IMPACT OF THE MOTIVATIONAL LEVEL ON SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEACHER'S OPINIONS

DELIA MUSTE[*]

ABSTRACT. In the context of an increasing level of interest expressed in relation to the need to implement new strategies of improving the quality of the educational process, it is considered absolutely necessary to analyze the motivational process itself, as a successful educational approach developed in the classroom cannot exist without a consistent motivational support and if unable to prove persistence over time. Thus, identifying the main conditions that contribute to creating a motivating learning environment plays a decisive role in determining the impact of motivation on school performance, but also in highlighting the potential solutions to problematic situations.

Keywords: motivation, motivational strategies, learning environment, school performance, motivated involvement

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Im Rahmen des zunehmenden Interesses in Bezug auf die Notwendigkeit der Einführung im Unterricht von neuen Strategien, um die Qualität des Lernprozesses zu verbessern, wird als absolut notwendig die Analyse der Motivation selbst betrachtet, da der erfolgreiche pädagogische Ansatz in der Klasse in der Abwesenheit einer konsequenten Motivation nicht existieren und seine Persistenz im Laufe der Zeit nicht nachgewiesen werden kann. Somit spielt die Identifikation der wichtigsten Bedingungen, die zur Schaffung einer motivierenden Lernumgebung beitragen, eine entscheidende Rolle bei der Bestimmung der Auswirkungen der Motivation auf die schulischen Lernleistungen, aber auch in der Auszeichnung der möglichen Lösungen für die Überwindung der Problemsituationen.

Schlüssenwörter: Motivation, Motivationsstrategien, Lernumgebung, Schulleistungen, motiviertes Engagement

1. Introduction

Identifying the key conditions that help create a motivating learning environment plays a decisive role in determining the impact of motivation on school performance, but also in highlighting possible solutions to help overcome problematic

---

[*] Junior Lecturer Ph.D., Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, delia_muste@yahoo.com

situations. Through the specialized teachers conducting specific activities, the educational unit can contribute significantly to improve the installed deficiencies and to insert certain changes in the way in which the educational phenomenon is addressed, changes designed to increase student motivated involvement in the educational process.

We believe that the starting point in building learning situations with real motivating potential is the teacher's ability to capture and correctly identify the elements of an educational environment.

The aim of this paper is to identify the motivational factors present in school learning activities in order to build up strategies to increase students' school performance. We also aim to identify teacher's training needs, in terms of familiarity with various motivating techniques specific to school environment.

2. The ascertaining approach for identifying teachers' perceptions of how students can be motivated to learn

Our approach is an ascertaining one and is conducted in order to identify the most relevant data on the actual attitudinal peak students have towards learning, as well as to identify the ways to maintain or increase it, ways which are familiar to primary school teachers. Subsequently, this ascertaining-type investigative approach can be the starting point towards establishing effective action strategies to be implemented at school.

Our intentions in relation to this ascertaining study are:

❖ *To identify the teachers' perspective on the level of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation students manifest in relation to learning activities conducted in formal situations;*

❖ *To list the motivational strategies used in the educational process in relation to learning, as identified by the teachers;*

❖ *To list the data teachers have on exactly how to implement motivational strategies.*

General aim	Derived specific objectives
To list the motivational strategies used in the educational process in relation to learning, as identified by the teachers	➢ Identifying teachers' opinions on the strategies used to help motivate students to learn; ➢ Assessing teachers' availability to engage in activities to learn new motivating techniques; ➢ Identifying the difficulties teachers face when motivating students to learn.

The group consisted of 12 teachers who teach primary school students and the starting point was the need for an early development of a positive attitude towards learning supported by the motivational approach, but without neglecting one very important factor: the intellectual, physical, emotional development of the trainer.

We also consider it important to justify our choice by the fact that this grade is the first year of the **curriculum development cycle** (grades III – VI-a), whose main aim is to develop the basic capacity necessary to continue the studies.

