

## School motivation: theoretical approaches to the learning process

*Motivação escolar: abordagens teóricas do processo de aprendizagem*

*Motivación escolar: aproximaciones teóricas al proceso de aprendizaje*

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## Abstract

The present theoretical reflection attempts to find out to what extent motivation can influence the student's learning processes. To this end, the links between the most important theoretical models - the Theory of Attribution of Causality, the Theory of Self-determination, and the Theory of Achievement Goals - are established. Students' participation in school content depends on various factors that are individually and contextually related to motivation. prevailing cognitive theories of motivation stimulate and guide the study of the individual's beliefs, values, and emotions since they consider these variables to be mediators of behaviour and have a strong influence on the motivation process. From a literature review, it is important to bear in mind that motivation in the school context has been assessed as a critical determinant of the level and quality of learning and performance. It can also be concluded that the relationship between learning and motivation goes beyond any established assumption, it is reciprocal and therefore motivation can influence learning and performance in the same way that learning can interfere with motivation. In consequence, a change of school practices is essential, promoting students' involvement in the learning process through challenging tasks, engaging students in appropriate strategies, and striving to develop new comprehension and proficiency skills. Some guidelines for educational practice are indicated.

**Keywords:** academic motivation; learning; learning goals; school success; school context; school performance.

## Resumo

Esta reflexão teórica procura saber até que ponto a motivação pode influenciar os processos de aprendizagem dos alunos, estabelecendo os pontos de ligação entre os modelos teóricos mais importantes - a Teoria da Atribuição de Causalidade, a Teoria da Autodeterminação e a Teoria das Metas de Realização. A participação dos alunos nos conteúdos escolares depende de vários fatores que estão individual e contextualmente relacionados à motivação. As recorrentes teorias cognitivas da motivação estimulam e orientam o estudo das crenças, valores e emoções do indivíduo, uma vez que consideram essas variáveis como mediadoras do comportamento e têm forte influência no processo de motivação. Da análise da literatura, fica claro que é importante ter em mente que a motivação no contexto escolar tem sido avaliada como um determinante crítico do nível e da qualidade da aprendizagem e do desempenho. A partir disso, pode-se concluir também que a relação entre aprendizagem e motivação vai além de qualquer suposição estabelecida de que seja recíproca e, portanto, a motivação pode influenciar a aprendizagem e o desempenho da mesma forma que a aprendizagem pode interferir na motivação. Assim, é imprescindível uma mudança de prática nas escolas, promovendo o envolvimento dos alunos no processo de aprendizagem através de tarefas desafiadoras, usando estratégias apropriadas e procurando desenvolver novas habilidades de compreensão e domínio. São indicadas algumas orientações para a prática educativa.

**Palavras-chave:** motivação académica; aprendizagem; metas de aprendizagem; sucesso escolar; contexto escolar; desempenho escolar.

## Resumen

Esta reflexión teórica busca conocer en qué medida la motivación puede influir en los procesos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes, estableciendo los puntos de conexión entre los modelos teóricos más importantes - la Teoría de la Atribución de Causalidad, la Teoría de la Autodeterminación y la Teoría de las Metas de Logro. La participación de los estudiantes en los contenidos escolares depende de varios factores que se relacionan individual y contextualmente con la motivación. Las teorías cognitivas recurrentes de la motivación estimulan y orientan el estudio de las creencias, valores y emociones del individuo, ya que consideran estas variables como mediadoras de la conducta y con fuerte influencia en el proceso de motivación. A partir de una revisión de la literatura, se desprende que es importante tener en cuenta que la motivación en el contexto escolar ha sido valorada como un determinante crítico del nivel y la calidad del aprendizaje y del rendimiento. También se puede concluir que la relación entre aprendizaje y motivación va más allá de cualquier suposición establecida de que es recíproca y, por lo tanto, la motivación puede influir en el aprendizaje y el desempeño de la misma manera que el aprendizaje puede interferir en la motivación. Por lo

tanto, un cambio de práctica en las escuelas es esencial, promoviendo la participación de los estudiantes en el proceso de aprendizaje a través de tareas desafiantes, utilizando estrategias adecuadas y buscando desarrollar nuevas habilidades de comprensión y dominio. Se indican algunas pautas para la práctica educativa.

**Palabras clave:** motivación académica; aprendizaje; metas de aprendizaje; éxito escolar; contexto escolar; el rendimiento escolar.

## Introduction

Looking at the successive reports of the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), there is a clear need to examine the motivation in students' learning, as this will lead to the desired school mastery and the success of education policy. In the educational context, student motivation is an important challenge that we must address, as it directly affects the quality of student involvement in the teaching and learning process. In the school context, learning motivation for learning has been defined as the initiation and maintenance of behavior to achieve a specific goal (Boruchovitch, 2009).

For this to happen, the student must face challenging tasks with commitment and perseverance and apply learning strategies. The teacher must also create a classroom atmosphere that encourages the development of motivational guidelines. The motivated student seeks new knowledge and opportunities, shows commitment to the learning process, participates enthusiastically in tasks, and shows a willingness to take on new challenges (Alcará & Guimarães, 2007).

