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Motivating Students to Learn by Primary School Teachers – in the Light of Teachers' Narratives

Abstract

Pedagogical reflection on stimulating students' engagement in learning has evolved away from traditionally oriented, behaviorist stimulation toward a more progressive, developmental approach. The aim of this article is to examine teachers' motivational practices and to address the following research question: *How do primary school teachers motivate their students to learn?* The empirical material was collected through unstructured qualitative interviews. The article presents the methodological foundations of the study, the adopted understanding of the concept of motivation and existing recommendation for motivating students, followed by an analysis of the teachers' statements in relation to this category. The findings reveal a tendency among teachers to rely primarily on extrinsic motivation, as the strategies they employ (mainly rewards, coercion, and control) function as external stimuli. The motivational practices described in their narratives cannot be considered developmental for students, nor progressive in light of contemporary pedagogical scholarship. Hence, there arises a need to expand teachers' awareness of the consequences of such practices and to enhance their competence in adopting alternative, more constructive approaches to motivating students.

Keywords: motivation, extrinsic motivation, teachers' strategies of motivating students, rewarding students, coercion and control in learning

Introduction

The issue of motivating children to learn is of concern not only to educators but also to increasingly broader social circles reflecting on the appropriate de-

sign of educational situations in schools that elicit cognitive activity in young learners. This reflection is increasingly directed toward the need to perceive learning as a lifelong process (Ćwikła, 2021), understood as an expression of individual autonomy and cognitive activity, rather than merely a reaction to teaching (Bauman, 2005). Such a perspective provides schools and teachers with grounds to move away from a traditional, behaviorist orientation in motivating students—an orientation largely manifested through short-term external stimulation—and to adopt approaches with a more progressive and developmental character.

It is therefore important to examine whether teachers, in their everyday practice, pursue motivational strategies consistent with such a perspective. Based on the analysis of research material collected through qualitative interviews, this article seeks to answer the following question: *How do the participating primary school teachers motivate their students to learn?*

Stimulating and Shaping Students' Motivation to Learn

There are numerous definitions of the concept of motivation, each corresponding to specific theoretical frameworks. One such definition, proposed by Janusz Reykowski, identifies motivation with the emergence of a "directional tendency," that is, "a readiness to pursue specific goals" (Reykowski, 1977, p. 18).[1] When combined with this readiness, motivation constitutes a form of "activating orientation of the current life act toward a positively valued state" (Rheinberg, 2006, p. 18), which one seeks to attain.

Building on Reykowski's theoretical findings, Małgorzata Cywińska defines motivation as a theoretical construct used to explain particular human behaviors, their direction, and persistence. "In relation to school learning, it concerns the student's subjective experiences, their willingness to engage in lessons and learning activities" (Cywińska, 2012, p. 155).

Different theoretical perspectives on motivation are accompanied by specific recommendations regarding how it may be stimulated and shaped in students. Barbara L. McComb and James E. Pope, in their book "*Hard-to-Handle Student: How to Motivate Them to Learn"*, highlight the following approaches:

— The Freudian perspective on motivation – specific basic biological drives and instincts motivate an individual's behavior. The teacher's task is to assist students in controlling and directing these impulses.
— Behaviorist theories of stimuli – the human being is seen as a "blank slate," on which external events and experiences are inscribed. These form the basis for conditioned behavioral tendencies. Motivation and learning should

[1] All translations into English of the original texts are the author's/authors' own translations.

be managed by influencing the individual's behavior through external stimuli (primarily rewards and punishments).

— The humanistic psychology approach – the individual possesses a natural tendency toward growth and self-actualization, which may be stimulated by learning, significant persons, or life events. Motivation is linked to the emergence and pursuit of needs (initially lower-order, later higher-order), which may be either supported or hindered by the environment (McComb & Pope, 1997).

As perspectives that modify and extend these positions, McComb and Pope also point to cognitive, socio-cognitive, and socio-behaviorist theories of motivation. The first emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in motivating learning. It assigns a significant role to the student's activity in the process of knowledge acquisition, which is always a personal construct shaped by their own system of beliefs and frames of reference. These may include, for instance, the student's self-concept, goals, or expectations, which in turn influence motivation and quality of performance. Theories associated with socio-cognitive and socio-behaviorist perspectives, by contrast, stress external factors that motivate learning. Among them, the authors identify social and emotional support from significant others (e.g., care or encouragement) as well as environmental stimuli (e.g., rewards) (McComb & Pope, 1997).

