Integrating Foundational Skills and Student-Centered Literacy: Insights from Self-Determination Theory

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Introduction

For decades, the aptly named *Reading Wars* have shaped literacy policy, curriculum adoption, and professional learning across the United States. These debates, often framed as a struggle between explicit phonics instruction and student-centered or balanced literacy approaches, have influenced not only how reading is taught but also how teachers and students experience classroom learning (Castles et al., 2018; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). While discussions frequently center on instructional efficacy, their consequences extend deeper, affecting how teachers connect with students, cultivate motivation, and create environments that sustain engagement.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1980) offers a powerful framework for reconciling these opposing perspectives. Grounded in the belief that all learners require autonomy, competence, and relatedness to thrive, SDT provides the fulcrum through which educators can balance the structure of foundational skill instruction with the freedom of student-centered learning. In this way, SDT becomes the common ground on which both sides of the Reading Wars can stand—a reminder that structure and freedom can serve as partners in cultivating motivated, capable readers.

This reflection begins by tracing the historical pendulum of literacy debates, followed by an exploration of key curriculum theories, and concludes with how SDT and the HEART Model (Maydew, 2025) together offer a bridge for integrating explicit skill instruction and authentic literacy engagement.

Historical and Contemporary Context of Reading Instruction

The history of reading instruction in the United States has unfolded like a pendulum—swinging between structured, skills-based programs and more holistic, student-centered approaches. Each shift reflects a search for the "right" way to teach reading, yet these cycles often overlook the relational and motivational dimensions that sustain learning. Recent policy movements grounded in the *Science of Reading* have brought renewed attention to foundational skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics (Castles et al., 2018; Petscher et al., 2020). While this emphasis on structure supports students' competence, critics caution that a narrow interpretation risks minimizing autonomy and authentic engagement (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

Past reform movements such as balanced literacy sought to merge structured skill instruction with authentic literacy engagement but often faltered in practice, leaving teachers uncertain how to balance both. As Pearson (2004) noted, education has often been "better at swinging the pendulum than finding its center"—a reminder that progress in literacy instruction requires balance rather than extremes.

As I reflect on my own work with preservice teachers, I've observed how this national pendulum trickles into teacher preparation. Candidates often feel they must "choose the correct side" between explicit instruction and student-centered literacy, rather than learning how both can coexist. In practice, however, the most effective classrooms balance systematic skill development with rich opportunities for students to make choices, connect texts to their lives, and experience reading as purposeful and joyful. These relational elements—rooted in trust, responsiveness, and belonging—are what enable the Science of Reading to become not just a set of practices, but a framework for human connection.

Reflections on Theory and Practice: SDT as a Unifying Lens

Across decades of educational thought, theorists have sought to connect structure, freedom, and human motivation in learning. Progressive Education (Dewey, 1916) emphasizes experiential learning and autonomy; Constructivist Education (Vygotsky, 1978) highlights scaffolding and collaboration, aligning with SDT's focus on competence; Humanistic Education (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1969) centers emotional well-being and relationships; and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971) underscores modeling and feedback for building confidence. Together, these perspectives form the philosophical scaffolding for Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980), which unites autonomy, competence, and relatedness into a single framework for motivation.

Viewed collectively, these theories affirm that balanced classrooms—where explicit instruction coexists with choice, collaboration, and connection—most effectively sustain student motivation and achievement. In literacy contexts, this means pairing systematic phonics and decoding instruction with authentic reading and writing experiences that foster purpose and voice.

SDT helps explain *why* this balance matters: learners flourish when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are all supported (Guay, 2022). Skill-driven programs that overemphasize structure may limit autonomy, while open-ended approaches can dilute competence. Classrooms that intentionally nurture all three needs sustain both achievement and engagement (Wang et al., 2024; Maydew, 2025). These same principles extend to teacher–student relationships (TSR)—when teachers understand students' strengths, interests, and goals, learning becomes relational rather than transactional.

