methodological memos, peer debriefing, and periodic review of personal assumptions concerning children's motivation and literacy learning (Astuti & Winarti, 2026).

Participants and Participant Selection

Participants were recruited through purposive criterion-based sampling. The sampling strategy was designed to obtain information-rich cases that represented variation in students' experiences of engagement and disengagement rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. Three schools were selected to provide contextual diversity, while eighteen students were selected to ensure representation across the first three grades of formal literacy instruction. Six students were recruited from each grade (Grades 1, 2, and 3), resulting in a balanced distribution of developmental levels. The sample included equal numbers of boys and girls and four students identified by their schools as multilingual learners. Students were eligible to participate if they (a) were enrolled in Grade 1, 2, or 3 at one of the participating schools; (b) had received at least six months of formal literacy instruction; (c) demonstrated variation in reading and writing engagement based on classroom teachers' observations; and (d) obtained parental consent and provided child assent. The inclusion of eighteen students was considered appropriate for the phenomenological purpose of obtaining detailed and diverse descriptions while permitting repeated engagement with each participant. Six students per grade also enabled comparison of experiences across the early elementary years without compromising the depth of individual phenomenological accounts. Classroom teachers ($n = 9$) and two literacy specialists were included as contextual informants. Their information was not treated as substitutes for children's first-person accounts but was used to contextualize classroom practices, identify relevant literacy episodes, and support interpretation of observational data.

Data Collection

Data were generated through four complementary sources: phenomenological interviews, participant observation, stimulated recall, and document collection. The use of multiple sources was intended to deepen the description of children's lived experiences while preserving participants' first-person accounts as the primary phenomenological evidence. The primary source was in-depth, semi-structured phenomenological interviewing. Each child participated in two to three interview sessions, with each session lasting approximately 25–40 minutes. Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet and familiar space at the participating school and were scheduled at times that minimized disruption to classroom learning. Following a modified long-interview protocol (McCracken, 1988), the interviews began with broad experiential questions, such as "Can you tell me about a time when you really wanted to read or write?" Participants were then invited to describe specific episodes in detail, including what they were doing, what they noticed, how they felt, what they thought, what happened immediately before and after the event, and how their bodies responded. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings rather than impose predetermined motivational categories.

Because the participants were young children, age-appropriate elicitation techniques were incorporated into the interviews. Drawing prompts were used when appropriate, allowing

children to draw themselves reading or writing and subsequently explain what was represented in their drawings. The researcher also used simple, concrete prompts and allowed children sufficient time to formulate their responses. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by reflexive field notes documenting contextual observations and significant nonverbal responses. Stimulated recall was used to help participants articulate moment-to-moment experiences that might have been difficult to remember or describe retrospectively without contextual support. Selected video recordings of participants engaged in ordinary literacy activities were replayed individually to the children after the observed activity. The researcher paused the recording at meaningful moments, such as the beginning of a task, a transition, visible persistence, withdrawal, successful completion, or interaction with peers or teachers. Children were invited to explain what they remembered thinking, feeling, wanting, or noticing at those moments. Questions remained open-ended, and the researcher avoided labeling the observed behavior as either “motivated” or “unmotivated” before the child provided an account. Stimulated recall data were treated as supplementary first-person descriptions and were integrated with the phenomenological interview data during analysis.

Participant observation was conducted in each participating classroom for approximately 15 hours per school, resulting in approximately 45 hours of classroom observation. Observations covered different literacy activities and instructional conditions, including guided reading, independent reading, shared writing, word study, individual tasks, and collaborative activities. The researcher documented students’ engagement, persistence, withdrawal, transitions between activities, interactions with teachers and peers, responses to success or difficulty, and classroom discourse surrounding reading and writing. Field notes distinguished descriptive observations from the researcher’s preliminary reflections and were completed within 24 hours of each observation session. Document data included reading logs, writing journals, teacher comments, self-evaluations, stickers, and other student-produced artifacts that appeared to carry motivational significance. These materials were used to contextualize participants’ accounts and identify concrete traces of their engagement with literacy activities. Before formal data collection, the interview protocol, observation guide, stimulated recall procedure, and reflective journal template were pilot-tested with three children who were not included in the study. Minor revisions were subsequently made to question wording, pacing, and drawing prompts to improve developmental appropriateness and clarity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Moustakas’s (1994) adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological procedure. The analysis was conducted iteratively, moving between individual accounts and the emerging description of the phenomenon. First, all interview and stimulated recall recordings were transcribed verbatim. Observation notes and relevant document descriptions were organized alongside the corresponding participant accounts to create a comprehensive phenomenological database. Second, the researcher conducted horizontalization, treating each relevant statement concerning the experience of motivation as having equal initial value. Statements that directly described participants’ experiences of reading and writing motivation were extracted as potential meaning units. Repetitive, overlapping, vague, or contextually irrelevant statements were subsequently removed, producing a set of non-redundant invariant meaning units.