Given due to the importance of this topic, it is essential to analyze the research carried out and the current reflections on the subject, as student participation in the various subjects of the curriculum varies greatly depending on several individuals and contextual factors related to motivation. The current cognitive theories of motivation give priority to the study of the beliefs, values, and emotions of the individual since they consider them as mediators of behavior and have a strong influence on the motivation process. These theories are based on the idea that cognitive processes mediate the relationship between stimulus and response (Barrera, 2010). On the one hand, subjects are seen as active processors of their learning process when they select, process, and store information about their environment. On the other hand, the behavior is no longer hostage to either the properties of the real world surrounding it or to the inner impulses but is related to its cognitive processing, which helps to determine the way the respondent behaves and feels.

The theoretical rationale suggests that the relationship between learning and motivation goes beyond any established precondition, it is reciprocal, and therefore motivation can affect learning and performance in the same way that learning can interfere with motivation. As mentioned by Boruchovitch, Bzuneck, and Guimarães (2010), the complexity and

multidimensionality of motivation as a construct has led to an increase in research worldwide, both in the educational context and in other, more theoretical approaches, since this variable needs to be understood in depth. Robinson et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of this understanding when they stress that academic motivation is a psychological process capable of influencing the intensity and persistence of the student in fulfilling school tasks.

The study of human motivation is a recurring theme in Educational Psychology, but although the term motivation is often used in common language, its scientific definition does not have a consensual character, depending on the theoretical approach proposed to study the phenomenon. In general, it can be said that the study of motivation deals with the "motives of human action", the dynamic or energetic aspect of the action, and what drives the behavior (Barrera, 2010). The history of motivation study consists essentially in the search for answers to the reason for human behavior, i.e. the search for the reason why some students decide to invest in a learning task while others face it with less complicity.

According to Murray (1986), motivation would be an internal factor that initiates, guides, and integrates a person's behavior. This perspective, which combines motivation with internal energy, is also supported by other theorists. According to Fromm (1987), motives activate and stimulate the organism, direct it to a specific goal, and keep the organism in action. For Garrido (1990), motivation is a psychological process, a force that emanates from the subject and drives it to action. Balancho and Coelho (1996), for their part, point out that motivation is all attitudes and behavior that awaken, direct, and regulate the action.

For Guimarães, Bzuneck, and Sanches (2002), understanding the factors related to student participation in learning is a complex task due to the variety of elements present in the situation. The authors understand motivation as an intervening variable that can include internal, external, situational, and permanent elements that make it possible to understand the intensity of each individual's involvement in a particular process. Clayton, Blumberg, and Auld (2010), for their part, emphasize that motivation is constantly linked to successful learning. For these authors, understanding the motivation of each student is the key to achieving effective learning. Thus, unmotivated students have no regulation, become passive, and have no intention to act (Bzuneck, Oliveira, Rufini, & Oliveira, 2015).

It is observed that the broad and multi-faceted nature of motivation offers room for several schools of thought. Motivation can be understood as the effort, will, and perseverance of individuals to carry out certain activities (Abbad, Lacerda & Pilati, 2012). According to Schoed, Raz, and Kluger (2018), academic motivation influences behavioral and emotional processes when performing a task and thus becomes an important predictor of academic hesitation.

Motivation is considered a fundamental element in the use of individual resources to achieve a goal and in justifying the importance attached to motivation in school learning (Rosário, Núñez,

Valle, González-Pianda, & Lourenço, 2013). For this reason, the authors stress that motivation enables the student to find reasons to learn, to improve, to discover, and monetize skills. Therefore, motivation is of utmost importance for the student's academic performance and their full adaptation to the demands of the school environment.

According to Pintrich and Schunk (2002), a definition of motivation should contain some elements: the idea of "process", i.e. motivation is a process and not a product, so that it cannot be observed directly, but can be derived from certain behaviors such as choice of tasks, effort, perseverance, and verbalization. Since motivation is a construct, it is created by the person to explain the reason or need for him/her to do something to act in a certain way (Lima, 2000). Motivated behavior is characterized by the fact that a relatively large amount of energy is spent and that it is directed towards a goal or purpose. Goals have the role of directing the individual's action, the basic point of which would be that, when acting, subjects always have something in mind that they seek to attract or avoid; the need for physical activity (e.g., effort, stamina) and/or mental (e.g., cognitive actions such as thinking, planning, and evaluation). Finally, the last element would be related to the fact that motivation initiates and sustains an action (Lourenço & Paiva, 2010).

According to Pintrich (2000), the planning of motivation and its activation implies the adoption of goals according to the nature of the tasks we propose, the stimulation of several motivational beliefs, such as self-efficacy beliefs that interest personalities in the proposed tasks, and beliefs about the importance of the same tasks. Student motivation is a relevant variable in the teaching and learning process since school achievement cannot be explained by concepts such as intelligence, family context, and socio-economic conditions alone. An important approach is presented to us by Vygotsky (2003) when he mentions that the learning process can be defined as how students acquire new knowledge, develop skills, and change behavior, i.e. it is a relatively stable change behavior that is more or less constant and is achieved through experience, observation, and motivating practice.

