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Examining What Motivates Black Learners Who Struggle with Reading

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Abstract

Reading difficulties disproportionately affect Black students who face compounding challenges rooted in systemic inequities, linguistic bias, and culturally misaligned literacy instruction. Despite growing recognition of these disparities, research specifically examining the motivational dimensions of literacy engagement among Black students who speak English as their primary language remains limited. This literature review synthesizes peer-reviewed research to examine three interconnected questions: What systemic barriers shape the literacy experiences of Black students? How do culturally relevant literacy practices influence reading motivation and engagement? And what role do intrinsic motivation, socioeconomic context, and non-cognitive skills play in shaping literacy outcomes for this population? Drawing on sociocultural theory, behaviorist theory, and information processing theory as theoretical anchors, the review identifies four convergent themes: the persistence of racial and linguistic bias in literacy definitions and practices; the centrality of culturally relevant instruction in fostering intrinsic reading motivation; the moderating role of socioeconomic status on reading engagement; and the urgent need for equity-centered, identity-affirming instructional frameworks. Implications for classroom practitioners, school administrators, curriculum designers, and researchers are discussed. The review concludes that improving literacy outcomes for Black students requires moving beyond skills-deficit frameworks toward approaches that treat motivation, cultural identity, and systemic equity as foundational instructional variables.

Keywords: *Black students; reading motivation; culturally relevant pedagogy; systemic barriers; intrinsic motivation; literacy equity; minoritized students*

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Introduction

Reading development involves both decoding abilities, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and letter-sound recognition, and meaning-based skills, including vocabulary, oral language, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension (Al Otaiba et al., 2022). For English Language Learners (ELLs), learning to read is often more complex because they must simultaneously acquire a new language, adapt to unfamiliar cultural expectations, and participate in literacy instruction that may not align with their linguistic and cultural experiences (Shatz & Wilkinson, 2010). For Black ELLs specifically, these challenges are further intensified by the interconnected effects of race, language, and longstanding systemic inequities within educational settings.

National assessments continue to show significant disparities in reading achievement. Research indicates that many English Language Learners (ELLs) do not reach reading proficiency by fourth grade, a milestone widely associated with later academic success, including high school completion and college enrollment (Solari et al., 2022). In addition, approximately 80% of students with learning disabilities experience primary educational difficulties related to reading, while ELLs with reading challenges remain underrepresented in intervention research (Vaughn et al., 2005). The urgency for effective and culturally responsive literacy instruction has also increased as the population of children who spoke a language other than English at home and who experienced difficulty speaking English grew by 124% between 1979 and 2003 (Wirt et al., 2005).

Despite the scale of this challenge, research specifically focused on Black ELLs, students who are simultaneously navigating racial minority status, English language learning, and reading difficulty remains remarkably sparse. Shatz and Wilkinson (2010) noted that even as research on language learning and difficulties expanded significantly, studies specifically focused on minority elementary and secondary students remained scarce. This gap is not merely academic. It reflects a broader pattern in educational research that studies Black and other minoritized students without producing remedies that address their specific challenges (Cabrera, 2013).

This literature review addresses this gap by examining what motivates Black learners who struggle with reading. The central research question guiding this review is: What influence do culturally relevant literacy practices have on the reading motivation and engagement of Black students in U.S. public schools?

Theoretical Framework

This review is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives that together address the cognitive, social, and linguistic dimensions of reading development among Black ELLs.

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that language and literacy development are fundamentally social processes that occur through interaction with more knowledgeable others within culturally situated contexts (Wang, 2015). The zone of proximal development, the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can accomplish with appropriate support, provides a framework for understanding how adult scaffolding, peer interaction, and

culturally responsive instruction facilitate literacy growth. For Black ELLs navigating between home languages, community dialects, and school-sanctioned academic English, the sociocultural dimension of literacy learning is particularly salient. Phillips Galloway et al. (2020) extend this framework by arguing that academic language development, a critical component of reading comprehension must be contextualized within real-life communicative practices rather than treated as a decontextualized set of grammatical rules. Teaching academic language effectively requires helping students understand when and how to use language in real contexts, not merely drilling the rules of its structure.

Behaviorist Theory

Behaviorist theory posits that language is learned through imitation, reinforcement, and conditioning, with caregivers and the broader linguistic environment providing the models that children imitate (Wang, 2015). While behaviorism does not fully account for the creative dimensions of language acquisition, it offers practical insights for designing structured, feedback-rich reading interventions for students with language-based difficulties. For Black ELLs, the imitation and reinforcement model is particularly relevant in the context of structured literacy interventions that build foundational decoding skills through explicit, systematic instruction.