Third, invariant meaning units were clustered according to conceptual similarity and examined for relationships, resulting in preliminary themes. Throughout this process, the researcher returned to the original transcripts to ensure that themes remained grounded in participants’ language and did not reflect predetermined theoretical categories. Fourth, a textural description was developed for each participant to capture what the participant experienced, including the concrete situations, feelings, perceptions, and actions associated with motivation. Fifth, a structural description was developed to explain how the experience occurred, with

particular attention to temporal, spatial, bodily, social, and relational conditions. Sixth, the textural and structural descriptions were integrated into an individual textural-structural composite for each participant. Finally, the individual composites were compared across all eighteen participants to identify convergent and divergent experiential meanings. Through this synthesis, invariant themes were refined and integrated into a composite description of the essential structure of learning motivation during early literacy activities. The final structure was retained only when it was supported across participants and remained consistent with the original experiential accounts.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical procedures were implemented throughout the study because the participants were children. Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant institutional and school authorities before data collection. Parents or legal guardians provided written informed consent, while participating children provided age-appropriate assent. Children were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could decline to answer any question, and that they could withdraw from the study without academic consequences. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting, and identifying information was removed from interview, observation, video, and documentary data. Video recordings were used solely for research purposes and were stored securely with restricted access. Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through four months of field engagement, repeated observations, multiple interview sessions, and triangulation across interviews, stimulated recall, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted with six participants using age-appropriate summaries of their accounts; all six confirmed the general accuracy of the interpretations, while two provided minor clarifications that were incorporated into the analysis. Biweekly peer-debriefing sessions with three doctoral researchers and one faculty member specializing in literacy and motivation provided opportunities to examine emerging themes, methodological decisions, and possible researcher assumptions.

Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the schools, participants, classroom literacy environments, and motivational episodes. Dependability and confirmability were supported through an audit trail containing transcripts, field notes, coding decisions, analytical memos, methodological records, and reflexive journals. An external qualitative methodologist reviewed the audit trail and the relationship between the raw data, meaning units, themes, and final phenomenological structure. Negative case analysis was also conducted by actively examining accounts that did not correspond with the emerging themes. Two cases in which students described motivation in more strongly agentic terms prompted refinement of the structural description rather than exclusion of contradictory evidence. These procedures strengthened the methodological rigor and ensured that the final phenomenological description remained grounded in the lived experiences of the participating children.



Discussion (مناقشة)

The phenomenological analysis yielded essential structures of learning motivation as experienced by elementary students during reading and writing activities. From the eighteen participant interviews, observational field notes, and artifact collections, four interrelated invariant themes emerged that collectively constitute the essential structure of motivated literacy experience: (1) the felt sense of competence as embodied satisfaction, (2) the social visibility of literacy achievement, (3) the perceived meaningfulness of the literacy task itself, and (4) the temporal flow of engaged versus disengaged states. Each theme captures a distinct dimension of what it means for a young learner to feel motivated or unmotivated while learning to read and

write. Below, these findings are presented through textural-structural descriptions supported by representative participant quotations and summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Essential Themes of Learning Motivation in Early Literacy