In the approach of Pintrich, Schunk, and Meece (2007), motivation is a process by which an activity aimed at achieving goals is stimulated and supported, the dynamic aspect of behavior by which one tries to understand the process of orienting behavior towards situations and preferred goals. It is therefore defined as an inner state that stimulates, motivates, directs, and sustains behavior and should be understood as a process rather than a product. The authors also note that motivation includes goals that set a direction for action and requires physical or mental activity. Moving towards a goal is important and often difficult because it involves a commitment to change and to the first step. Motivation processes are critical to sustaining action, and much of what we know about this issue comes from examining the way people respond to difficulties, problems, successes, and failures in achieving their goals.

When considering the motivation to learn, however, it is necessary to consider the characteristics of the school context. In general, the tasks and activities experienced at school are linked to cognitive processes, namely the ability to pay attention, concentrate, process information, reason and solve problems. Because of these characteristics, some authors, such as Brophy (1983) and Bzuneck (2002), report that the application of general concepts about human motivation in the school environment would not be very appropriate without taking into account the specific characteristics of this environment.

There is a growing interest in motivational aspects of learning that are not only assessed as critical determinants of the level and quality of learning and performance. Current research suggests that the relationship between learning and motivation goes beyond any precondition and that there is some reciprocity - motivation can affect learning and performance just as learning can affect motivation (Barrera, 2010).

The motivation question can clarify why some students like and enjoy school life by revealing appropriate behavior and skills and developing their full potential. Others, however, show little interest in activities, often do them out of a sense of duty or in an irresponsible manner, and in some cases neglect a large part of school life (Fontaine, 2005). In this reflection article, we want to make a small approach to the theories that, according to the literature review, are considered the most relevant for the academic success of students - the Theory of Causal Attribution, the Theory of Self-determination, and the Theory of Achievement Goals.

### **An approach to Causality Attribution Theory**

It is well known that motivation problems are a key factor in students' personal and academic development, as they can seriously impair learning (Martini, 2008). As Boruchovitch (2009) points out, there are motivation problems that are confused with learning difficulties. We often see a variety of interpretations that are verbalized by students in terms of their results, namely when they hand in a paper or a test. Expressions such as "I will never get good grades from this teacher... he does not like me", "I do not ask my friends for help because I do not need it" or "or" I do not know how to learn "are part of the daily life of our schools. In this context, it will be appropriate to ask: *what influence will the interpretations that each student makes of his or her results have on their motivation? What message can these students "say without saying it" for us?*

In this sequence, Davis, Nunes, and Nunes (2005) point out that motivation is characterized by an energetic situation that leads to an effort to achieve a certain goal by carefully selecting relevant data and organizing an integrated sequence of action strategies, insisting on the activity until the defined goals are achieved.

At present, there is no single theory that is comprehensive and addresses the issue of motivation to learn, only small theories. One of them, to which Boruchovitch (2009) refers,



deals with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The intrinsically motivated student performs the task only for pleasure because he is interested in it and is satisfied with the activity itself. In the case of the extrinsically motivated student, this happens for external reasons, namely the fear of punishment, the desire to acknowledge and receive compensation, or even acknowledge it as necessary, even though he does not like it.

The Causality Attribution Theory (CAT), also known from Weiner's (1985, 1992) attribution theory of motivation and emotion, is an important aspect for the study of motivation, the principles of which were first postulated by Heider (1970) in the 1960s of the 20th century. This theory assumes that a person makes every effort to understand the events he or she experiences, and to this end, it distinguishes between the causes that can be attributed to the person, such as personality factors, the motivation to perform a task, the effort expended on an activity, and those that can be attributed to the situation, namely the effects of social norms and expectations.

CAT is based on the understanding that people use the events present in their psychological universe to develop causal, inductive, or deductive models in which it is possible to observe cause-effect relationships (Martini & Boruchovitch, 2004). This theory adopts itself as a theoretical framework of great value since it allows us to understand the causes that students attribute to success and failure in different school activities and the effects they have on learning motivation, emotions, and school performance (Martini & Boruchovitch, 1999).

At present, cognitive motivation theories prefer to study the beliefs, values, and emotions of the respondent, as they believe that these have a mediating effect on behavior and strongly influence the motivation process. Among the multitude of differences related to student learning and achievement, the role of causal attribution stands out, which refers to personal beliefs about the causes responsible for experiences of school success or failure (Weiner, 1985). This attribution theory of motivation and emotion explains how students interpret and give meaning to their results, assigning a fundamental role in causal explanations and the subjectivity that characterizes them (Weiner, 1992).

This finding shows that the motivation to face school tasks and activities is determined by the different interpretations of the results obtained, i.e. by the attributions or explanations of school successes or failures. Therefore, the type of understanding that students have about the causes of their school results is crucial for future selection and commitment to tasks.

According to Weiner (1985, 1992), the taxonomy guiding the types of causal attribution consists of three dimensions, namely: the locus of causality, which categorizes the causes of school results as internal (capacity, effort) or external (difficulty of the task, luck, chance) to the student; constancy/stability, which locates causes through continuity in time, that is, delimits

whether they are stable or unstable; and controllability, which relates to the classification of causes as controllable or uncontrollable according to the student's perception of mastery.