Information Processing Theory

The information processing model of reading holds that skilled word recognition depends on the rapid, automatic processing of phonological and orthographic information (Wang, 2015). When a student's processing capacity is limited, whether due to learning English as a second language, a language-based learning difficulty, or inadequate prior instruction, cognitive resources are disproportionately consumed by decoding, leaving insufficient capacity for higher-order comprehension processes. For Black ELLs experiencing both linguistic distance between their home language and English and reading difficulties, this processing burden is compounded. Understanding these cognitive constraints helps explain why culturally familiar content and scaffolded instructional supports are particularly valuable. They reduce the extraneous cognitive load that unfamiliar content imposes, freeing cognitive resources for meaningful engagement with text.

Methodology

This review employed a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing relevant research on Black ELLs and Black English speakers who struggle with reading. Electronic databases searched included INFOKAT, ERIC, JSTOR, and ProQuest. Search terms included combinations of the following: motivation, struggling readers, literacy, Black English Language Learners, culturally relevant practices, and reading engagement. Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed articles, U.S. Government reports, and publications within the last ten years, with the exception of foundational theoretical works cited for their ongoing relevance. An initial search for Black English Language Learners combined with Research and U.S. yielded 65 publications. The search was refined by adding peer-reviewed status, motivation, and struggling readers as additional criteria, resulting in 43 articles.

Articles were analyzed using a consistent framework that examined each study's research questions, research design, participant characteristics, and relevance to the central research question. As the review progressed, recurring scholars emerged as authorities in the fields of reading comprehension, social interaction for language development, and reading motivationincluding Phillips Galloway et al., Suzanne Adlof, Vygotsky, Xiao-lei Wang, Smith et al., Wigfield and Guthrie (1997), and Solari et al. Themes were identified through inductive coding, with recurring patterns color-coded and synthesized across studies. Four primary themes emerged from this process: systemic barriers to literacy, culturally relevant literacy practices and motivation, intrinsic motivation and socioeconomic context, and non-cognitive skills and challenging deficit narratives.

Review of Literature

Structural challenges

In U.S. public schools, ELLs represent an important and rapidly growing group who face significant challenges in achieving reading proficiency due to systemic inequities and inconsistent access to personalized, culturally appropriate education (Solari et al., 2022). These systemic barriers are not merely practical, they are ideological, rooted in definitions of literacy that center White, middle-class norms and marginalize the literacy practices and identities of Black and other minoritized students.

Smith et al. (2020) provide a compelling illustration of how racial and linguistic biases are deeply intertwined in shaping the literacy experiences of Black immigrant students. Their examination of a 19-year-old biracial student who identified as Black and who had been exposed to Jamaican Creole, Jamaican Standard English, and American English reveals how multilingualism, which might reasonably be framed as a cognitive and cultural assetwas instead treated as a liability in her school context. Her Jamaican Creole was characterized by teachers and peers as language interference, reflecting what Smith et al. (2020) describe as the tension between autonomous views of literacy, which privilege decontextualized, skills-based reading and writing, and ideological perspectives that recognize literacy as embedded in social and cultural contexts where meaning is created through language in different ways. Over time this student internalized these judgments, came to view her Creole as broken English, altered her speech patterns, and experienced a profound erosion of academic self-worth and literacy motivation.

This case illustrates a broader pattern identified across multiple studies: when schools define literacy success through standardized assessments of decoding accuracy and reading fluency that reflect mainstream cultural assumptions, they systematically disadvantage students whose literacy practices are rich and varied but differently valued. Solari et al. (2022) corroborate this finding in their synthesis of intervention research for ELLs with word-reading difficulties, concluding that access to evidence-based, personalized literacy support remains inequitably distributed, with Black and Hispanic ELLs least likely to receive appropriately differentiated instruction.

The systemic challenges facing Black ELLs are further compounded by the dynamics of second language acquisition. For students whose home language is typologically distant from English, the phonological, morphological, and syntactic demands of English literacy are

substantial (Shatz & Wilkinson, 2010). The greater the difference between a student's first language and English, the more time needed to achieve a level of proficiency sufficient for academic reading (Shatz & Wilkinson, 2010). Capin et al. (2022) add an important neurological dimension to this picture, noting that students with comorbid reading and language difficulties, a profile particularly relevant for some Black ELLs may present with more significant reading comprehension problems than students with reading difficulties alone, making the design of effective interventions more complex and more urgent.