Theme	Core Experiential Feature		Representative Participant Excerpt
Felt sense of competence as embodied satisfaction	Physical and emotional sensations accompanying successful decoding or writing		“When I sound out the whole word by myself, my tummy feels warm and I want to do another one.” (Participant 7, Grade 2)
Social visibility of literacy achievement	Recognition from teachers, peers, or parents that makes internal motivation externally visible		“I like when the teacher puts my story on the wall because then everyone sees I am a writer.” (Participant 12, Grade 3)
Perceived meaningfulness of the literacy task	Connection between the reading/writing activity and child’s own interests or purposes		“If it’s about sharks, I don’t even feel like I’m working. I just keep reading.” (Participant 3, Grade 1)
Temporal flow of engaged versus disengaged states	Shifting quality of time experience—accelerated when motivated, slowed when unmotivated		“Writing sentences feels like forever. But drawing and writing my comic goes fast like a video game.” (Participant 15, Grade 2)

Theme 1: The Felt Sense of Competence as Embodied Satisfaction

Across all grade levels, participants consistently described motivated reading and writing experiences as those accompanied by a distinctive, positive bodily sensation that emerged precisely at the moment of successfully performing a literacy task. This phenomenon was not merely cognitive self-evaluation (“I am good at reading”) but rather a pre-reflective, embodied feeling that children located in specific parts of their bodies. First grader Participant 4 explained, “When I finish a page and I know all the words, my chest feels light like I’m floating.” Similarly, third grader Participant 16 described the experience of completing a writing assignment: “My hands stop being tight. They feel loose and ready to write more.” Children who displayed lower observed literacy engagement reported the opposite: the absence of this embodied satisfaction, replaced by physical sensations of tension, heaviness, or discomfort. Participant 9 (Grade 2) stated, “When I can’t read the word, my shoulders go up and my head feels hot. Then I don’t want to try the next word.” Notably, this embodied dimension was entirely absent from children’s descriptions of being praised or receiving external rewards; such events produced different feelings (described as “happy” or “good”) that were qualitatively distinct from the warm, loose, or light sensations accompanying self-attributed competence. The structural invariant here is that motivated literacy engagement is fundamentally anchored in bodily feedback loops: the child’s own successful decoding or writing act generates a somatic marker that, once experienced, fuels the desire to continue.

Theme 2: The Social Visibility of Literacy Achievement

While embodied competence operated at an internal level, a second theme revealed that motivation also required a social dimension specifically, that the child's literacy achievement be made visibly recognizable to others. Participants did not describe motivation as sustained by private feelings of success alone; rather, they articulated a need for their competence to become publicly observable through artifacts (writing displayed on walls, stickers on reading logs), performances (reading aloud to the class), or interpersonal recognition (teacher's verbal acknowledgment delivered in front of peers). Participant 10 (Grade 1) illustrated this vividly: "I have eight stickers on my chart. My friend has five. When my teacher says my name in morning meeting, I feel like I want to read even more books so everyone knows." The absence of social visibility produced marked motivational withdrawal, even when children privately recognized their own improvement. Participant 14 (Grade 3) reported, "I finished a whole chapter book at home, but my mom was on her phone. I didn't feel like reading the next one because nobody saw that I did it." This theme does not contradict the embodied competence finding but rather extends it: the felt sense of competence appears to require external **confirmation** or **witness** to transform momentary satisfaction into sustained motivational energy. Importantly, children distinguished between authentic recognition (responsive to genuine achievement) and indiscriminate praise, with the latter described as "just words" that quickly lost motivating power.

Theme 3: The Perceived Meaningfulness of the Literacy Task Itself

A third essential theme concerned the relationship between the child and the content of the reading or writing activity. Participants consistently distinguished between tasks they perceived as personally meaningful—connected to their existing interests, curiosities, or purposes and tasks perceived as arbitrary or externally imposed. The former generated spontaneous, self-sustaining motivation that children described using metaphors of openness ("the door opens and I go in"), attraction ("it pulls me"), or natural flow. The latter required effortful self-regulation, which younger children in particular found depleting. Participant 5 (Grade 1) stated simply, "If the book has trains, I don't need anyone to tell me to read it. I just do it." Participant 13 (Grade 3) elaborated on writing: "When we have to write about our weekend, I don't know what to say. But when we write our own animal reports, I can't stop writing because I want to tell people that tarantulas have eight eyes." The structural invariant here involves the child's perception of agency over the **content** of literacy engagement, rather than merely over the process or duration. Interestingly, several participants reported that initially uninteresting tasks could become meaningful if the teacher provided a relational bridge connecting the task to something the child already cared about suggesting that meaningfulness is not a fixed property of tasks but a relational achievement between child, task, and classroom context.