This dynamic is especially relevant amid renewed emphasis on the Science of Reading (Castles et al., 2018). Foundational skills are essential for building competence, yet must work cooperatively with opportunities for curiosity, agency, and authentic text use (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Frameworks such as the Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) mirror SDT's focus on integrating decoding, language, and motivation, reminding us that reading development is both cognitive and affective. SDT

reframes explicit instruction and student-centered literacy not as competing agendas but as complementary forces.

These ideas come to life through the HEART Model (Maydew, 2025), which positions teacher–student relationships (TSR) as the bridge between structure and autonomy. Its five dimensions—Holistic, Enthusiastic, Approachable, Responsive, and Transformative—translate the principles of SDT into daily classroom practice, showing that effective literacy instruction begins with relationships that honor both rigor and humanity.

The HEART Model and Relational Literacy

Developed through research on teacher–student relationships in reading methods courses, the HEART Model (Maydew, 2025) translates the principles of Self-Determination Theory into daily classroom practice. The model's five dimensions— Holistic, Enthusiastic, Approachable, Responsive, and Transformative—describe relational teaching behaviors that intentionally cultivate autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Each dimension represents a way educators can create motivational conditions where students feel capable, valued, and empowered. In this sense, the HEART Model operationalizes the relational side of the *Science of Reading*: it reminds educators that foundational skill instruction succeeds most fully when paired with trust, connection, and joy.

Holistic instruction views students as whole individuals, connecting reading and writing to their lives, cultures, and identities. When teachers make these connections explicit, they strengthen *competence* through relevance and purpose. Enthusiastic teaching conveys genuine joy for literacy and creates emotional energy that fosters *autonomy*— students are invited to see themselves as active participants rather than passive recipients of instruction. Approachable teachers cultivate *relatedness* by building psychological safety and warmth, ensuring students feel comfortable asking questions and taking risks. Responsive instruction involves adjusting lessons in real time to meet learners' needs, reinforcing *competence* and demonstrating that feedback is a form of care. Finally, Transformative teaching practices position learning as a shared journey in which teachers and students grow together, centering student voice and identity to support both *autonomy* and *connection.*

Across literacy contexts, these five dimensions illustrate how relational practices transform traditional instruction into motivational teaching. For example, when teacher candidates redesign phonics or vocabulary lessons to include structured student choice, engagement and confidence tend to rise. Such experiences demonstrate that when relationships are prioritized, foundational skill instruction becomes more meaningful and sustainable.

Ultimately, the HEART Model (seen in Figure 1) underscores that literacy development flourishes at the intersection of structure and support. When educators embody holistic, enthusiastic, approachable, responsive, and transformative teaching behaviors, they enact the motivational principles of Self-Determination Theory. These relational practices bridge explicit instruction and authentic engagement, affirming that strong literacy instruction begins with human connection.

Figure 1

The HEART Model: A Teacher–Student Relationship Model to Support Student Self-Determination.