Due to the low number of teachers involved in the present research, we have chosen a predominantly qualitative investigation of the collected data. All teachers are tenure teachers in their educational institutions and their professional experience ranges between 5 to 20 years, as follows:

❖ teaching experience between 5 - 10 years – 3 teachers;
❖ teaching experience between 11 - 15 years – 3 teachers;
❖ teaching experience between 16 - 20 years – 3 teachers;
❖ teaching experience between 20 years – 3 teachers.

In order to provide a comprehensive picture of the motivation for learning as perceived by the subjects involved, we established several lines of action that will be the basis for investigating the motivational phenomenon characteristic to the educational environment. Generically, we have defined aspects such as:

❖ the impact of motivation on students' performance as perceived by the teachers;
❖ concrete identification of the reasons students have for learning;
❖ highlighting the basic characteristics of the educational environment built by the teacher;
❖ teachers' identification of the strategies on the increase of student's motivation to learn;
❖ identification of the training needs related to the programmes stimulating learning motivation.

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire addressed to teachers on the identification of the motivation strategies and of the attitudinal peak existing in the classroom. This tool is based on four specific sequences: inventory reasons why students learn, review the conditions to achieve a stimulating educational environment, stating the main strategies used to motivate students in the classroom, but also identify their training needs in terms of familiarity with learning new strategies motivated.

➢ *assessment of the reasons why students learn* is the starting point in making the most important decisions addressing the educational phenomenon as a whole, based on the premise that motivating students to learn can contribute significantly to the increase of the educational process efficiency.

➢ *analysis of the conditions for achieving a stimulating educational environment* takes into account the need for teachers to become aware and responsible for the role of 'architect' of certain learning situations consistent with the expectations of the students and their explicit needs for sustainable development.

➢ *stating the main strategies for motivating students* teachers use in the classroom allows inventory of the known strategies and subsequent establishment of a valid program to stimulate motivation. They can be the starting point for rethinking the process according to the characteristics of each class, but can also help establish relationships with new strategies.

➢ *identification of the own training needs,* starting from the assumption that the need for constant and sustained personal development must be part of every teacher's needs analysis, not only in the sphere of motivational strategies, but in as far as the teaching activity itself is concerned.

Thus, the questionnaire for teachers included both open items (which allowed us to directly note the personal opinion of teachers on the motivational phenomenon energetically underlying the learning activity) and closed items which implied choosing an answer from a set of given alternatives. The proportion of open items, significantly higher than the other type, was established in accordance with the low number of teachers participating in this study, because such an instrument will eventually allow a detailed qualitative research.

3. Qualitative analysis of the data obtained

The questions of the first part of the questionnaire for teachers focused on information on the causes responsible for triggering the act of learning and thus, the analysis of the responses outlined two categories of reasons involved, depending on the existing level groups in the classroom.

Table 1

Teachers' perception on the distribution of the grounds underlying the act of learning, according to the level groups existing in the class

Students with superior performance	Students with average performance	Students with lower performance
o a need to know; o enriching the cultural horizon o the competitive spirit; o training for a future profession; o remaining among the top students in the class; o a privileged position within the structure they are a part of o consolidating the prestige gained; o the wish to meet the expectations of others.	o training for a future profession; o material rewards from family;	o avoiding failure; o avoiding punishment from parents; o material rewards;

Analysis of Table 1 enables us to specifically identify the way in which these reasons polarize, depending on the student's performance level. Thus, for students with superior potential and performance, we identify motivations in the scope of personal development, intrinsic motivation characterized by durability, effectiveness and persistence over time. There is also external motivation, but it's positive external motivation, which leads us to consider them an additional aspect of the learning process and to a certain extent they are also specific to the age of students (an average of about 10 years). However, we still advocate that this internal motivation gradually replace extrinsic motivation, because they can support more the learning effort in a more consistent manner.

At the opposite end there is the motivation for students with low performance, as identified by teachers. As expected, in this context we refer to a category including predominantly external motivation:

❖ **positive external motivation** aimed at obtaining benefits (mainly material) as a result of the cognitive effort. This motivation remains external and therefore does not make the action appealing to the students, as it aims exclusively its result and not the process.

❖ **negative external motivation,** which are based on the attitude of removing any unpleasant consequences that might arise in the process of knowledge: criticism, fear of failure or fear of punishment. This type of motivation occurs in situations where the people involved are more susceptible to sanctions than to anything else.