The student's perception of competence about the task to be developed can be greatly impaired if he admits to having made a great effort, but receives, on the part of the teacher, feedback of effortlessness, responsible for the failure. It is essential, therefore, that teachers know their students' causal attributions and, whenever pertinent, use them in an appropriate way (Martini & Boruchovitch, 2004). For example, capacity is considered to be stable since its level is supposed to remain over time. Causal attributions to stable factors after successful situations probably promote expectations of future success, on the contrary, in situations of failure, stable causal attributions are not expected to promote expectations of success. However, the same is not true in the case of effort because this varies depending on the task to be performed by the student. Thus, we can conclude that attribution to unstable causes can generate changes in expectations of future performance. Regarding controllability, this dimension is related to the emotional component, being the feeling of control over the successes or failures of the student generating emotions such as sadness, guilt, shame, and gratitude. For example, if a student perceives a task as being under his control and fails to perform it may feel guilty. If the student is successful in carrying out a task that he perceives to be in control, he can be proud. On the other hand, when the student tries not to have control over the situation (control is perceived as being in the "hands" of parents or teachers), when faced with failure he may feel anger, and when faced with the success he may feel gratitude by those who consider having control of the situation (Hospel & Galand, 2016).

Knowledge about students' causal attributions helps to implement intervention programs, in which irreconcilable causes are modified with motivation for learning and good school performance. The students are led to realize the possibility of having used misadjusted learning strategies, despite having made an effort (Boruchovitch & Martini, 1997).

In an investigation carried out by Marques et al. (2006), with eight-year-old children, presenting learning difficulties in the Portuguese Language, as well as low academic self-concept in this domain, there were positive effects of an intervention based on attributional training. The intervention was essentially based on the use of internally focused performance feedback (e.g., "... it did very well in this reading activity...") and attributional feedback (attribution of competencies and effort for success and no effort) for failure, associated with capacity reports and the use of adjusted strategies), both of which are important for students' performance in scheduled tasks. There was an improvement in students who attributed their effort and capacity to success and failure to lack of effort, as well as a substantial improvement in reading and writing skills and the academic self-concept of these students.

Causal attributions are, therefore, susceptible to changes and their knowledge and mastery can provide important contributions to the construction of a context more conducive to school



mastery. Martini and Boruchovitch (2004) emphasize that the reason to know and work on students' beliefs, since the beginning of the course school, is the fact that the earlier a belief is assimilated the greater the difficulty in changing it. The same authors mention that the research in the area pointed out a series of behaviors of teachers that are frequently related to the promotion of motivation and good academic performance of students, highlighting: (i) the offer of support, encouragement, and guidance to students; (ii) the implementation of educational actions that aim at the student's personal growth and mastery of the task in the context of cooperation; (iii) the preparation of learning activities with an appropriate level of complexity, pleasant and challenging for students; (iv) promoting assessments that also foster opportunities for participation, learning and improving student performance; and (v) the use of positive feedbacks about students' competence and self-efficacy in activities, encouraging effort and the appropriate use of learning strategies.

Students have several individual methods of assessing what they do or produce and, for most of them, what they do needs to be motivating, require little effort, and have some usefulness, as they create interest in the proposed tasks and lead them to school mastery (Rosário et al., 2012). The literature review shows a distinction between two groups of students: (i) what is committed with the main purpose of learning; and (ii) what seeks to obtain good qualifications, reputation, in addition to, in certain cases, avoiding punishment. Students who fall into the first group are the ones who set learning goals, resulting in a good performance, good ratings, and high motivation. Commonly, these students are more open to corrections and are not easily frustrated. Students whose only concern is the concrete and apparent results, when they have a low rating or do not immediately observe the success in learning, are frustrated and do not extract anything positive from this experience, discouraging them (Martini, 2008).

The investigation states that the attribution patterns that most favor learnings are those in which the student attributes both success and failure to internal, unstable, and controllable causes. According to this view, Almeida, Miranda e Guisande (2008) refers that effort can be instigated, both to maintain or increase success, and to avoid future failures. They also mention that the attribution of successes to external, unstable, and uncontrollable causes - such as luck - would be the most unfavorable to achieving success, as it produces a feeling of lack of control, both to produce success and to avoid failure.

Weiner's attributional theory (1985, 1992) thus allows us to conclude that failure in the school context does not necessarily lead to student withdrawal and discouragement. The type of causal attribution performed is decisive in the way the student gets involved in his learning (Weiner, 2000).

CAT approach can motivate teachers and educators to adhere to strategies to overcome their students' motivational problems through the construction of positive educational beliefs and

an undesirable classroom environment, it highlights the pleasure of learning and teaching (Paiva & Loureço, 2010).

### **The Self-Determination Theory Perspective**

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2002), authors of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), distinguish two types of motivation - intrinsic and extrinsic -, considering the type of reasons that drive individuals to action. They argue that the objectives underlying motivation are different from individual to individual and are a continuum between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Williams et al., 2002), depending on the level of internalization that the subject makes of his experiences. An intrinsic regulation interprets the type of innate and instinctive motivation in which the individual does something for the interest and pleasure that this action gives him (Ryan, 1995), that is, to provide enjoyment and satisfaction. On the contrary, in extrinsic motivation the subject performs a task to obtain something not directly related to the task or its instrumental value, acting on the consequence resulting from his performance (e.g., studying for my parents to offer me a bicycle).