In discussing motivation, it is necessary to address the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Although some researchers, such as Aleksandra Tokarz (2005), question this division, it remains well-grounded in the scholarly literature.

Characterizing intrinsic motivation, Małgorzata Głoskowska-Sołdatow associates it with behaviors stemming from individual needs, among which she identifies interests, curiosity, and the desire to acquire knowledge as the strongest developmental stimuli. These factors drive the individual to continuously expand their knowledge, accumulate new experiences, and set increasingly ambitious goals. Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, is defined as "all activities undertaken by an individual as a result of external factors or social pressure" (Głoskowska-Sołdatow, 2016, p. 41). When learning is extrinsically motivated, a student undertakes tasks to gain rewards (e.g., good grades, praise, recognition) or to avoid punishments (e.g., poor grades, disapproval) administered by external authorities such as teachers or parents. Among extrinsic motivators she lists pressure, coercion, commands, reprimands, supervision, prohibitions, and various forms of gratification. She emphasizes that the use of such strategies—especially when applied ineffectively—may lead to negative consequences such as inhibiting spontaneity, diminishing the sense of control, increasing anxiety, lowering self-esteem, or suppressing self-initiated activities (Głoskowska-Sołdatow, 2016).

When considering motivation to learn, Martin V. Covington and Karen Manheim Teel distinguish positive motivation for learning and five accompanying

principles. These, in their view, foster students' achievement and help eliminate competition framed as a "race for ability." The principles are as follows: ensuring that each student has opportunities to demonstrate competence; rewarding curiosity, persistence, effort, and achievements alongside the natural satisfaction that sustains a willingness to learn; valuing diverse abilities and skills, rather than exclusively those related to abstract thinking and verbal proficiency, "which are favored in the traditional school operating under the rules of the ability race" (Covington & Teel, 2004, p. 45); employing diverse motivational strategies tailored to the needs of individual students, recognizing that children often value different motivations—some seek social acceptance, while others value privileges; and designing tasks that engage all participants by incorporating elements such as novelty, surprise, connections to personal interests, and an "inner force of attraction whereby everyone can find something that relates to their world" (Covington & Teel, 2004, p. 46).

In contrast to positive motivation, they point to teacher practices that direct students toward a race for ability, characterized by defining success in terms of grades and outperforming peers, prioritizing a narrow set of abilities while neglecting the effort of learning, deriving pride from outperforming others, perceiving classmates as obstacles to success, and positioning the teacher as a judge who interprets mistakes as signs of weakness or incompetence (Covington & Teel, 2004).

Covington and Teel's propositions reflect elements of cognitive, socio-cognitive, and socio-behaviorist models of motivation. These frameworks integrate both external factors (e.g., punishment) and internal ones (e.g., reliance on personal interests) in fostering students' motivation to learn. Jere Brophy, in his book "*Motivating Students to Learn"*, adopts a similar position, arguing that contemporary perspectives no longer view extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as opposing categories, since the former can complement the latter. However, he stresses that most researchers agree "that intrinsic methods are superior because they yield qualitatively better engagement with tasks and foster durable internal interest in the subject matter or activity" (Brophy, 2002, p. 158).

In providing teachers with guidelines for fostering intrinsic motivation, Brophy recommends didactic practices that elicit and sustain students' sense of self-direction and cognitive autonomy (e.g., opportunities for choice), competence (e.g., activities enabling active responses and immediate feedback), and relatedness (e.g., group collaboration). Effective strategies for cultivating students' motivation also include arousing curiosity, inducing tension, creating cognitive dissonance, transforming abstract material into personally relevant content, and stimulating interest in tasks (Brophy, 2002)[2].

[2] This position is also shared by other theorists, namely Manfred Prenzel and Barbara Drechsel (1996), as well as Monique Boekaerts (2013).

Methodological Foundations of the Study

The analyses presented in this article are based on research material in the form of transcripts of qualitative interviews conducted with primary school teachers. These interviews constitute part of a larger project aimed at accessing teachers' everyday professional experiences in order to describe, analyze, and interpret their meanings[3]. The specific goal of the present text is to examine how the participating teachers motivate[4] their students to learn. The guiding research question was therefore as follows: *How do primary school teachers motivate their students to learn?* Related to this was an inquiry into the kinds of tools they employ and the type of motivation on which they rely.

The method of data collection used was the unstructured qualitative interview (Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2005)[5]. A total of fourteen interviews[6] were conducted with female teachers working in primary schools: five taught grades I–III, five taught Polish in grades IV–VIII, and one taught mathematics, one history, one English, and one French. The selection of participants was based on their extensive professional experience and their expressed consent to participate in the research.

