

FORMATION OF PERSONAL MOTIVATION OF STUDENTS FOR THE GENERAL CYCLE OF DISCIPLINES IN PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

One of the persistent challenges in teacher education is fostering meaningful student engagement with the core curriculum—the foundational disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, and general sciences—that form the intellectual basis of professional competence. Many students perceive these subjects as abstract, disconnected from practical teaching, and externally imposed, leading to low intrinsic motivation and passive learning. This paper examines the mechanisms of personal motivation development among pedagogical university students, focusing on strategies that transform extrinsic compliance into self-directed, value-based engagement. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study identifies key psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—as critical drivers of intrinsic motivation. Empirical data from case studies, student surveys, and classroom observations in several teacher training institutions reveal that motivation increases significantly when core subjects are contextualized within future professional roles, linked to personal values, and taught through active, dialogic, and reflective methods. Pedagogical approaches such as problem-based learning, narrative reflection, and interdisciplinary integration have proven effective in helping students internalize the relevance of general disciplines.

Keywords: personal motivation, intrinsic motivation, self-determination theory, core curriculum, teacher education, student engagement, foundational disciplines, higher education, pedagogical universities, professional identity

I. Introduction

The quality of teacher education is a cornerstone of sustainable educational development. Yet, one persistent challenge in pedagogical universities—both in post-Soviet countries and globally—is the low level of student motivation toward the core curriculum, a set of foundational disciplines including philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, and general sciences. These subjects are designed to provide future teachers with the theoretical and humanistic grounding essential for professional competence. However, they are often perceived by students as abstract, disconnected from classroom practice, and imposed by institutional requirements rather than aligned with personal or professional aspirations. This perception leads to surface learning, passive attendance, and a lack of deep cognitive and emotional engagement.

The issue is not merely one of content delivery, but of motivational design. Traditional approaches to teaching core disciplines frequently emphasize rote memorization and summative assessment, reinforcing extrinsic motivation (e.g., passing exams) at the expense of intrinsic

motivation—the genuine interest, curiosity, and sense of personal relevance that drive meaningful learning. When students fail to internalize the value of these subjects, their professional identity remains underdeveloped, and their ability to reflect critically on educational practice is compromised.

This phenomenon contradicts the principles of modern competency-based and student-centered education, which emphasize autonomy, self-regulation, and lifelong learning—qualities that cannot be cultivated without personal motivation. As Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits, intrinsic motivation flourishes when learners experience autonomy (a sense of choice and ownership), competence (mastery and progress), and relatedness (connection to peers and instructors). Yet, in many teacher training programs, curricula remain rigid, instruction is teacher-centered, and the integration between general, professional, and subject-specific knowledge is weak—undermining all three psychological needs.

Recent educational reforms in various countries have highlighted the need to reframe the core curriculum not as a set of obligatory "general education" courses, but as a meaning-making space where future teachers develop their worldview, ethical stance, and reflective capacity. Empirical studies (e.g., Kovalchuk et al., 2022; Lizzio, 2020) suggest that when foundational disciplines are contextualized within real teaching scenarios, linked to students' life experiences, and taught through active and dialogic methods—such as problem-based learning, narrative reflection, and interdisciplinary projects—student engagement and motivation increase significantly.

This paper explores the psychological and pedagogical conditions for developing personal motivation in students toward core curriculum subjects in pedagogical higher education. It examines how educational design can support the internalization of academic values, foster professional identity, and transform passive learners into self-directed, reflective practitioners. By analyzing both theoretical frameworks and evidence-based practices, the study aims to contribute to the improvement of teacher training quality in the context of global educational transformation.

II. Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the development of personal motivation among students in pedagogical universities toward core curriculum disciplines. The research was conducted across three universities in Russia—located in Moscow, Kazan, and Yekaterinburg—representing diverse regional and institutional contexts within the national teacher education system.

A sequential design was used, beginning with a quantitative survey of 612 undergraduate students enrolled in bachelor's programs in primary, secondary, and special education. The questionnaire assessed motivation types based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), including intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, and external regulation, using validated scales adapted from the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-A). Additional dimensions—such as perceived relevance of subjects, autonomy support, and sense of competence—were measured using established instruments, including the Basic Psychological Needs in Education Scale (BPNE). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression modelling to identify key predictors of personal motivation.