Intrinsic motivation is the phenomenon that best explains the positive potential of human nature, being considered, among other aspects, support for growth, psychological integrity, and social cohesion (Deci & Ryan, 2000, Ryan & Deci, 2000). It represents a natural tendency to seek novelty, challenge, and achieve and exercise one's skills. It concerns the commitment to a given task because it is interesting, engaging, or, in a way, creating satisfaction. In the view of Csikszentmihalyi (1992), this involvement is considered spontaneous, part of individual interest, and autotelic, that is, the activity is an end in itself. The SDT reveals three innate psychological needs inherent to intrinsic motivation: (i) the need for autonomy; (ii) the need for competence; and (iii) the need to belong or to establish links. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the internalization by an individual of these three needs is considered essential for good development and psychological health.

Autonomy is constituted as the subject's ability to self-govern; the right or ability to address one's laws, as well as freedom or moral or intellectual independence. Through this perceived autonomy the student feels that he has some power of choice and freedom over his actions (e.g., choosing the theme of a work). In this perspective, people would tend to carry out activity because they believe they do it willingly and not because they are forced by external pressures. From this perception, he presents an intrinsically motivated behavior, establishes personal goals, highlights his adjustments and setbacks, plans the necessary actions to achieve his goals, and appropriately evaluates his progress.

Regarding the need for competence as an essential motivation factor intrinsic, this was based on the work of White (1975) who used the expression competence to describe the individual's ability to interact satisfactorily with your environment. Competence would have a motivational nature that would guide the subject to attempts at dominance, and cannot be attributed to

impulses in the face of needs specific or instincts. For the same author, the experience of controlling a stimulating activity and the resulting increase in competence give positive emotions to the individual, which he called the feeling of effectiveness. In the understanding of Ryan and Deci (2000) through this perceived competence, the student feels effective in activities and interactions with the environment that surrounds him.

Concerning the need to belong or establish bonds, it would be a tendency to establish an emotional bond or to be emotionally involved with significant individuals. Baumeister and Leary (1995) consider it as a universal need, applicable to a wide variety of situations, being a source of influence for cognitive-emotional patterns. From this point of view, all subjects would be encouraged to establish and maintain, at least, positive, stable, and significant interpersonal relationships. When this need is failed, at least in part, its effects damage the individual's emotional balance and general well-being. On this aspect of the need for belonging or relationship, Ryan and Deci (2000) mention that the student establishes close emotional connections and secure bonding with others, that is, he needs to be involved in warm, caring, responsive, authentic, and reciprocal relationships. These psychological needs are considered as the source or antecedent of the intrinsic motivation that will energize the student's school involvement (Reeve, 2012), are private (internal)/are not observed, however, they can be inferred from the (public/observable) involvement of the student in the tasks (Lee & Reeve, 2011).

It is also important to highlight what was mentioned by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) about the involvement of students in tasks, when they mention it can be organized in three dimensions, namely: behavioral (e.g., participation in the classroom, attention, persistence); cognitive (e.g., appropriate use of learning strategies); and emotional (e.g., positive emotions, feeling of belonging to the class/school). It can be said that the (low) involvement of the student can act as a “thermometer” of the (low) satisfaction of the psychological needs of the students. For example, a student who does not establish a good relationship with his teacher may have his psychological need for a relationship compromised and, therefore, present a low intrinsic motivation (Reeve, 2012). This may provide a clue as to where it will be necessary to intervene. Another example could be when a student does not actively participate in classroom activities, or express an interest in learning. This may be due to several factors, however, in light of the theory presented, it may mean that the student does not feel sufficient autonomy to choose and/or perform his tasks (Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Faced with these types of scenarios and similar ones, the question can be asked about what can be done to promote the student's intrinsic motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), any external event (e.g., rewards, goals, positive feedback, criticism, evaluation, praise, deadlines) that affects the autonomy and competence perceived by the student may influence intrinsic motivation.

In this sequence, Reeve (2012) mentions that external events can take on two functional aspects, namely information, and control. The information communicates to the student data about the competence or improvements achieved (e.g., “Once you have written your composition without spelling mistakes, you can do a free activity until you touch it”). Control puts pressure on the student to obtain specific results or behaviors (e.g., “You have to finish the exercise by the end of the class, only afterward”). The feedback given by the teacher can both positively and negatively influence the student's intrinsic motivation. If the feedback is positive and informative (e.g., it provides information on how the student can improve, praises positive performance) it is expected to increase intrinsic motivation, because it improves the student's feelings of competence and promotes their functioning and results. Encourages and accepts students' thoughts, feelings, and actions, as well as using informative language, encourage internal motivational resources, allows time for individual learning, and supports choice (Hospel & Galand, 2016).

On the contrary, if the feedback is negative (e.g., criticism that is not perceived as constructive, negative evaluation), it is expected that it negatively affects the intrinsic motivation, as it does not help to improve the student's feelings of competence (Wentzel, 2002). The pressure placed on students also reduces intrinsic motivation, as it can be perceived as “controlling”, affecting their feelings of autonomy and negatively influencing their functioning and results (Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These findings suggest the need to reflect on the reasons that may lead to the exercise of this style, whether due to cultural appreciation, the exercise of power, or pressure to fulfill the curriculum. In summary, the motivational style adopted by the teacher, whether in support of autonomy or control, has differential repercussions on intrinsic motivation. For this reason, the motivational styles adopted by the teacher should be responsive to the context and malleable, to have an impact on students' motivation patterns (Reeve, 2012).

