

MOTIVATING YOUNG LEARNERS IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN ROMANIA

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Rezumat

Studiul de față prezintă modul în care o instituție de învățământ din România folosește anumite strategii de motivare a elevilor din clasele primare, percepția părinților asupra eficienței utilizării acestor strategii precum și perspectiva cadrelor didactice asupra folosirii acestor strategii la clasă. Studiul a avut loc în cadrul unei instituții de învățământ privat din Cluj-Napoca și prezintă date culese dintr-un chestionar online precum și din fișele de observație completate de cadrele didactice. Astfel, datele culese din cele două surse prezintă modul în care strategiile de motivare existente la nivelul instituției de învățământ din studiul de față sunt percepute de către părinții elevilor și de către cadrele didactice care le folosesc. Principalul scop al studiului a fost investigarea modului în care elevii se raportează la strategiile motivaționale, *Ora de Aur*, *Star of the Week* și *Punctele Spectrum* precum și identificarea modului în care aceste strategii sunt percepute de către părinți și cadrele didactice.

Cuvinte cheie: strategii motivaționale, motivația extrinsecă, motivația intrinsecă, contextul social, recompense

Abstract

The current study presents the way an educational institution from Romania uses certain motivational strategies for primary school students, parents' perceptions as to the efficiency of these strategies and also teachers' perspective on the use of motivational strategies in the classroom. The study took place in a private educational institution from Cluj-Napoca and it presents data collected from an online questionnaire and from teacher observation sheets. Therefore, the data collected from two sources indicate the way the existing motivational strategies are perceived by parents and by the teachers using them. The main purpose of the study was the investigation of the way primary school students feel about the following motivational strategies: *Golden Time*, *Star of*

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the Week and Spectrum Points as well as the perceived effectiveness of these strategies by parents and primary school teachers.

Keywords: motivational strategies, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, classroom research, social context, rewards

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on how an educational institution from Romania has implemented motivational strategies in order to increase student engagement in school performance and promote good behavior among students.

In our opinion, school plays an important role in student motivation and has the ability to actively engage students in their academic performance. Therefore, different aspects of school organization can affect student motivation, such as school climate, teachers, schedule, students themselves. Moreover, it is very likely that what happens in a school affects to a certain extent student motivation. Loss of motivation can begin at a very young age and therefore schools should create programs that increase student motivation. Accordingly, the current study is intended to give a picture of the motivational strategies implemented in a school based context in order to offer students a better school experience and to motivate them in their academic performance. The study focuses on the school environment as a social context in which children grow and learn but most importantly where students are motivated to internalize specific behavior based on extrinsic rewards. From this perspective, the study is likely to bring new insights into how extrinsic rewards have positive outcomes on students' behavior and involvement in task performance.

2. Theoretical framework

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation is not a recent one and it has been thoroughly discussed in the literature on motivation (Ryan, R.M & Deci, E.L 2000) bringing thus new perspectives in educational research theories. Therefore, the current study is situated within the theoretical framework of these two concepts, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, arguing considerably that both types of motivation play a different role in children's development unfolding according to the social context in which they are used.

Deci, E.L. & Ryan R.M. (1985) distinguished clearly between two different kinds of motivation, namely intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to them, intrinsic motivation implies doing

something which is inherently interesting and enjoyable whereas extrinsic motivation implies doing something because it leads to a desired outcome.

It is acknowledged that intrinsic motivation can have very good outcomes for learning and creativity (Ryan & Stiller, 1991). On the contrary, extrinsic motivation was often seen as pale and impoverished (deCharms, 1968) contrasting powerfully with intrinsic motivation. However, Ryan R.M & Deci E.L.(2001) in the Self-Determination theory, proposed that there are several types of extrinsic motivation, some of which are truly poor forms of motivation whereas others represent active forms of extrinsic motivation.