Addressing these systemic challenges requires more than incremental adjustments to existing literacy instruction. Smith et al. (2020) and Solari et al. (2022) both call for a fundamental shift in how literacy success is defined and measured, one that respects the unique linguistic experiences and cultural identities of Black students and moves beyond narrow skills-based metrics toward more inclusive and equitable understandings of what it means to be literate.

Literacy Motivation Through Culturally Relevant Instruction

Against the backdrop of systemic barriers, a growing body of research documents the power of culturally relevant literacy practices to foster engagement, motivation, and reading achievement among Black and other minoritized students. Motivation has emerged as a key factor in literacy success, particularly for students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008). Research consistently demonstrates that students who are intrinsically motivated to read, who engage with texts because they find them personally meaningful and culturally resonant, spend more time reading, encounter a broader range of texts, and develop stronger comprehension skills over time (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

Castillo and Wagner (2019) provide compelling empirical support for the motivational power of culturally relevant literacy practices. Their two-year study of a multimedia reading program in rural South African schools for grades one through three found that students who participated in a culturally grounded, technology-enhanced literacy program, featuring home-language texts, animations, interactive games, and immediate feedback, demonstrated significantly greater gains in reading fluency and comprehension than students in control conditions. Critically, the authors attribute the program's motivational power not only to its technological features but to its cultural relevance: students were reading about characters, settings, and situations that reflected their own lives and communities, which increased their interest and willingness to persist through challenging material.

This finding aligns with Wigfield and Guthrie's (2014) concept-oriented reading instruction (CORI) research, which demonstrates that embedding literacy tasks in meaningful, real-world contexts produces significant gains in both reading motivation and comprehension. The CORI model allows students to choose reading materials and connect lessons to real-life experiences, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and sustaining engagement over time. Mucherah and Yoder (2008) further demonstrate that students who report higher levels of intrinsic reading motivation, defined as reading for pleasure, curiosity, and personal relevance, perform significantly better on standardized reading assessments than peers who are primarily extrinsically motivated. This finding is particularly important because it suggests that motivation-centered interventions are not supplemental to academic achievement but foundational to it.

Castillo (2020) challenges a pervasive and damaging deficit narrative in the literacy literature: the assumption that Black and Hispanic students are less motivated to read than their White peers. Her analysis of a large, nationally representative sample of elementary-age students found that Black and Hispanic students reported high levels of reading motivation, a finding that directly contradicts widespread assumptions about these students' academic engagement. The problem, Castillo (2020) argues, is not that these students lack motivation but that the literacy environments they encounter too rarely honor the motivational resources they bring. Current literacy practices may actually suppress the motivation that Black students already possess by failing to provide culturally relevant content and inclusive definitions of literacy success. This insight has profound implications for instructional design: the goal is not to create motivation in Black students but to stop destroying it through culturally misaligned instruction.

Incorporating multilingual texts and culturally affirming materials into reading instruction directly addresses the identity-based barriers that Smith et al. (2020) identify. When students see their languages, communities, and experiences reflected in the texts they read, they are more likely to develop a positive reading identity, a sense of themselves as people for whom reading holds personal meaning and value.

The Connection Between Intrinsic Motivation, Socioeconomic Status, and Reading Engagement

Intrinsic motivation does not develop or operate in isolation. It is deeply shaped by the socioeconomic contexts in which students live and learn, and by the degree to which those contexts provide access to the resources, opportunities, and affirming relationships that literacy development requires. Finch et al. (2023) examine academic motivation and self-regulated learning behaviors in middle childhood, finding that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly more likely to face barriers to reading engagement, including limited access to books, reduced exposure to print-rich environments, and greater exposure to chronic stressors that compete with academic focus. For Black ELLs who may face poverty-related challenges in addition to racial and linguistic biases, this intersection of socioeconomic disadvantage and structural marginalization creates compounding barriers to intrinsic reading motivation.

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is central to understanding these dynamics. Mucherah and Yoder (2008) emphasize that intrinsic motivation, the drive to engage in reading for the value and enjoyment the activity itself brings, is more effective than extrinsic motivation, being driven by external rewards such as grades or teacher approval for producing sustained reading engagement and achievement. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) demonstrate that students who are intrinsically motivated spend significantly more time reading, which leads to better academic outcomes through the accumulating effects of reading volume and breadth. For students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who face systemic barriers to reading engagement, building intrinsic motivation is not a luxury but a necessity. It is one of the few factors within instructional control that can serve as a protective buffer against the effects of external disadvantage.