Theme 4: The Temporal Flow of Engaged versus Disengaged States

The final essential theme pertains to the temporal quality of motivational experience. Participants uniformly described motivated literacy episodes as those in which time seemed to "go fast," "disappear," or "fly." Conversely, unmotivated episodes were characterized by time "stretching," "taking forever," or being "so slow." This temporal distortion was not merely a metaphor but a concrete experiential structure that children could articulate with precision. Participant 2 (Grade 1) reported, "When I'm drawing my story first, the writing part goes fast like a blink. But if I have to write first, the clock takes so long to move." Participant 18 (Grade 3) distinguished between two types of reading: "If it's a book I chose, I look up and recess is already over. If the teacher makes me read a hard book, I look at the clock every minute." The structural invariant involves a shift in the child's **intentional directedness**: in motivated states, attention is absorbed by the literacy act itself, and temporal awareness recedes from consciousness; in unmotivated states, attention fragments between the task and the monitoring of its duration, producing a painful awareness of elapsed time. This finding also revealed developmental

variation: third graders demonstrated metacognitive awareness of this temporal dynamic (“I know when I’m checking the clock too much, that means I’m not into it”), whereas first graders simply reported the raw experience without such reflective labeling.

Synthesis of the Essential Structure

Across these four themes, the essential structure of learning motivation in early literacy development can be described as follows: *Motivation is the child’s lived experience of a self-reinforcing cycle in which (a) successful literacy performance produces an embodied sense of competence, (b) that competence becomes socially visible to meaningful others, (c) the literacy task is perceived as connected to the child’s personal interests or purposes, and (d) temporal awareness recedes, allowing absorption in the activity. The absence of any single component disrupts the cycle, transforming motivation into disengagement characterized by bodily tension, social invisibility, perceived meaninglessness, and fragmented, time-conscious effort.* Notably, no participant described motivation as a stable personal trait (“I am a motivated reader”) nor as a simple product of rewards or punishments. Instead, children portrayed their motivational experiences as highly context-dependent, shifting across tasks, times of day, social configurations, and even specific physical locations within the classroom. This finding challenges trait-based conceptualizations of academic motivation and supports the phenomenological claim that motivation is fundamentally an intentional relationship a way of being directed toward the world of reading and writing rather than a property located inside the child.

Negative Cases

Two participants (Participant 8, Grade 2 and Participant 17, Grade 3) presented experiential patterns that initially appeared discrepant from the essential structure. Both children described motivated reading and writing in unusually agentic terms, stating that they could deliberately *decide* to feel motivated even for uninteresting tasks. Participant 17 explained, “If I don’t like the book but I have to read it, I tell myself this will help me get smarter. Then I feel like doing it.” This strategy self-generated extrinsic framing was not reported by any other participant. Further analysis revealed that these two children also scored higher on classroom measures of self-regulation and had teachers who explicitly taught metacognitive strategies. Rather than rejecting these cases, the essential structure was refined to include a secondary pathway to motivation: when the direct experience of meaningfulness is absent, some children can generate motivation through cognitive reappraisal that reconstructs the task’s personal value. This pathway, however, was described as effortful and less satisfying than the spontaneous motivation arising from the four thematic components. The primary essential structure thus represents the most direct and frequently reported experiential pathway, while the reappraisal pathway constitutes a derived, cognitively mediated variant. In summary, the results reveal that elementary students’ learning motivation during reading and writing activities is not a unitary state but a dynamic experiential gestalt comprising embodied, social, meaning-oriented, and temporal dimensions. These findings provide the foundation for the discussion, in which their implications for theory, pedagogy, and future research will be examined.