Ryan R.M.& Deci E.L (2001) have presented the Self-Determination theory in order to make the critical distinction between behaviors that are volitional and accompanied by the experience of freedom and autonomy - those that emanate from one's sense of self - and those that are accompanied by the experience of pressure and control and are not representative of one's self. Intrinsically motivated behaviors, which are performed out of interest and satisfy the innate psychological needs for competence and autonomy are the prototype of self-determined behavior. Extrinsically motivated behaviors are those that are executed because they are instrumental to some separable consequence and can vary in the extent to which they represent self-determination. Internalization and integration are the processes through which extrinsically motivated behaviors become more self-determined.

Ryan R.M &Deci E.L (2001) specified in their review of the studies on motivation that there are social contextual conditions that support intrinsic motivation and facilitate internalization and integration of extrinsically motivated tasks. Ryan R.M &Deci E.L. (2001) saw that social contextual conditions that support one's feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are the basis for maintaining intrinsic motivation and for becoming more self-determined with respect to extrinsic motivation. Cameron, Banko and Pierce (2001) also looked at the effects of extrinsic rewards offered to children for reading. Their analysis shows that rewards can be used effectively to enhance interest without disrupting performance of an activity in a free-choice setting. These findings are given more importance in light of the fact that the group-design experiments on rewards and intrinsic motivation were primarily designed to detect detrimental effects.

The reward contingencies can be viewed as a subset of the many possible arrangements of the use of reward in everyday life. Rewards can be arranged to shape performance progressively and to establish interest in activities that lack initial interest (Bandura, 1986) or to enhance effort and persistence in a task (Eisenberger, 1992).

According to Ledford, Gerhart and Fang (2013), research does not demonstrate that incentive plans cannot work due to negative effects on intrinsic motivation. Motivation is the sum of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and therefore the popular claim that rewards undermine intrinsic rewards to such an extent that rewards fail, is not consistent with research.

Likewise, Lepper (1999) pointed out that over 80% of published studies are explicitly designed to demonstrate interaction effects, conditions under which a negative effect of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation is likely to occur compared to conditions under which no effect or a positive effect is likely to occur. Social cues, supervisor behavior, feedback about performance and organizational climate can help people see rewards as being associated with increased competence and self-control, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation. This means that sweeping statements about the negative effect of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation that are found in popular polemics go far beyond the evidence.

Consequently, based on the literature review above, extrinsic motivation is likely to increase performance and this is because rewards tend to increase total motivation (extrinsic and intrinsic). Negative effects on motivation can be averted systematically by clearly understanding and avoiding the conditions that could create a negative effect. We believe that the conditions that could create a negative effect on intrinsic motivation depend on the social context in which the rewards are provided. If the reward is appropriately implemented, it should enhance, rather than undermine, intrinsic motivation, making the incentive effect much more powerful than if it relies on extrinsic motivation alone. This shows that contextual factors are at least as important to success or failure of reward programs as the technical merits of the programs.

Consequently, the current study analyzes its results within the above described theoretical framework bringing new insights into how the school environment is the social context of the child and how the values of extrinsic rewards are likely to be perceived differently within a school social context.

3. Context of the study

The study took place in a private educational institution in Cluj-Napoca focusing especially on primary classes (grades 0-4) following the Romanian National Curriculum. Within the school, primary school teachers have been using three motivational strategies set up by the school management in 2010. These motivational strategies are the following:

- ✓ *The Golden Time* strategy is a strategy used for behavior change. At the end of every week, students who behaved during the week have an extra hour to spend in school playing different games with their school mates. On the other hand, students who misbehaved do not have the golden hour and they have to spend that time reflecting on their behavior during the week. This strategy is meant to have an effect on students' behavior from one week to another. It is by far a strategy that students really enjoy as it gives them the opportunity to socialize with their school mates and do different activities they like within the school.
- ✓ *The Star of the Week* strategy is a cognitive motivational strategy and it focuses on students collecting reward stars for involvement in task performance in the classroom. At the end of the week students count the stars they have received throughout the week and the student with most stars is awarded the *Star of the Week* honor.
- ✓ *The Spectrum Points* policy is also considered to be a cognitive motivational strategy and it implies students collecting points for any extra work they do outside the classroom but related to any school subjects they like. This is a biannual motivational strategy as students' points are counted only at the end of each semester. There is usually one *Spectrum Points* winner per class and that student is given a prize.