As previously mentioned, another important aspect to consider in SDT is extrinsic motivation. An extrinsically motivated student is one who performs a task interested in external or social compensation. A student with this type of motivation is more concerned with the opinion of others, the activities are carried out with the main purpose of pleasing teachers and/or parents, to have external rewards, receive praise, or just to avoid punishment (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). In a school context, presumably in most cases, extrinsic motivation, guided by the use of stimuli other than the activity itself, is more frequent and necessary. This occurs, for example, due to the diversity of approaches to a subject, since the more specialized the tasks are, the greater the motivation and concentration and the better the learning takes place.

Thus, motivation generates the impulse or intention for action to achieve a certain objective, it is affected by intrinsic and extrinsic incentives (Davidoff, 2001), as well as it is inconceivable to imagine any situation in our daily life in which we could act totally independent of external influences (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

## **The Theory of Achievement Goals (TAG)**

The Theory of Achievement Goals emerged in the late 1970s, as an expanded follow-up to the Theory of Achievement Motivation (TAM) by McClelland (1953) and Atkinson (1957), having been continued through investigations by Dweck and Elliot (1983) and Bzuneck (2002). Currently, exist a large scientific production about the school context, with the objective of verifying which are the goals or purposes understood by the students as motivating their behavior (Crestani, 2015). These goals are qualitatively defined purposes, or general guidelines when academic achievements or situations in which performance must be performed are at stake. The achievement goals can be understood as a set of components or cognitive mediators, in which each goal can be interpreted as a type of mental programming, consisting of specific steps, intentions, goals, understandings, assimilations, opinions, attributions, and concepts, which they generate cognitive results, that is, conscious knowledge of a certain fact; affective results, related to the emotional or sentimental segment of a given attitude; and behavioral outcomes, referring to the intention to behave in relation to other people, events or objects (Bzuneck, 2002).

TAG is not intended to label students as motivated or unmotivated, only seeks to demonstrate the importance of identifying individual differences in the development of the various forms of student motivation (Zenorini, Santos, & Monteiro, 2011). For Beauchamp (2009) achievement goals direct attention and effort to capture important information and activities, which leads to better performance, avoiding time and effort in parallel activities. Following this reasoning, Sousa (2010) highlights that higher goals make people make greater efforts to satisfy their needs, and this fact over time will make the goals improve the level of involvement. Students who perform better are those who dedicate more time to their studies and are more motivated to achieve their goals.

According to Crestani (2015), the focus of TAG is on understanding the reasons that lead individuals to privilege the performance of a certain task, that is, in prioritizing the purposes considered by the individual as motivating their behavior. For the author, and considering the educational scope, this theory seeks to understand how students think of themselves, their tasks, and their performance. Thus, the concept of goal is related to the qualitative aspect of the student's involvement with learning situations, demonstrating the causes of their involvement with the task, in this sense, the achievement goal expresses the reason why the individual is willing to perform a certain activity (Bueno et al., 2007).

Over the past decade, researchers have been working with four possible achievement goals among students, commonly termed as - learning (or mastery, or task), ego-approach (or performance-approach), ego-avoidance, and work avoidance (or academic alienation) -, the

first three being the most developed in terms of assessment instruments (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002). According to Bzuneck (2002), a student-focused on learning is characterized by the search for new knowledge, mastery of content, appreciation for challenges at intermediate levels, and a belief that performance results depend, maximally, on personal effort. It is centered on the development of skills and intrinsically related to academic commitment and dedication, seeking help to clarify school doubts, that is, the belief that with commitment, events can be created to achieve goals desired (Crestani, 2015).

According to Polese, Bortoluzzi, and Antonelli (2019), the student characterized by the goal of learning focuses their energies on their own activities, is not afraid to face academic challenges, employs metacognition, and attributes success to themselves, they do not get discouraged with possible mistakes or failures in learning, but feel positive emotions with the success achieved with effort. They care about the learning process rather than the product. These individuals believe that what happens in their lives is the result of their actions, therefore, they feel capable of interfering in the results. The ego-approximation goal is related to the profile of individuals who need to be better than their colleagues at any cost, for them it is not enough to be good at tasks, they need to demonstrate their skills and competencies, they need the recognition of others, they are willing to do better than others and avoid mistakes as much as possible so as not to get frustrated (Crestani, 2015). Typically, they aim to show themselves as intelligent or to be the first in the class, that is, the primary concern is with their performance or performance as perceived by others (Cardoso & Bzuneck, 2004). Closely linked to this type of goal, but conceptually distinct, the ego-avoidance goal was also identified, which refers to the student who simply aims to avoid presenting himself as incapable or being less intelligent than others, as well as fear of taking risks and asking for help (Zenorini, et al., 2011). These seek to protect themselves from devaluation by colleagues and teachers, therefore, they avoid expressing themselves in the classroom as much as possible, so as not to demonstrate failure, avoiding negative consequences. Therefore, the meta-ego, in its two forms, denotes a special concern with one's own capacity, in which other people are normally taken as a benchmark for comparison.