Foster and Miller (2007) offer a longitudinal perspective on these dynamics, tracking the development of the literacy achievement gap from kindergarten through third grade. Their analysis reveals that the gap widens most significantly in the early elementary years, precisely

the period during which children's reading motivation is most malleable and most responsive to instructional conditions. This finding underscores the importance of early intervention: schools that wait until students are significantly behind before providing motivationally oriented, culturally affirming support miss the developmental window during which the foundations of reading motivation and identity are established.

Wigfield and Guthrie (2014) demonstrate through their CORI research that intrinsically motivated students are more likely to engage with reading, achieve better academic outcomes, and sustain their engagement over time. Importantly, their research shows that motivation is not a stable personality trait but a dynamic response to instructional conditions that can be cultivated through deliberate, well-designed literacy instruction that provides meaningful challenge, genuine choice, and culturally relevant content. This finding has direct and practical implications for teachers working with Black ELLs: rather than accepting low reading motivation as a fixed characteristic of struggling readers, educators can and should design instruction that actively builds the motivational conditions that support sustained literacy engagement.

Non-Cognitive Skills, Deficit Narratives, and the Path Forward

A fourth theme emerging from the literature concerns the role of non-cognitive skills, particularly self-regulation, persistence, and academic resilience in moderating the relationship between systemic barriers and reading outcomes, and the importance of challenging the deficit narratives that have historically characterized discussions of Black students' academic motivation.

Castillo (2020) argues that non-cognitive skills deserve far greater attention in literacy research and practice, particularly for students from minoritized backgrounds. Her research demonstrates that when Black and Hispanic students are given literacy tasks that are culturally meaningful and intrinsically motivating, they demonstrate strong self-regulatory behaviors, choosing to persist, seeking help, and returning to challenging texts. This finding directly challenges the stereotype that Black students are less academically motivated or less capable of self-regulation. The evidence suggests instead that self-regulatory behaviors emerge when instructional conditions are appropriately supportive and culturally affirming, not that they are absent in these students.

Kim et al. (2016) provide additional evidence for this reframing in their evaluation of the Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention (STARI), a program designed for struggling middle school readers that emphasized choice, collaborative discussion, and texts addressing themes of identity and social justice. Students who participated in STARI demonstrated gains not only in reading fluency and comprehension but also in reading motivation and self-efficacy. While the STARI study was not conducted exclusively with Black students, its emphasis on culturally relevant content and student agency aligns closely with the principles identified throughout this review as particularly important for Black learners.

Finch et al. (2023) extend this analysis by examining how intrinsic motivation functions as a protective factor for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, serving as a buffer against the academic challenges posed by poverty-related stressors. Students who reported genuine interest in reading were more likely to sustain reading engagement despite

socioeconomic adversity, suggesting that building intrinsic motivation is not just an instructional goal but a form of equity work that directly addresses the disadvantages produced by structural inequality.

Taken together, these findings support a multi-faceted understanding of what it means to improve literacy outcomes for Black ELLs and speakers. Structured instructional strategies must reflect culturally affirming literacy approaches (Smith et al., 2020; Castillo & Wagner, 2019) and practices that foster intrinsic motivation (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Understanding the role of socioeconomic status and non-cognitive skills (Finch et al., 2023; Castillo, 2020) explains why systemic barriers exist and how they can be partially addressed through instructional design. Literacy programs that involve students and families reading together have the potential of making reading more personally relevant and culturally meaningful, bridging the gap caused by systemic inequalities in ways that purely skills-focused interventions cannot.

Implications for Practice and Research

Implications for Practitioners

The synthesis of this literature review generates several direct implications for classroom teachers, school administrators, and curriculum designers working with Black students who struggle with reading.

First, educators should broaden traditional literacy instruction to include culturally relevant and inclusive approaches that reflect the social and cultural contexts of diverse learners. A successful example is the BFI multimedia reading program by Castillo and Wagner (2019), which demonstrated that culturally grounded technology-enhanced instruction can simultaneously improve reading skills and sustain motivation. Teachers should structure reading activities to incorporate books that reflect students' cultural backgrounds and organize sessions as collaborative group discussions that reinforce a sense of belonging and community.