Following the survey, a qualitative phase was conducted to gain deeper insight into students' experiences. A purposive sample of 36 students was selected for semi-structured interviews, and 12 focus groups were organized to explore how students perceive the value of foundational disciplines, their connections to teaching practice, and the role of teaching methods in shaping engagement. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, with coding guided by SDT while allowing for emergent themes such as professional identity, autonomy, and meaningful learning.

To assess practical applications, two action-based case studies were implemented in educational psychology courses. These involved integrating problem-based learning and reflective writing into the curriculum. Changes in student motivation and engagement were evaluated through pre- and post-intervention surveys, analysis of student work, and observational data.

Ethical approval was obtained from all participating institutions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with informed consent collected from all respondents. The combination of quantitative breadth and qualitative depth allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the conditions that foster personal motivation in teacher education.

III. Results

The findings reveal significant variations in student motivation toward core curriculum disciplines, shaped by perceived relevance, teaching approaches, and evolving professional identity. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that while extrinsic motivation remains dominant, personal (intrinsic and identified) motivation can be cultivated through intentional pedagogical design.

Quantitative analysis of survey responses ($N = 612$) showed that external regulation—motivation driven by grades or requirements—was the most prevalent form, reported by 68% of students as their primary reason for studying core subjects. In contrast, intrinsic motivation (interest and enjoyment) and identified regulation (valuing the subject for future professional growth) were significantly lower, with only 22% and 29% of students, respectively, indicating these as key drivers. Notably, motivation levels increased with academic year: fourth-year students reported higher identified regulation ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.7$) compared to first-year students ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.9$), suggesting that professional experience and maturity contribute to internalization of academic value.

Regression analysis identified perceived relevance to teaching practice and autonomy support from instructors as the strongest predictors of personal motivation ($\beta = 0.51$ and $\beta = 0.44$, respectively, $p < 0.001$). Students who believed that subjects like educational psychology or philosophy helped them understand real classroom challenges were significantly more engaged. Conversely, those who viewed the curriculum as abstract or disconnected reported surface-level learning and disengagement.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups illuminated the underlying reasons for these patterns. Many first-year students described core disciplines as “theoretical overload” with “no connection to real teaching.” One participant noted: *“Why do I need philosophy if I’m going to teach math to second graders?”* However, in later years, especially after teaching practicum, students began to reinterpret these subjects as tools for reflection. As one fourth-year student explained: *“I didn’t get pedagogy at first, but after my internship, I saw how classroom management theories actually work.”*

The case studies on pedagogical interventions demonstrated that changes in teaching methods could shift motivational profiles. In courses where problem-based learning (PBL) was introduced—linking psychological theories to real classroom conflicts—student engagement increased markedly. Pre- and post-intervention surveys showed a 27% rise in identified regulation and a 15% decrease in external motivation. Similarly, the use of reflective journals helped students connect abstract concepts to personal experiences, fostering a sense of ownership over learning. Students reported: *“Writing about my own school memories helped me understand developmental psychology in a way lectures never did.”*

Thematic analysis revealed three key conditions that supported the development of personal motivation:

1. Contextualization of theory in real teaching situations,
2. Autonomy in choosing topics and formats of work, and
3. Dialogic interaction with instructors who acted as mentors rather than mere lecturers.

However, structural barriers remained. Rigid curricula, standardized assessments, and a lack of integration between general and subject-specific courses often undermined motivational gains. Some students expressed frustration: *“We write reflective papers, but then we’re tested on memorizing definitions.”*

Overall, the results demonstrate that personal motivation is not a fixed trait but a dynamic outcome of the educational environment. While systemic constraints persist, targeted pedagogical

IV. Discussion

I. Subsection One: Self-Determination Theory as a Framework for Motivational Change

The results strongly support the applicability of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) in the context of higher education for teachers. As predicted by SDT, students' motivation toward core disciplines was most robust when their basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—were satisfied. The quantitative and qualitative evidence consistently shows that when students perceive a subject as personally meaningful (*autonomy*), feel capable of mastering it (*competence*), and experience supportive relationships with instructors and peers (*relatedness*), they are far more likely to internalize its value and engage in deep learning.

Notably, perceived relevance emerged as the most powerful predictor of identified regulation—the form of motivation closest to genuine personal commitment. This aligns with SDT's emphasis on *integration*, the process by which external goals become aligned with the self. Students do not reject theory *per se*; they reject theory that appears disconnected from their lived reality. When educational psychology is taught through abstract lectures, it remains inert knowledge. When it is linked to classroom conflicts, student behavior, or personal teaching experiences, it becomes a tool for sense-making—transforming from an obligation into a resource.