These motivational strategies have been used in order to motivate students to improve their behavior, to enhance competition among students and also to motivate them to do extra work. Although these motivational strategies represent forms of extrinsic motivation, it is expected that they promote good behavior among students and also the intent to further perform well in school tasks and extra school work.

4. Research methodology

In order to collect data for the current study, we used the following data collection methods:

- A six-question online survey (five close-ended questions and one open question) sent to 48 parents which measured the parents' perception of the use and effectiveness of school based motivational policies;
- Teachers' observation sheets on the effectiveness of motivational policies completed by 6 primary school teachers which measured the effectiveness of each of the three motivational policies for each individual student and per class;

Therefore, we combined the online survey, which provided both quantitative and qualitative data with data from teachers' observation sheets. These methods complement one another and give a full picture of the phenomenon under discussion. We integrated and discussed the results from both sources in the Results discussion section.

5. Data analysis procedure

The online questionnaire items were written by us based on our experience with the motivational policies used in this particular institution. The research sample was formed by 48 parents who completed the online questionnaire. Only 17 of them also answered the open-ended question. We used basic descriptive statistics to analyze the questionnaire data whereas content analysis was used to analyze the answers to the open ended question. Following the data processing, common patterns were observed which represented the basis for the main results of the study. The anonymity of the participants was ensured and the open answers were coded with numbers. The Results section shows the main patterns which emerged out of the data analysis procedure supported by relevant quotes from the participants.

We also used another method of data collection, namely, teachers' observation sheets which were meant to give an account of teachers' perceptions as to the effectiveness of motivational policies for the students in their class. The research sample was formed by 6 primary school teachers.

Therefore, we combined the data from these sources in order to have the perspectives of both parents and teachers, both of these categories equally important in the way motivational policies work out for the students in the institution under study.

This study is based on a mixed methodology, blending traditional data collection methods, such as the questionnaire method with classroom research. As Nunan and Bailey (2009) point out, there are several definitions for classroom research, but basically, it involves doing research in the classroom about the teaching and learning. In the context of the current study, the research was about the effectiveness of motivational policies at classroom level and the extent to which these may or may not inform the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom.

The process of data collection took place in June 2016 involving both parents and teachers at the same time. The questionnaire was sent to all parents in the research setting and it was available for two weeks to be completed whereas the teachers completed observation sheets based on the 2015-

2016 academic year experience with the students in their classes. Descriptive statistics was also used to analyze the observation sheets.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Parents' perceived efficiency of motivational strategies

In the research setting, 95.8% of the respondents are familiar with the motivational policies used within the school and figure 1 below shows parents' views as to the efficiency of these motivational policies. Accordingly, 45.8% consider them very efficient, 25% consider them efficient whereas 20.8% and 8.4% think they are moderately efficient or less efficient.