Second, literacy instruction should prioritize strategies that build intrinsic motivation, including allowing students to choose their reading materials, connecting literacy activities to students' real lives, and encouraging social interaction during reading activities. The CORI model (Wigfield et al., 2014) offers a well-researched instructional framework that operationalizes these principles. Researchers have consistently demonstrated that intrinsically motivated students are more likely to engage with reading and achieve better outcomes (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), making motivation not a peripheral concern but a central instructional priority.

Third, schools must address structural barriers from the roots. Racial and linguistic biases that hinder Black ELLs from receiving meaningful, personalized literacy instruction must be actively identified and dismantled. Schools can implement policies that challenge stereotypes about minoritized students, ensure equitable access to high-quality literacy resources including those designed for students with word-level reading difficulties or dyslexia (Solari et al., 2022), and provide teachers with the professional development they need to deliver culturally responsive reading instruction.

Fourth, educators and policymakers must actively counter deficit narratives about the literacy abilities and motivation of students of color. Castillo (2020) demonstrates clearly that Black and Hispanic elementary students report high levels of reading motivation, a finding that should transform how teachers interpret and respond to disengagement in their Black students. Disengagement from reading is a rational and predictable response to culturally misaligned instruction, not evidence of inherent motivational deficiency.

Fifth, early reading motivation must be prioritized through timely intervention. Castillo's (2020) research shows that while young students are generally motivated to read, motivation declines as students get older, a trajectory that early, culturally affirming literacy intervention can interrupt. Schools should create early reading motivation interventions that capitalize on the motivational energy young Black students bring to school rather than waiting until that motivation has been eroded by repeated failure.

Implications for Researchers

This review identifies several important directions for future research that would directly extend and deepen the field's understanding of literacy motivation among Black students.

More research is urgently needed to examine how culturally relevant texts and inclusive literacy practices influence motivation, engagement, and reading outcomes for Black students specifically. Most existing research treats race and language background as demographic variables rather than as central analytical categories, producing findings that may not accurately represent the specific experiences and needs of this population. Longitudinal studies that assess the sustained impact of culturally relevant literacy practices over time would be particularly valuable (Finch et al., 2023).

In-depth examination of systemic barriers is also needed. Though systemic inequities and racial biases have been acknowledged in the literature, further research is needed to examine precisely how these factors affect Black immigrant students and other subgroups within the broader Black ELL category (Smith et al., 2020). The intersection of race, language background, immigration status, and socioeconomic status creates a complex constellation of experiences that existing research has only partially illuminated.

Researchers could also examine how interventions targeting non-cognitive skills including self-regulation, resilience, and reading self-efficacy can help Black ELLs overcome the negative effects of systemic barriers on reading engagement and outcomes (Finch et al., 2023; Castillo, 2020). While the evidence base for motivation-focused interventions is growing, much of it lacks the specificity needed to guide practice for this particular population.

Finally, there is a critical need for research that expands understanding of Black students specifically students who occupy the dual position of racial minority and multilingual learner. These students' unique strengths and challenges are poorly represented in both the ELL literacy literature and the Black students' literacy literature, leaving a significant gap that future research must address (Smith et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This narrative literature review has synthesized evidence across four interconnected themes. Systemic barriers, culturally relevant literacy practices, intrinsic motivation and socioeconomic context, and non-cognitive skills, to argue that improving reading outcomes for Black students requires a fundamental reconceptualization of what effective literacy instruction looks like, for whom, and toward what ends.

The evidence reviewed here consistently shows that Black students are not unmotivated readers.They are students whose motivational resources have too often been ignored, devalued, or actively suppressed by educational systems that define literacy success narrowly and distribute literacy resources inequitably. Castillo (2020) demonstrates that Black students arrive at school with high levels of reading motivation. Smith et al. (2020) show how linguistic bias systematically erodes that motivation. Castillo and Wagner (2019) and Wigfield et al. (2014) demonstrate that culturally relevant, motivationally oriented instruction can reverse that trajectory.

A holistic approach is needed. One in which literacy instruction simultaneously builds foundational skills and affirms cultural identity, addresses systemic barriers alongside instructional quality, and treats motivation as a foundational variable rather than an ancillary concern. Educational equity is not achieved through skills instruction alone. It requires the courage to examine and dismantle the structural, ideological, and cultural forces that have systematically prevented Black ELLs from experiencing literacy as a source of power, pleasure, and identity. The students are ready. The question is whether the systems that serve them will be.

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