Knowing what triggers motivated learning and the classification of these factors into preset categories can help us, as well as other teachers, to structure learning sequences in a manner as close to the existing educational reality as possible.

With regard to the request addressed to teachers to illustrate the need to stimulate students' motivation, they believe that such action proves to be indispensable in the educational process. Therefore, the presence of motivational factors in teaching will lead to increased school performance of students and effectiveness of teaching.

The inventory of the strategies for motivating students commonly used in the classroom by teachers according to the importance given to each, and depending on the frequency of its use will be the starting point of our analysis. We identified them as follows: verbal assessments, provision of individual tasks, group activities, proposal of exciting exercises and games to be solved, presentation of interesting situations, material rewards, continuous feedback, constant support or assessment when solving problematic situations.

The motivation for which students learn must be analyzed in relation to the methods used to motivate students used by teachers when working with their students. Verbal assessments and exciting activities lead this hierarchy, followed by the presentation of interesting information or the use of individualized tasks. Other elements considered to be important are: providing feedback, support from teachers or even material rewards that still have an impact given the students' age (10 years). The means of providing feedback, the component with a regulator character

present throughout the teaching process is decisive when it comes to the effectiveness of the students' learning. Therefore, constant assessment during the lessons and the final moment of the educational approach must capitalize on these aspects.

Investigation of teachers' self-perception data on the quality of the classroom activities target several consistent subdivisions. This item aims to gather information on the teachers' feelings during the lessons, laying less emphasis on the lesson's benefits to students. We consider that it is necessary to discuss in detail the definition of organized environment, knowledge application level and effective ways of relating to the class.

Knowing that the existence of a stimulating environment in the classroom helps support student motivation, we asked teachers to identify the organizational conditions of such an environment. Thus, special attention was paid to conditions such as:

- The existence of optimal student-student relationships;
- Use of interactive teaching methods;
- The existence of appropriate classroom furniture;
- A relaxed attitude;
- Existence of individual tasks;
- Display and use of the products of the activities.

The literature also notes the role of increased socialization among members of a community in terms of motivation to achieve a specific activity, as the establishment of relationships among the members of the school community may lead to the perception of the space as beneficial and supportive to the act of learning.

Moreover, the use of the students' products can also help support student motivation. Corroborating this with the known human need to be appreciated for the effort made in achieving a task, we can consider that maintaining such conditions in education is justified.

Individual tasks and a relaxed attitude of the teacher in relation to the activities specific to the educational environment are also mentioned, which enables us to consider that highlighting the real potential of these conditions is also necessary.

Teachers believe that active and diversified teaching strategies also concur in achieving interesting lessons. The two components act complementarily, facilitating increased efficiency of the learning activities. Consequently, students' attitude towards learning will have mainly positive effects, whose immediately visible ones are: sustainability and flexibility of knowledge, increase of their application or development of self-training skills.

One of the most frequent conditions teachers mention is the promotion of innovations as a triggering factor of interest in school learning. It can be associated with the moment of capturing the attention of the students, or it can be present as stand-alone sequence in teaching, or it can be inserted at various points of the lesson. The benefits of the "new" in teaching may be multiple, ranging from creating a bridge

between different content sequences, to "re-energizing" the group when fatigued, an excuse for a formative assessment or a means of developing the self-learning ability in students.

Interest and efficiency are closely inter-related, which is why we decided to investigate as well teachers' perception of efficiency in school work. Thus, we can see that the word circumscribes a few components, such as:

❖ acquiring new knowledge,
❖ differentiated work,
❖ an efficient communication,
❖ attention to proper time dosing,
❖ emphasis on group activities.

All these can be addressed as today there is an increasing concern for the need of providing quality, efficient and practical education.