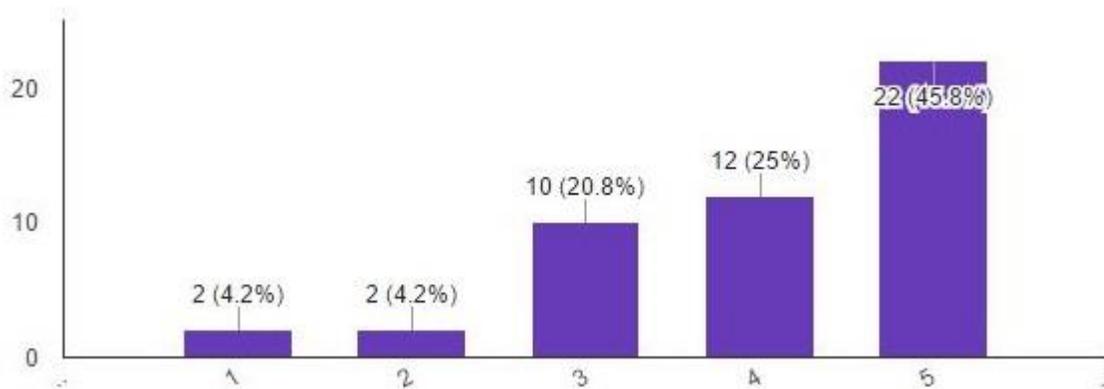


Figure 1. Parents' perceived efficiency of motivational strategies

However, the data show that the majority of the respondent parents believe that these strategies are efficient for behavior management and cognitive motivation.

Also, 77.1% of the respondents believe that their child views the motivational strategies in a positive way, whereas 23% consider that their child does not respond in a rather positive way to these motivational policies. Likewise, these strategies have an overall rather positive effect on students whereas the 23% percentage suggests the fact that indeed not all students respond in the same way to motivational strategies given existent individual differences between students.

As to the preferred motivational strategy, according to the respondent parents, 75% of the students prefer the *Golden Time* motivational strategy, whereas 54.2% prefer the *Star of the Week* policy and 35.4% the *Spectrum Points* policy. These results are not surprising given the fact that *Golden Time* is the time students appreciate most as they have the opportunity to socialize with students from

different classes through play at their own will. Also, the *Star of the Week* strategy is an immediate one, happening at the end of the week, therefore students feel more motivated by it than by the biannual Spectrum points strategy.

Finally, 61.7% of the respondents would not bring any changes to the current motivational strategies, whereas 38.3% would favor some changes. The respondent parents who favor changes to the motivational policies, further explained in their comments different reasons for which they do not consider these motivational strategies effective and motivating for their children.

According to participant 4, the lack of golden time does not really improve a child's behavior as the child is not reflective enough during that time and therefore a positive change in behavior is not very likely to occur. Participant 4 states that *"even if you put an adult to reflect on a mistake for 45 minutes, there is no guarantee that the adult would even consider or think about it during that time."* This comment suggest that indeed the so called 'punishment' may not necessarily change a student's behavior from one week to another but it can still have an effect on the child's desire to be socially involved with the other students. If playing with other students means changing something in his/her behavior, then the child can strive to achieve that goal. The following comment by participant 5 supports the idea of the student changing his behavior because of the desire to play with the other students. Participant 5 suggested that a form of collaborative motivation within the group of students would probably motivate each individual student more. According to participant 5, *"well-behaved students should motivate the less well-behaved ones in order to benefit from Golden Time as well."* This idea could lead to collaboration among students towards a better group classroom behavior.

Another participant also highlighted the fact that lack of Golden Time is a form of punishment. Thus, according to participant 9, *"motivation means to animate and stimulate a student, not to punish him/her as any form of punishment is not motivating for students"*.

Participant 11 considers that *"these motivational strategies are in fact short term rewards given to students for activities that are normally standard student activities/tasks. Such ordinary student tasks should not be rewarded as students should be expected to simply do them. Students should be given motivating rewards for something really outstanding, original, beyond the standard in order to motivate them to innovate. Thus, the Star of the week award should only apply for something outstanding."* Participant 11 also points out that *"we are now in an era when we praise and reward*

students for absolutely every common activity they do. The long term effects could reduce students' intrinsic motivation, which, unfortunately transfers to the future adult."