Note. Adapted from *Teaching with HEART: A Mixed Methods Exploration of Undergraduate Pre-Service Teachers' and University Reading Methods Faculty Relationships* (Doctoral Dissertation), Maydew, 2025.
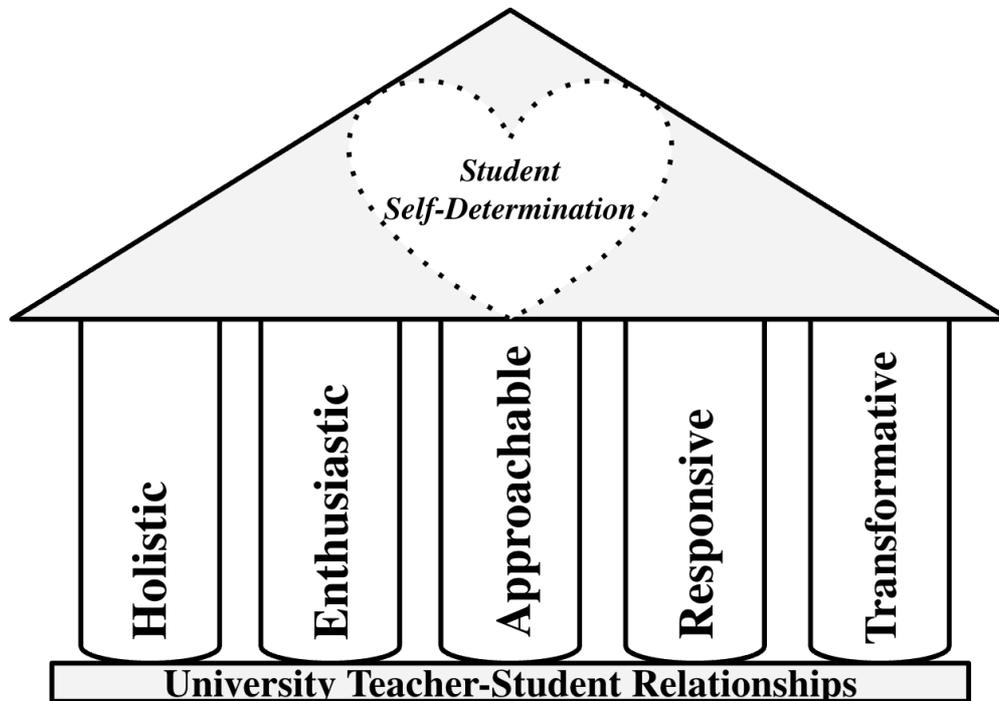
HEART Model (Maydew, 2025)

Reflections for Educators

The HEART Model reminds educators that literacy instruction is at its best when it integrates the head and the heart—balancing systematic skill instruction with human connection. In a climate where debates about "what works" in reading often prioritize programs over people, HEART re-centers relationships as the foundation of motivation and learning. Teaching with HEART means viewing explicit instruction not as a constraint on creativity, but as a structure that allows students to experience competence and confidence. Within this structure, student voice, choice, and connection transform learning from compliance to engagement.

Each dimension of the HEART Model offers an entry point for reflection. *Holistic* instruction attends to students' cognitive, social, and emotional growth, recognizing that literacy is both a skill and a means of self-expression. *Enthusiastic* teaching models curiosity and joy, helping students internalize positive attitudes toward reading and learning. *Approachable* educators cultivate trust, creating classrooms where students feel safe to take risks and make mistakes. *Responsive* teaching ensures that instruction adapts to students' needs and strengths, while *Transformative* teaching empowers students to apply literacy in meaningful, life-connected ways. Together, these dimensions operationalize the principles of Self-Determination Theory—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—within daily classroom interactions.

For teacher educators and literacy leaders, HEART offers a framework for guiding both preservice and practicing teachers toward relational rigor. It reminds us that motivation is not a byproduct of instruction but a precondition for it. When students experience instruction that is structured yet compassionate, they are more likely to persevere through challenges and see themselves as capable readers and thinkers.

Conclusion

Educators, administrators, and policymakers alike would benefit from a research-backed ceasefire in the Reading Wars. The needs of our students, alongside the professional voices of educators, should anchor every instructional decision. To be sure, students deserve high-quality, rigorous foundational reading instruction. Yet we must guard against swinging so far toward skill-focused precision that we overlook the very learners for whom it is intended. Literacy instruction must cultivate curiosity, honor identities, and invite students into the wonder of reading—not reduce them to data points or checklists.

Self-Determination Theory reminds us that the way forward is not found at either extreme, but at the fulcrum—the point of balance where structure and autonomy meet. When leveraged intentionally, this balance allows educators to uphold scientific rigor while nurturing humanity, ensuring that instruction is both evidence-based and soul-centered. As Rita Pierson (2013) so memorably said, "Kids don't learn from people they don't like." Relationships matter. Practices that foster teacher–student connection and encourage self-determination must remain the foundation for striking this balance. Only when we teach with both rigor and heart can literacy instruction truly serve every learner from elementary school to university classrooms.

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