The fourth achievement goal – avoidance of work or academic alienation –, although less researched than the previous ones, has been focused on studies with higher education students. Without any concern for showing up, the student with such an orientation places special value on academic success, but as long as it doesn't cost him effort (Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001). According to Riveiro, Canabach, and Arias (2001), research has consistently shown that people can simultaneously orient themselves to more than one achievement goal, with different effects on behaviors, depending on the combination. It has been found to be beneficial, at least in certain contexts, to combine the learning goal with the ego-approach goal.



According to the author, a large number of studies – and several of them with samples of higher education students – have shown the relationship between achievement goal orientation and the adoption of learning strategies and self-regulated learning. That is, the quality of the effort applied in the studies, which consists in the use of effective study strategies, appeared to be associated with the specific orientation to a certain achievement goal. In general, the results have confirmed that students preferentially identified with the learning goal, or even with the ego-approximation goal, combined or not with the first one, seek more adequate learning strategies or, according to the conceptualization of a group of contemporary researchers, depth strategies, which consist of methods that provide a genuine understanding of the contents and the relationships between them (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001).

Finally, proponents and scholars of the theory of achievement goals have also dedicated themselves to identifying the factors that explain the preferential adoption of a certain goal by students. According to the review carried out by Ames (1992), the process of socialization of the learning goal encompasses at least three aspects of teaching: the learning tasks given to students, the way of working assessments, and the promotion of autonomy in learning. However, what immediately influences students in the formation of the learning goal (or any other) are their perceptions that their teachers place emphasis on content mastery and on meaningful learning (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2007).

### **Looking to the future**

In the opinion of Pajares and Schunk (2001), the school is seen by western society as a socializing component of great importance and influence in people's lives. However, to achieve their goals, it is essential to foster a genuine interest in and enthusiasm for learning and school performance among students.

As education professionals, when we focus on the micro space of the classroom, we immediately look for solutions that are more stimulating and feasible for students to participate and have an interest in the content covered. We know that there are curricular areas with syllabus adjusted for each school year, which end up hampering the teacher's praxis about the elaboration of a theme where all these can fit. In reality, the teacher must plan and organize them in line with the real interests of the class, in an interdisciplinary way, working towards a fusion of these contents.

Boruchovitch (2009) highlights the need to transform the classroom into an affable environment, activating the student's feeling of belonging. It is essential that the teacher builds an environment where the student feels integrated, sees his doubts legitimated, and requests help. In the author's opinion, of the different ways of promoting motivation, the main one is that the teacher himself is a model of a motivated person.

Regarding the importance of teachers' involvement in the promotion of motivation in the school space and, more specifically, in the classroom, and recognizing the importance of motivation in learning processes, it is therefore important to mention some aspects to consider when trying to trigger motivation from the students. These considerations must be faced in a pragmatic and realistic way, adapted to specific contexts, the idiosyncratic characteristics of students and teachers, the level of schooling, and the curricular area in question.

It should be noted that motivation is procedural and multi-determined and, as such, undergoes fluctuations and variations (Elliot, Dweck, & Yeager, 2017). It is necessary to be aware that motivation is not necessarily stable, and that some decreases and variations in students' academic motivation are predictable and normative. We cannot expect students to be involved and interested in all syllabi every day and in every situation. Machado and Alves (2013) refer that the teacher has a fundamental role in activating and maintaining the motivation of their students. As motivation is multidetermined, the teacher is not responsible for everything, nor is he able to mobilize the motivation of all students. However, the research emphasizes the teacher's role in activating and maintaining student motivation (Fernandes & Lemos, 2020) considering him as the educational agent with the most power and impact in promoting student motivation.

Thus, and although this dimension is not explicit in what are the functions of the teacher (constituting itself as a dimension of the hidden curriculum), if teachers resign from the task of motivating students, then the repercussions will be seriously harmful, especially in situations in which students are still unable to trigger self-motivation mechanisms. According to the theory of social learning (Bandura, (2002) the observation of models is crucial in learning and development. Also at the motivational level, teachers are models. Ideally, throughout schooling, students manage to better manage their own motivation, finding strategies to motivate themselves. However, the teacher always exerts a decisive impact on the students' motivation from their own motivated behavior. In this way, it is important that teachers reflect on their own motivation levels and on the repercussions of these motivational levels on their behavior as a teacher, requiring teachers to self-regulate and question themselves about the type of motivational models they are (Paiva, & Lourenço, 2011).

According to Machado and Alves (2013, the stimulation of motivation is operationalized from a safe pedagogical relationship. The establishment of a pedagogical relationship structured from the definition of clear and firm rules of behavior and work, translating a relationship of genuine interest in each student, with effective classroom management, will allow the student to perceive greater legitimacy and credibility on the part of the teacher and, consequently, enhance the teacher's impact on the student.

The teacher must identify the causes of the student's demotivation and stimulate the student's motivation from these causes. If the teacher considers that it is necessary to motivate a student,

it will be a priority to start by understanding why the student is little or not motivated at all. There are no universal strategies to promote motivation, and more than that, the intervention must be logical and sequential. In this sense, it is important to first understand why students are unmotivated (Machado & Alves, 2013).