Discussion

The Experiential Structure of Motivation in Early Literacy

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essential structures of learning motivation as experienced by elementary students during reading and writing activities, examine how motivational experiences vary across literacy tasks and classroom conditions, and develop a phenomenological account of the relationship between subjective motivation and early literacy development. Four invariant themes emerged: (1) felt competence as embodied satisfaction, (2) social visibility of literacy achievement, (3) perceived meaningfulness of the literacy task, and (4) temporal flow between engagement and disengagement. Taken together,

these themes indicate that motivation in early literacy is not a stable internal disposition but a dynamic, context-sensitive relationship between the child and the literacy activity. This interpretation is consistent with situated perspectives on motivation, which conceptualize motivation as emerging through the interaction between learners and their learning environments. The first theme, felt competence as embodied satisfaction, provides phenomenological depth to the concept of competence in Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT conceptualizes competence as the need to experience effectiveness and mastery in interactions with the environment. However, competence is frequently operationalized through cognitive self-evaluations or behavioral indicators of performance. The present findings demonstrate that, for young literacy learners, competence is also experienced somatically and pre-reflectively. Children described successful reading and writing experiences through bodily sensations, such as a “light” chest, relaxed shoulders, or warm feelings in the stomach. Thus, competence is not simply a cognitive judgment such as “I am good at reading”; it is experienced as a bodily confirmation that one can successfully act within the literacy environment.

This finding extends previous quantitative research demonstrating positive associations between reading motivation and literacy achievement. Whereas quantitative studies primarily establish that motivation is associated with literacy performance, the present phenomenological evidence provides insight into how this relationship may be experienced. Participant 7, for example, explained, “when I sound out the whole word by myself, my tummy feels warm and I want to do another one.” This account illustrates a self-reinforcing process in which successful performance generates an embodied sense of competence, which subsequently increases the desire to engage in another literacy task. In this respect, the present findings that intrinsic reading motivation facilitates comprehension through improved reading efficiency (Hikmah, 2022). The present study suggests that such efficiency may also be subjectively experienced as bodily ease, making successful performance itself a source of continued motivation. The converse pattern was evident among children who experienced difficulty (Gonçalves et al., 2023). Participants described reading and writing challenges through sensations of bodily tension, heat, tightness, and discomfort. Such accounts suggest that low motivation is not merely the absence of positive motivational energy but may involve an active embodied experience of difficulty that discourages continued engagement (Vaknin-Nusbaum et al., 2020). Lower reading motivation is associated with lower levels of well-being. The present study adds an experiential explanation by showing how motivational difficulty may become embodied as physical discomfort. Consequently, literacy interventions that focus exclusively on cognitive skill acquisition may overlook an important dimension of motivational withdrawal. Supporting children’s literacy development may therefore require instructional conditions that reduce unnecessary performance anxiety and enable repeated experiences of manageable success (De Smedt et al., 2020).

The second theme, social visibility of literacy achievement, extends the SDT concept of relatedness. Within SDT, relatedness concerns the need to experience connection, care, and belonging in relationships with significant others. The present findings indicate that, for young literacy learners, relatedness may be experienced specifically through the recognition of competence by meaningful others. Participant 12 stated, “I like when the teacher puts my story on the wall because then everyone sees I am a writer.” This account illustrates that social recognition does more than establish interpersonal connection; it confirms the child’s emerging identity and competence as a reader or writer. The findings therefore suggest an experiential interdependence between competence and relatedness. Competence that remains entirely private may not have the same motivational significance as competence that receives meaningful social recognition. Participants described public acknowledgment through classroom displays, teacher responses, peer recognition, and family attention as strengthening their desire to continue literacy activities. This finding is compatible with sociocultural accounts of literacy, particularly Vygotsky’s (1978) emphasis on the socially mediated development of higher psychological

functions, and with research demonstrating that self-regulated reading and writing are embedded within social contexts (Zulianah et al., 2022).