The relations between efficiency, interest and stimulating potential in teaching as perceived by teachers are shown in relation to certain qualities of the educational process, as follows:

• the need for a more active teaching approach is present in all three categories of items, being a sine qua non condition for achieving specific school activities;

• increase of the efficiency of classroom communication, whether we refer to vertical communication between teacher and student, or to communication among students, is another goal mentioned by teachers, given the undeniable role of communication;

• highlighting the desirable benefits, not only by quantitative assessments but, in particular, by qualitative assessments, may be a key element of a motivating teaching activity; its benefits are numerous, starting with a better understanding of their school performance, continuing with support given to students in developing self-assessment skills, even in the primary school education.

Information on teachers' attitude towards the need of self-instruction and self-training, truly reveals its efficiency at an older age, but need to be built begins as early as primary school. Promotion of self-instruction strategies that serve as models in developing personal ones can lead to the development of such strategies at the level of each student. Such strategies were identified within the educational approach as follows: doing homework, developing thematic projects, emphasising individual work, drawing up reading cards or participating to interdisciplinary activities.

Given that every teacher is a potential model for students they work with, we asked ourselves how they relate to their own training and personal development. The data obtained indicate that teachers are aware of the importance of self-instruction in their own development process and that they consider it more important than training in as far as their status as adults is concerned. Knowing self-instruction strategies and their implementation on their own person must precede the stage of explaining and achieving them in relation to the students. Moreover, due to the growing amount of information provided by studies specialized in teaching, as well as to the rate of obsolescence of the information within present-day society, teachers find themselves in a position of permanent self-trainer.

Under the same auspices as the ones mentioned above, we consider that an analysis of the motivation underlying self-study of both teachers and students is fully justified. Thus, we would like to mention the constant need of information (derived from the rapidly increasing pace of information obsolescence), followed by the need to enrich the general culture, the need for disseminating good practices in relation to colleagues and enriching the educational life experience lived by each actor separately. We believe that the motivational factors mentioned cover only a part of the constellation of possible motivations, but that they successfully match the information provided by teachers with regard to the information sources activated in the self-training process. Thus, the literature in the field ranks as number one in the teaching hierarchy, seconded by electronic sources accessible through the Internet, as well as by the magazines focusing on various areas of interest. Thus, we can talk about a permanent need to enrich the inventory of information sources, along with the need to develop skills for selecting the contents one comes into contact with.

4. Conclusions

All opinions recorded as a result of the implementation of the investigative tools provided us the relevant data that helped us determine the factual situation, but also establish the directions for action or to improve the degree of efficiency of the teaching process. At the same time, the data provided by teachers, combined with the expectations of both parents and students, will allow us to trace the main lines of discussion that will be addressed in future workshops to be held with teachers involved in the study, in order to debate on the necessity of a motivational incentive programme applicable in the school context.

REFERENCES

Ames, C. (1990). *Motivation: what teacher need to know*, Teacher College Record, USA, Barron, K.E. & Harackiewicz, J.M. (2000). Achievement goals and optimal motivation: A multiple goals approach. In C. Sansone & J.M. Harackiewicz (Eds.), *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: The search for optimal motivation and performance (pp. 231-254)*. San Francisco: Academic Press.

Beck, R.C. (2000). *Motivation: Theories and principles*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bernat, S.E. (2003). *Tehnica învăţării eficiente*, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca.

Brophy, J. (2004). *Motivating students to learn*, Laurence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey, USA.

Cerghit, I. (2008). *Sisteme de instruire alternative şi complementare. Structuri, stiluri şi strategii*, Ed. Polirom, Iaşi.

Chiş, V. (2005). *Pedagogia contemporană – pedagogia pentru competenţe*, Ed. Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, Cluj-Napoca.

Creţu, D. (2005). *Motivaţia învăţării*, Ed. Universităţii "Lucian Blaga", Sibiu.

Gibă, R. (2007). *Cum să predăm pentru ca elevii să ştie, să aplice, să explice*, Ed. Sinapsis, Cluj-Napoca.

Muste, D. (2012), *Stimularea motivaţiei la elevi prin intermediul unui program educaţional specific*, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca.

Schunk, D., Pintrich, P.R., Meece, J. (2010). *Motivation in education. Theory, research and applications,* Pearson Education Ltd., London.

Wlodkowski, R.J. (1999). *Enhancing adult motivation to learn: A comprehensive guide for teaching all adults*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publishers.