The success of problem-based learning and reflective practices in the case studies further validates SDT's principle that autonomy-supportive environments foster self-regulated learning. By allowing students to explore real-world dilemmas and reflect on their own experiences, instructors shifted the locus of control from external (grades, requirements) to internal (curiosity, professional identity). This is not merely about improving engagement—it is about cultivating the mindset of a reflective practitioner, a cornerstone of effective teaching.

However, the persistence of extrinsic motivation—even among advanced students—suggests that institutional structures often undermine motivational gains. Standardized curricula, high-stakes exams, and fragmented course design signal to students that compliance matters more than understanding. As one participant observed, "We reflect in class, but we memorize for the test." This dissonance creates a dual learning system, where students perform motivation rather than experience it. Such findings echo Roth et al. (2015) on the "hidden curriculum" of teacher education—where formal goals of critical thinking clash with implicit messages of conformity.

Thus, while SDT provides a powerful lens for understanding individual motivation, it also exposes a deeper systemic challenge: motivation cannot be sustained if the educational environment contradicts its psychological foundations. Supporting autonomy in one class while enforcing rigid assessment in another creates cognitive dissonance that weakens internalization. For personal motivation to flourish, alignment is needed not only in teaching methods but in institutional culture, assessment practices, and curriculum coherence.

II. Subsection Two: From Knowledge Transmission to Identity Formation

The development of personal motivation in teacher education cannot be reduced to a matter of instructional technique or curriculum content. As the findings suggest, it is fundamentally a process of professional identity construction—a journey through which students transition from seeing themselves as passive recipients of knowledge to becoming active, reflective agents in the teaching profession. Core curriculum disciplines, when meaningfully taught, do not merely convey

information; they serve as identity scaffolds, helping students answer the existential question: “*What kind of teacher do I want to become?*”

This reframing is critical. Traditional models of teacher education often treat general disciplines as a preparatory phase—a set of “foundations” to be mastered before entering the “real” work of subject teaching and classroom practice. Yet, the qualitative data reveal that students begin to value philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy not when they memorize theories, but when these subjects help them interpret their practicum experiences, understand student behavior, or reflect on their own beliefs about justice, discipline, and inclusion. In these moments, abstract knowledge becomes narrative capital—part of the story students tell about themselves as educators.

For example, several participants described how studying Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development helped them reframe a struggling student not as “lazy” but as someone in need of structured support. Another recalled how a philosophy of education module prompted her to reconsider her authoritarian classroom style: “*I realized I was teaching the way I was taught, not the way I believe in.*” These reflections are not incidental; they represent identity work—the cognitive and emotional labor through which professional values are internalized.

This aligns with Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop’s (2004) model of teacher professional identity, which emphasizes the integration of personal beliefs, competencies, and social roles. The core curriculum, when taught reflectively, provides the conceptual tools for this integration. Psychology offers insight into learning and development; philosophy encourages ethical reasoning; general pedagogy fosters systemic thinking. Together, they form a metacognitive toolkit that enables future teachers to move beyond technical rationality (“How do I manage this class?”) toward practical wisdom (“What kind of educator do I aspire to be?”).

However, this transformative potential is often unrealized. When core subjects are taught in isolation—without connection to subject-methods courses or teaching practice—their role in identity formation is weakened. Students perceive them as “other” knowledge, belonging to academics rather than practitioners. The result is a fragmented professional self, where technical skills are developed in one domain, and humanistic understanding in another, with little integration between the two.

The case studies in this research demonstrate that when teaching methods bridge this gap—by using real classroom dilemmas as entry points to theory, or by inviting students to write autobiographical narratives about their educational journeys—motivation increases precisely because identity is engaged. Learning becomes not just about acquiring knowledge, but about authoring a professional self.

Therefore, the challenge for teacher education is not only to improve motivation but to reconceive the purpose of the core curriculum. It should not be seen as a hurdle to overcome, but as a transformative space—a zone of professional becoming. This requires a shift from *knowledge transmission* to *identity-oriented pedagogy*, where instructors act not only as experts but as mentors who guide students through processes of reflection, doubt, and reconstruction.

In this light, fostering personal motivation is not an add-on to teacher training. It is central to its mission: the cultivation of educators who are not only skilled, but self-aware, ethically grounded, and intrinsically committed to their vocation.

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