The interviews were conducted in person. Analysis began during transcription, which included recording analytical observations and making notes (Gibbs, 2011). The next step involved delineating the thematic scope of the teachers' statements and identifying partial meanings within the context of entire narratives. Subsequently, the material was coded by assigning labels to fragments based on similarities in topics, issues, ideas, activities, or illustrations of comparable cases (Charmaz, 2009). This process resulted in the creation of a set of main thematic codes. The next phase involved more analytical and theoretical coding, which allowed for refining, developing, and hierarchically organizing the emerging codes into overarching, subordinate, and parallel categories.

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[3] In line with Florian Znaniecki's (2008) assumptions, it was accepted that access to elements of the teachers' lived reality could be achieved through the interpretation of their narratives about professional experiences.

[4] As one among several dozen categories, motivation was identified through multidirectional analyses of the participants' statements (Gibbs, 2011).

[5] The choice of data collection method was dictated by the adoption of a humanistic approach to the empirical study of social phenomena and by the assumption, following Florian Znaniecki, that scientific exploration of social reality can be undertaken through access to everyday human experiences (Znaniecki, 2008).

[6] The study was conducted within the interpretative paradigm, which, among other factors, determined the number of participating teachers. This was related to the exhaustion of the outcome field during the course of the interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000) and the saturation of emerging categories. The research was concluded at the point when no new themes or categories appeared in subsequent interviews.

A comparative analysis of the obtained information was then undertaken, examining similarities and differences between the teachers' accounts of their professional lives, events, situations, actions, and interactions with others. Finally, focused coding was applied to transform descriptive codes into constructs with greater analytical and theoretical significance.

Teachers' Motivation of Students to Learn – Analysis of Research Findings

Most of the teachers participating in the study described deficits in students' motivation to acquire knowledge and skills defined by the curriculum, emphasizing their own inability to stimulate such motivation effectively. In classroom practice, students often displayed insufficient engagement (as perceived by the teachers), a lack of interest in the subject matter, boredom, or discouragement:

> *These children are increasingly struggling with learning and absorbing knowledge. I don't know, they lack the motivation to know more, to be able to do more – what for?* (Melania – grades I–III teacher)

> *It's like a wall. Once the principal came to observe my lesson, and I just had to conduct the class by myself, even though we had the multibook turned on, even though the equipment was there… There was no chance that anyone would speak up*. (Edyta – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Teachers reflected on the causes of students' lack of motivation, typically attributing them to students' own deficiencies. This is exemplified by the statement of the teacher quoted above, who equates learning with absorbing knowledge rather than actively constructing it, an understanding that contradicts contemporary research and didactic recommendations—especially constructivist approaches (Klus-Stańska, 2018), which stress the need for learners to generate and deepen knowledge spontaneously (e.g., through problem-solving or project work), prioritizing the quality of the learning process over outcomes. In contrast, the participating teachers revealed a strong attachment to transmissive methods (lecturing, explaining, clarifying), in which the student remains largely passive, limited to receiving and assimilating knowledge, and following the teacher's line of reasoning. From the perspective of the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, such practices are unlikely to foster motivation for learning.

Teachers in upper primary grades also attributed students' motivational deficits to fear of exposing their ignorance or to habitual disbelief in their own abilities:

> *Often it ends like this: the student says, 'I don't know,' without even reading the task, already convinced they cannot do it.* (Kinga – mathematics teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Similarly, teachers expressed a desire to rely on students' self-motivation linked to the intrinsic need for knowledge, but considered this unrealistic:

> *I like it when students are motivated, when they study, when they achieve good results—it's a great thing*. (Magdalena – English teacher, grades IV–VIII)

In practice, teachers aspired to rely on motivation arising within students themselves, yet framed this in terms of the desire to acquire externally defined knowledge, accumulated through assimilation. They were not oriented toward nurturing students' intrinsic needs for exploring the world but rather toward ensuring that students accept the necessity of absorbing knowledge presented by the teacher in traditional, transmissive ways. To instill this understanding, teachers resorted to strategies such as persuasion or coercion:

> *I tell* [students – Author] *directly that in life there are things you don't like, but you still have to do them*. (Melania – grades I–III teacher)

> *You study for yourself, so you won't be an idiot.* (Sylwia – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Given their perception of students' lack of motivation and the difficulty of stimulating it effectively, teachers attempted to persuade students by presenting abstract, often distant visions of future life situations in which knowledge or skills might prove useful (e.g., employment opportunities):

> *I tell them: 'Right now you're not interested, but in ten years, as an adult man, you'll sit at a barbecue… and someone will mention Piłsudski…* (Ewelina – history teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Such strategies projected teachers' own visions of the future, which may not correspond to students' plans or imaginings. Moreover, they neglected the fact that young learners (especially in early education) are naturally inclined to live in the "here and now," rather than project themselves into a distant future[7]. Consequently, this approach appears ineffective in stimulating motivation.