Therefore, the above comments by the respondents point out the following aspects. First of all, that these motivational strategies may not accommodate the needs and particularities of absolutely every individual student, which means that the same strategies cannot motivate students in exactly the same way. Secondly, some motivational policies (e.g. the *Golden time*) may lead to demotivation as they are seen as forms of follow-up punishment by the student. Therefore, more than one respondent noticed that the *Golden Time* strategy does not have any effect on the students' behavior as the young student is not reflective enough to consider his/her behavior within a certain amount of time. However, based on teacher observations', this strategy has an effect on the students who simply want to play with the other students during the Golden Hour.

Thirdly, an interesting point was made by participant 11 who clearly stated that rewarding students for normal activities would not have a positive effect on his/her intrinsic motivation as an adult. Therefore, these motivational policies tend to have an undesired long term effect on the students. However, as Ledford, Gerhart and Fang (2013) illustrated, research does not show that rewards cannot work given negative effects on intrinsic motivation.

To summarize the points made by the 17 respondents, the *Star of the Week* policy is considered as repetitive in terms of who gets to be the star every week and it also ranks primary school children. On the other hand, it also favors competition among students. The *Golden Time* policy is considered as a form of punishment for those who do not have it, therefore it is not motivating. As to the *Spectrum points* policy for extra work, the majority of the respondents consider that they have a negative effect on students' intrinsic motivation.

Likewise, the idea of students motivating each other instead of competing against each other means that motivational strategies could also be applied within a group of students who work collaboratively towards a common goal, namely playing together. This idea is also reinforced by the results which show that 75% of the students prefer the *Golden Time* strategy as it mostly enables them to socialize with their school mates. The idea of having an extra hour to socialize is more motivating than the idea of collecting a certain numbers of stars within a week, which shows that younger learners may feel motivated by something which may seem more valuable for them at that age.

6.2 Teachers' perceived effectiveness of motivational strategies

The data indicate that 70.14% of the students are often and always motivated to get involved in tasks when using the *Star for the Week* strategy. Therefore, teachers observed that most of the time the *Star of the Week* policy better motivates students in task performance and involvement which means that students feel more motivated to do the task if there is some reward at the end. One of the problems associated with this, is that students could get points for very normal tasks which may have an effect on their future intrinsic motivation.

As to the *Golden Time* policy, the data showed that 86.56% of students are motivated most of the time to adjust their behavior. This outcome is not surprising as the *Golden Time* policy responds to children's natural need to socialize through play, which seems to be the most motivating factor for enhancing good behavior.

As to the Spectrum points for extra work, the data show that 71.64% of students are motivated most of the time to do extra work.

Therefore, the data collected from both sources show that students in general have a positive attitude to extrinsic motivational strategies and that teachers observed better involvement in task performance and behavior adjustment as well as better classroom management. The results indicate that these strategies work in the 'here and now' and that little could be said at this point about any future implications for students' intrinsic motivation. However, based on Ryan R.M. & Deci E.L. (2001), certain social conditions support intrinsic motivation and also facilitate internalization of the desired behavior. Internalization of the desired behavior and involvement for tasks are outcomes to be expected from students in primary school. These results emphasize the use and the perceived effectiveness of school based extrinsic motivational policies, mainly for classroom management, but also for engaging students in school tasks, behavior adjustment or motivation for extra work.

7. Conclusions

The current study analyzed data from an online survey completed by 48 parents in a school based setting, followed by the analysis of teachers' observation forms. Data from both sources indicated that primary school children feel motivated to a certain extent by extrinsic motivational strategies which all proved to have a certain effect on the students. Although the study indicated some

positive outcomes for students, it also brings under discussion some critical aspects related to extrinsic motivation. One of the most interesting one, is the long term effect of extrinsic motivation on students' intrinsic motivation. Giving students incentives for standard, normal tasks they would have to do as students, may have undesired effects on their future adult intrinsic motivation. Likewise, though the majority of students have a positive attitude towards these motivational strategies, they do not accommodate the needs or expectations of all students and parents. Therefore, these strategies are more about what happens in the classroom at a specific point in time, having potential effects on how students behave and perform while being involved in tasks.

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