At the same time, participants distinguished between authentic recognition and generic praise. Recognition was motivating when children perceived it as a genuine response to something they had actually accomplished. By contrast, indiscriminate praise was sometimes perceived as “just words” and therefore had limited motivational value. This distinction is consistent with SDT’s differentiation between need-supportive and controlling forms of feedback and with evidence that SDT-informed teacher practices can strengthen autonomous reading motivation. The present study extends this literature by suggesting that recognition becomes particularly meaningful when it makes literacy competence socially visible without transforming recognition into external control. The third theme, perceived meaningfulness of the literacy task, further clarifies how intrinsic motivation emerges in children’s everyday literacy experiences. Previous research has established that intrinsic motivation is strengthened when learners perceive tasks as interesting, personally relevant, or valuable (Abidin et al., 2025). The present findings add that meaningfulness is experienced not primarily as an abstract judgment of task importance but as a lived connection between the literacy activity and the child’s interests, curiosity, identity, or immediate purposes. Participant 3 captured this experience by stating, “If it’s about sharks, I don’t even feel like I’m working. I just keep reading.” The statement illustrates how personal relevance can transform the experience of effort: an activity that might otherwise require deliberate self-regulation becomes spontaneous and absorbing.

This interpretation complements Li, Yao, and Zhu’s (2024) finding that intrinsic motivation contributes to writing performance through self-efficacy for self-regulation. The present study provides a phenomenological account of the process underlying this relationship. When children perceive a literacy activity as personally meaningful, engagement becomes less dependent on externally imposed regulation. Conversely, when an activity is perceived as arbitrary or disconnected from the child’s interests, participation requires greater regulatory effort and may become difficult to sustain. Importantly, meaningfulness was not found to be an inherent property of a literacy task. Several participants described initially uninteresting activities becoming engaging when teachers connected them to topics, experiences, or interests that were already meaningful to the children. Meaningfulness can therefore be understood as a relational achievement among learner, task, and instructional context. This interpretation supports broader contemporary perspectives that literacy engagement cannot be reduced to cognitive skills alone but must also account for motivational and affective process. It is particularly relevant given evidence that children’s voluntary engagement with writing remains relatively limited.

The fourth theme, temporal flow between engagement and disengagement, represents one of the most distinctive contributions of the study. Participants consistently differentiated motivated and unmotivated literacy experiences through their perception of time. During highly engaging activities, children reported that time “went fast,” “disappeared,” or “flew,” whereas during difficult or externally imposed tasks, time seemed to “stretch” or “take forever.” Participant 18 explained, “If it’s a book I chose, I look up and recess is already over. If the teacher makes me read a hard book, I look at the clock every minute.” This contrast demonstrates that temporal experience is not merely an incidental feature of literacy engagement but part of how children recognize and describe their own motivational states. The finding resonates strongly with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of flow, in which individuals become deeply absorbed in an activity and experience altered temporal awareness. The present study extends this concept to early elementary literacy by demonstrating that young children can experience flow-like states during reading and writing when the activity combines meaningfulness, perceived competence, and opportunities for sustained engagement. Conversely, repeated temporal monitoring appears to accompany disengagement. Temporal awareness may therefore provide an accessible phenomenological indicator of motivational quality. Developmental differences were also

apparent. Older participants, particularly third graders, were more capable of explicitly interpreting temporal experience as an indicator of their own motivational state, whereas first graders more often reported the experience without metacognitive labeling. This pattern is consistent with research showing developmental growth in metacognitive and self-regulatory capacities during the elementary years (Hikmah, 2022). The finding suggests that motivational support should be developmentally differentiated: younger children may benefit primarily from environmental structures that sustain engagement, whereas older children may increasingly benefit from explicit instruction in recognizing and regulating their own motivational states (Miranti et al., 2020).

Integrating the Four Themes: A Phenomenological Extension of Self-Determination Theory

When considered collectively, the four themes form an experiential structure rather than four independent motivational factors. The essential structure can be described as a self-reinforcing cycle in which successful literacy performance produces an embodied sense of competence; competence becomes socially visible to meaningful others; social recognition and personal relevance strengthen the meaningfulness of the literacy activity; and meaningful engagement facilitates temporal absorption. As temporal awareness recedes, children become more deeply engaged, creating further opportunities for successful performance. Conversely, disruption of one or more components may produce a contrasting cycle characterized by bodily tension, insufficient recognition, perceived meaninglessness, and fragmented attention. This structure has important implications for SDT. The theory traditionally conceptualizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as distinct but interrelated psychological needs. The present findings suggest that, in the lived experiences of young literacy learners, these dimensions may be experienced less as separable constructs and more as an integrated experiential gestalt. Competence becomes more motivationally powerful when it is socially recognized; meaningful engagement becomes easier when children experience themselves as capable; and autonomy is strengthened when children perceive literacy activities as connected to their own interests and purposes. The findings therefore do not reject the separability of SDT's constructs at the theoretical level but demonstrate how they may become experientially intertwined in children's everyday literacy activities.