Teachers also associated the usefulness of school knowledge with the educational realities of students, which necessitate mastering prescribed content and skills. In this case, the value of knowledge remains confined to schooling purposes, such as class promotion, preparation for the next educational stage, or meeting exam requirements.

In addition to persuasion, teachers frequently employed coercion as a motivational stimulus, often accompanied by control measures. The tools of control included frequent quizzes, tests, and examinations, intended to stimulate students to study:

> *Also through testing… otherwise, the student simply wouldn't study on their own*. (Magdalena – English teacher, grades IV–VIII)

[7] The nature of this phenomenon and the need for educators to respect it had already been addressed by Janusz Korczak (1984).

Certainly there are quizzes, scheduled dictations… They need such frameworks. (Bianka – grades I–III teacher)

I think they simply don't study by principle, so lessons need to be verified, and maybe more quizzes given. (Aneta – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Among teachers of grades I–III, parental supervision was also identified as an additional, widely relied-upon mechanism for motivating students to acquire prescribed knowledge and skills.

Furthermore, teachers revealed a tendency to monitor students' thinking and behavior during lessons:

I keep the weakest students in the front rows—those who need constant supervision, otherwise they won't write or will get lost within minutes. (Kinga – mathematics teacher, grades IV–VIII)

External stimulation was also accompanied by the use of rewards. In grades I–III, teachers typically used material rewards (e.g., colorful stickers) to recognize students who fulfilled assigned duties or met expectations. In upper grades, good grades served as the primary reward. Notably, teachers themselves acknowledged the limited effectiveness of such practices:

I used different motivators—stamps, stickers. It was fun for a while, but only up to a certain point. (Małgorzata – grades I–III teacher)

Honestly, grades are not motivating for students. (Kinga – mathematics teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Although most motivational practices relied on extrinsic strategies such as control, coercion, and rewards, teachers also mentioned occasional attempts to use other means of stimulation, such as digital technologies, commercial educational offers (e.g., theater visits), or additional teaching aids. A few teachers emphasized the need to "activate" students in class, ensuring their active participation. However, such activation often took the form of temporary substitutes for student engagement, such as traditional mid-lesson exercises:

Activity is important. It doesn't always work—sometimes better, sometimes worse… Sometimes you just have to improvise, get them moving between lessons, even just standing up and clapping. (Jadwiga – grades I–III teacher)

Descriptions of these practices indicate that they lacked a genuinely motivational dimension, as they failed to provide opportunities for developing critical thinking, independent knowledge construction, linking knowledge to experience, problem-solving, collaborative creation or application of knowledge, improved communication (e.g., through discussion), or self-assessment (Głoskowska-Sołdatow, 2016). Teachers tended to equate "activation" with external stimulation through coercion:

So they don't just sit apathetically in class, I constantly mobilize them for intensive work… I keep asking questions and demand [answers – Author]. *If someone lies down on the*

desk, I immediately call on them, to mobilize them again… I activate them. (Aneta – Polish language teacher, grades IV–VIII)

Five teachers emphasized the importance of connecting with students' interests during lessons or creating opportunities for "success." However, "success" was typically understood as fulfilling assigned tasks or participating in activities valued by the teacher (e.g., contests), rather than as self-directed achievement. Teachers sometimes even simulated students' "success" to provide external recognition:

Even if someone is weak, I give distinctions. They always get a certificate, participation counts—it's important they have the diploma. I give something, I somehow motivate them… Later, during contest summaries, we present what success was achieved, what place they got. (Zuzanna – grades I–III teacher)

Finally, many teachers attributed students' lack of motivation to their parents, whom they described as failing to set challenges, being overly lenient, excusing ignorance or reluctance to learn, neglecting supervision, lacking authority, or being powerless to motivate their children.

Conclusions and Discussion

The analysis of the collected research material revealed that teachers, in their efforts to stimulate students to learn, primarily rely on extrinsic motivation[8], as the strategies they employ can be identified as external stimulants.