In reality, motivation is not only a characteristic of the student, it is also mediated by the teacher, by the classroom environment. and the culture of the school. In this relation of the teaching and learning process, Paiva and Lourenço (2011) refer to demotivation as one of the great promoters of the lack of desire to learn and to teach, emphasizing that it is important to reflect how this demotivation influences the motivational process that is present in the act to teach and learn and how much it conditions the classroom environment.

In this way, the motivation for learning, whether in an academic or work environment, may be linked to secondary and subjective gains, which, even if not strongly expressed by individuals, will directly affect their willingness to study and learn. In this perspective, the motivation to learn is made up of intrinsic aspects of the individual when he realizes that the content to be studied is relevant and significant, whether to fill some intellectual gap, professional need, or simple curiosity and, from there, his motivation raises, providing the greater possibility of absorption of knowledge in its learning process, facilitating, in this way, reaching the initial objectives that led to the emergence of the motivation itself, in a considerably more effective way.

Vygotsky (2003) states that learning is influenced by intelligence, incentive, and motivation. The fundamental elements to keep the new information acquired and processed by the individual are the stimulus, the impulse, the reinforcement, and the response. A motivated individual has an active and engaged behavior in the learning process and thus learns better, so school tasks must take this aspect into account. The same author also mentions that boring, routine tasks with no appeal to motivation, that is, that they do not take into account students' wishes, tend to be assimilated with more difficulty. On the other hand, those that go to meet their interests, or attend to their reality, are interesting in themselves, leading them to carry out tasks, to participate in a motivating way, and, consequently, enable effective learning.

In this sequence, Vygotsky (2003) also mentions that thinking itself is the product of motivation, that is, of our desires, needs, and interests. Inherent in every thought is an affective-volitional tendency. Thus, it would not be valid to study learning difficulties without considering the affective aspects (Paiva & Lourenço, 2009) and those related to emotional intelligence (Valente, Veiga-Branco, Lourenço, Rebelo, & Cristóvão, 2020). Taking into account Vygotsky's thinking, it is impossible to plan a pedagogical action without first determining the universe of each student in its different aspects. Or even, the concern with learning focuses on broader perspectives than the simple planning of cognitive type tasks, being necessary to think about the individual as a whole, a thought that is also defended by Zabala (1998).

Another way is the feedback given by the teacher in the various tasks, which must be corrective, constructive, and informative, pointing out the problem detected but also indicating clear guidelines for solving it, to achieve the established goal. Teachers need to learn to monitor the degree of difficulty of the task, developing a culture of quality. If the teacher makes it clear to the student that something is not feasible, it will certainly demotivate him. A task that is too easy is identically motivating, and it must be demonstrated to the student that the proposed challenge is likely to be carried out, but that for that it is necessary effort and expenditure of effort.

Looking to the future, we believe that the teacher must use strategies that allow the student to integrate new knowledge, thus using methods adjusted to their needs and a well-structured curriculum, not neglecting the basic role that motivation plays in this process. The incentive techniques that seek the causes for the student to become motivated guarantee a more productive class on the part of the teacher, because teaching is related to communication. Teaching only makes sense when it interferes with learning, so it is necessary to know how the teacher teaches and understand how the student learns (Paiva, 2008), only then can the educational process result and the student will be able to learn to think, feel and act. There is no learning without motivation and a student is motivated when he feels the need to learn and gives meaning to the learned (Lourenço & Paiva, 2017). Considering the above, a question may be presented and which may constitute the motto for future research and reflection: why is it that a large number of students do not wish to study or are not interested in what is taught at school?.

At the very least, part of the answer to this question is related to the little use that the students themselves see in what they are taught. Studies indicate that what they learn at school has little to do with everyday life, their interests, and concerns. The contents taught at school are often very theoretical, removed from reality, have little practical application, and, as such, with very negative effects on motivation. Therefore, if we want to awaken in students the desire and motivation to learn, we need to try to associate the contents we teach in schools with the real world, that is, there is an urgent need to give meaning, meaning, and utility to what is taught. The greater the link between real life and what is taught in the classroom, the more interest and satisfaction they will have in different learning.

On the other hand, the center of interest at the educational level is no longer the teaching and the teacher (transmissive approach), as in the past, but the learning and the student (comprehensive approach), where the principles of learning must become the starting point, a fundamental reference that guides the teaching activity (Paiva & Lourenço, 2017). This whole new educational paradigm should imply substantial transformations in the way of teaching, in interpersonal relationships, in the way of dealing with individual differences between students, among other aspects, however, the reality indicates that these changes have not yet been the object of a necessary and urgent reflection in our educational system.

Finally, motivation in the school context has been assessed as a critical determinant of the level and quality of learning and performance. A motivating student is actively involved in the learning process, insisting on challenging tasks, expending effort, using appropriate strategies, and looking to develop new understanding and mastery skills. Expresses enthusiasm in the execution of tasks and pride in their performance and results. Creating this culture of acting in school can be the essential pillar for the action of learning. Although motivation is an idiosyncratic process, the theories addressed in this reflection provide an important contribution to understanding how a teacher can positively influence students' motivational patterns and, consequently, their behavior and academic performance.

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