The study consequently provides a phenomenological extension of SDT by specifying how motivational needs are lived in the body, social environment, and temporal experience of literacy activity. Conventional measures often ask children to report whether they feel competent, autonomous, or connected. Such measures remain valuable, but they may not fully capture the pre-reflective and situational character of motivation revealed in this study. The embodied feeling of competence, the need for socially visible achievement, and the experience of temporal absorption indicate dimensions that are difficult to represent through isolated Likert-scale items. The findings also challenge trait-oriented conceptualizations of motivation. Participants did not consistently experience themselves as permanently motivated or unmotivated readers and writers. Instead, motivation shifted according to task difficulty, topic, choice, social context, instructional practices, and physical and temporal circumstances. This pattern supports situated perspectives on motivation, which emphasize that motivational states emerge through transactions between learners and their environments. It also suggests that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, while theoretically useful, may not fully describe the lived complexity of young children's motivational experiences. Children may simultaneously experience competence, social recognition, personal interest, obligation, and self-regulatory effort within a single literacy episode.

The two negative cases further refine this interpretation. Two participants demonstrated a secondary motivational pathway based on cognitive reappraisal. Participant 17 explained, "If I don't like the book but I have to read it, I tell myself this will help me get smarter. Then I feel like doing it." These children were described as having relatively strong self-regulation skills and

were able to generate a reason for engaging even when the task lacked immediate personal meaning. This finding is consistent with research linking self-efficacy for self-regulation to writing performance and with evidence that choice and situational interest can stimulate engagement. The negative cases therefore do not invalidate the primary structure. Rather, they suggest that children may possess different motivational resources depending on their developmental and self-regulatory capacities. For younger children, motivation may depend more strongly on the immediate interaction of competence, social recognition, meaningfulness, and temporal absorption. As metacognitive and self-regulatory abilities develop, children may increasingly employ cognitive reappraisal as a secondary strategy when the primary experiential pathway is unavailable. This distinction contributes to a more nuanced understanding of motivational development by identifying not only different levels of motivation but also potentially different pathways through which motivation is generated.

The findings also extend previous phenomenological research on literacy. Philomena and Chye (2023), for example, examined self-regulated reading among older primary students using a transcendental phenomenological approach and identified motivational, behavioral, and metacognitive dimensions. The present study extends this work by focusing on younger learners in Grades 1–3 and by examining motivation specifically through the lived experience of reading and writing. Likewise, research on writing attitudes, self-efficacy, and achievement has demonstrated important associations between motivational beliefs and literacy performance. The present phenomenological account complements these findings by explaining the experiential processes through which such motivational beliefs may become consequential during actual literacy activities. Overall, the theoretical contribution of the study can be summarized in three ways. First, it provides a phenomenological extension of SDT by showing how competence, relatedness, and autonomy are experientially interconnected in early literacy. Second, it identifies temporal flow as an experiential dimension of literacy motivation, extending the application of flow theory to young elementary learners. Third, it proposes a developmentally differentiated motivational model consisting of a primary experiential pathway and a secondary cognitive-reappraisal pathway. Together, these contributions shift attention from asking whether children are motivated toward understanding how motivation is lived, sustained, disrupted, and reconstructed in particular literacy situations.