By employing extrinsic motivation[9]—coercion, rewards, or control—the teachers interviewed seemed unaware of the potential long-term consequences of such practices, for example, students' withdrawal from task engagement without an external incentive (e.g., a reward), or the experience of anxiety provoked by frequent teacher monitoring (through quizzes, tests, etc.), which may become a source of neurotic tendencies in students (Zajdel, 2019).

The participants' efforts, centered on externally stimulating students, lacked the recommended practices emphasized by Jere Brophy (2002), namely eliciting and sustaining students' sense of self-direction. Furthermore, in the context of externally prescribed content and skills and the teachers' tendency toward frequent monitoring, their practices limited opportunities for students to experience cognitive autonomy[10], self-direction, and the satisfaction of achieving self-

[8] These results align with the findings of Grażyna Szyling (2019), who demonstrated that early childhood education teachers predominantly employ extrinsic strategies to motivate their students.

[9] Extrinsic motivation is regarded, among others by Daniel Pink (2009), as less effective than intrinsic motivation in the context of the long-term education of younger generations.

[10] Research by Jennifer Henderlong and Mark Lepper (2002), as well as by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2000), demonstrates that students' sense of autonomy—together with the fulfill-

selected goals. Consequently, such practices did not foster key developmental components in young learners.

Teachers' attempts to spark students' interest in the curriculum also lacked elements highlighted by Ewa Filipiak, drawing on Jerome Bruner, namely: nurturing a sense of discovery, stimulating natural curiosity, and provoking doubt or uncertainty when faced with problem situations (Filipiak, 2012). The motivational practices described by the participants therefore cannot be identified as progressive or consistent with contemporary pedagogical trends.

The interview analyses highlight the need to enhance teachers' awareness of the negative consequences of relying predominantly on external stimulation, as well as the need for widespread professional development—through courses or workshops—focused on alternative motivational strategies. Such strategies should diverge from traditional, behaviorist school practices and instead align with constructivist approaches. Professional development of this kind could enrich educational practice with strategies consistent with current pedagogical trends (outlined in earlier sections of this article), such as stimulating students' curiosity and research-oriented engagement (e.g., through conducting experiments or independent inquiry in the process of knowledge acquisition), creating opportunities for agency and autonomy (e.g., involving students in co-designing educational goals and pathways to achieve them), fostering competence (e.g., building confidence in completing tasks through moderate effort; Cywińska, 2012), and cultivating satisfaction derived from both individual and collective achievements (e.g., shared classroom discoveries).

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ment of psychological needs such as relatedness and competence—constitutes a fundamental condition for effective motivation to learn and is associated with higher engagement and improved academic outcomes.

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Motywowanie uczniów do uczenia się przez nauczycieli szkół podstawowych – w świetle nauczycielskich narracji

Streszczenie

Pedagogiczny namysł nad wzbudzaniem aktywności uczniów do uczenia się ewoluował w kierunku oderwania się od tradycyjnie zorientowanego, behawioralnego ich bodźcowania do nadania motywowaniu uczących się bardziej postępowego, prorozwojowego wymiaru. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ogląd nauczycielskich oddziaływań motywacyjnych i próba odpowiedzi na następujące pytanie: W jaki sposób nauczycielki szkół podstawowych motywują swoich uczniów do nauki? Drogą pozyskania materiału badawczego były wywiady swobodne o charakterze jakościowym. W tekście zostały przedstawione: podstawy metodologiczne podjętych badań, przyjęte rozumienie pojęcia: motywacja i istniejące zalecenia dotyczące motywowania uczniów do uczenia się oraz analizy wypowiedzi rozmówczyń związanych z tą kategorią. Ujawniły one tendencje nauczycielek do bazowania głównie na motywacji zewnętrznej, gdyż stosowane przez nie sposoby (głównie nagradzanie, przymus, kontrola itd.) identyfikować można jako zewnętrzne stymulatory. Opisywanych przez nie w narracjach oddziaływań motywacyjnych nie można uznać za prorozwojowe dla uczniów i postępowe w odniesieniu do współczesnych ustaleń pedagogicznych. Zachodzi więc potrzeba poszerzania zarówno nauczycielskiej świadomości dotyczącej np. skutków tak zorientowanych działań, jak i umiejętności odmiennego motywowania uczniów.

Słowa kluczowe: motywacja, motywacja zewnętrzna, nauczycielskie sposoby motywowania uczniów, nagradzanie uczniów, przymus i kontrola uczenia się.