Educational Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings have several implications for literacy instruction. First, because competence must be experienced rather than merely demonstrated to become motivational, teachers should provide frequent opportunities for children to experience attainable success. Appropriately leveled texts, scaffolded writing tasks, incremental challenges, and specific feedback can help children experience themselves as capable literacy learners. The objective is not simply to increase performance but to create conditions in which successful performance is experienced as personally meaningful and reinforcing. Second, because social visibility contributes to the motivational value of competence, teachers should create authentic opportunities for children's literacy achievements to be recognized by meaningful others. Classroom displays, student-authored books, read-aloud sessions, peer sharing, literacy celebrations, and authentic audiences can make children's developing identities as readers and writers visible. Such practices should emphasize genuine accomplishment rather than indiscriminate praise so that recognition remains informational and supportive rather than controlling. Third, literacy activities should be designed to increase meaningfulness. Teachers can provide choices of reading materials and writing topics whenever curricular conditions permit. When choice is constrained, teachers can establish connections between assigned tasks and students' existing interests, experiences, questions, or aspirations. The findings suggest that meaningfulness is not something teachers simply "add" to a task; it can be constructed through the relationship between the child, the activity, and the instructional context.

Fourth, teachers should recognize the importance of temporal experience. Extended and relatively uninterrupted periods of reading and writing may allow children to move from initial engagement toward deeper absorption. Excessive interruptions, fragmented activities, and persistent time monitoring may interfere with this process. Teachers can also help older children develop metacognitive awareness by inviting them to reflect on indicators of engagement and disengagement, including their experience of time, bodily tension, attention, and desire to continue. Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in three elementary schools within a single geographical region; therefore, the findings may not transfer directly to contexts with different literacy curricula, cultural expectations, socioeconomic conditions, or classroom practices. Second, the participants were primarily drawn from mainstream classrooms, and the study did not specifically examine children with diagnosed learning disabilities, attention difficulties, or participation in specialized literacy intervention programs. Their motivational experiences may differ from those described here. Third, the sample of eighteen participants was appropriate for phenomenological inquiry but does not permit claims about the prevalence or statistical distribution of the identified experiences. Finally, the study employed a cross-sectional design. Although repeated observations and interviews provided depth, longitudinal phenomenological research would be required to determine how the experiential structure of motivation develops and changes across the early elementary years.

Future research should therefore investigate the stability and variation of the four themes across developmental stages and cultural contexts. Longitudinal phenomenological studies could examine whether the relative importance of embodied competence, social recognition, meaningfulness, and temporal flow changes as children develop greater metacognitive and self-regulatory capacities. Cross-cultural research could also determine whether the social visibility of achievement is similarly central in educational cultures that place different emphases on individual and collective accomplishment. In addition, intervention studies could test whether instructional environments deliberately designed around the four experiential dimensions produce measurable improvements in motivation and literacy outcomes. Finally, the findings point to the need for more phenomenologically sensitive approaches to assessing literacy motivation. Future researchers could develop instruments or mixed-method assessment procedures that complement conventional self-report measures with indicators of embodied experience, social recognition, task meaningfulness, and temporal engagement. Such approaches would help bridge psychological measurement and children's lived experience and could provide a more comprehensive account of how motivation develops during the earliest stages of reading and writing. In this sense, the central contribution of the present study is not simply to identify four themes but to demonstrate that early literacy motivation is a lived, relational, embodied, and temporally unfolding experience that emerges through the interaction of the child, the literacy task, and the social environment.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study demonstrates that elementary students' motivation during reading and writing activities is a dynamic, context-sensitive lived experience rather than a stable personal trait. (1) The findings indicate that motivated literacy engagement is constituted by four interconnected experiential dimensions: embodied feelings of competence, social visibility of literacy achievement, perceived meaningfulness of literacy tasks, and temporal absorption in the activity. (2) These findings address the research objectives by showing that students' motivational experiences vary according to the nature of the literacy task and classroom conditions, while also revealing an essential structure through which children experience reading and writing as engaging or disengaging activities. (3) The study therefore extends existing understandings of literacy motivation by foregrounding children's first-person experiences and suggests that early

literacy instruction should provide meaningful tasks, opportunities for successful participation, supportive social recognition, and conditions that allow sustained engagement. (4) Future research should examine whether these phenomenological dimensions are evident across different age groups, educational settings, and cultural contexts. Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening early literacy requires attention not only to what children learn to read and write, but also to how they experience the process of learning.



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