REFLECTING ON MOTIVATION AND LEARNING IN THE NEW SPANISH EDUCATION ACT (LOE): TALKING VS. DOING

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The widespread lack of motivation among schoolchildren is probably one of the most crucial factors in the explanation of some of the problematic situations found in school education. Lack of student motivation may be seen as both a consequence of the changes and transformations that society has undergone in recent years and the educational system has not yet been able to assimilate, and as a triggering factor of certain problems and conflicts that occur in schools. In this article we reflect on some the variables that most clearly contribute to pupil motivation (or its absence) in Spanish primary and secondary schools.
Key words: Motivation, academic learning, academic failure.

Probablemente, la falta de motivación académica de muchos estudiantes se ha convertido en uno de los factores centrales que pueden explicar algunas situaciones problemáticas que se están viviendo en la educación escolar. Y es que la desmotivación de los alumnos puede ser tanto una consecuencia de los cambios y transformaciones que ha sufrido la sociedad en los últimos años y que el sistema educativo todavía no ha sido capaz de asumir, como también un factor desencadenante de ciertos problemas y conflictos que se producen en los centros escolares. En este artículo se reflexiona sobre algunas de las variables que más contribuyen a la motivación (o desmotivación) de los estudiantes de las escuelas e institutos de nuestro país.
Palabras clave: Motivación, aprendizaje académico, fracaso escolar.

Various studies and reports on the state of Spain's education system, above all the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) Report, situate our students at the bottom of the OCDE rankings in reading, writing and mathematics. If we consider that in addition to this around 25% of students fail to complete secondary education, the situation of our education system for the present and the immediate future is clearly none too promising. Although the problem is a highly complex and wide-ranging one that affects students' level of knowledge, their academic performance, the organization of schools, disciplinary issues, students' lack of motivation and interest, and so on, there must obviously be certain factors to be identified that have contributed in one way or another to the current situation.

Spain's most recent Education Act (*Ley Orgánica de Education, LOE*), passed by Parliament on 15th December, 2005, constitutes a normative framework intended to provide solutions to many of the problems of our educational system and to make it possible to attain optimum levels of quality in education. Although this will depend on many other factors beyond the reach of the Act itself, the priority is to ensure that the legislation adequately addresses the causes and provides routes for the solution of the most serious problems currently affecting education.

The coordinator of the OECD's PISA Report, Andreas Schleicher, stressed in an interview at the end of 2005 that "the success of the education system lies in achieving greater motivation in the student. Students should learn that what they study serves not only for school itself, but opens up new opportunities for the future". Thus, one of the most important motivational sources is the necessary connection between what is taught in the school and what happens outside it. The greater the extent to which students perceive a relationship between what they learn and the real world, the more meaningful they will find academic work, the more interest they will have in learning and the more pleasure it will give them (Stipek & Seal, 2004).

The widespread lack of motivation among schoolchildren is probably one of the most crucial factors in the explanation of some of the problematic situations found in school education. Indeed, pupil demotivation can be both, on the one hand, a consequence of the changes and transformations that society has undergone in recent years and the educational system has not yet been able to assimilate and, on the other, a triggering factor of certain problems and conflicts that occur in schools.

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In the introduction to the LOE it is stated that the responsibility for pupils' success lies not only with schoolchildren themselves, but also with their families, the teaching staff, schools, educational administration and, finally, society, which is ultimately responsible for the quality of the educational system. Therefore, what is required is a joint effort from all the parties involved. It adds, moreover, that schools and teachers should strive to build rich, motivating and demanding learning environments.

Is sufficient effort being made to create these rich, motivating and demanding environments? While it is clear that schools, teaching staff and students themselves have to apply themselves to achieving such conditions, it is also evident from the current reality and from experience in relation to previous education legislation – particularly the LOGSE (*Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo*) of 1990 – that it is not enough to talk about school settings that are motivating, rich, demanding, and so on for them to appear automatically.

Indeed, in the education system as it is today, the general sensation is that none of these adjectives – rich, motivating or demanding – can be considered to apply particularly to either schools or the teaching and learning that go on in them. In fact, many professionals involved in education consider that students are learning less and less and showing ever-decreasing interest in learning (Valle, Cabanach, Rodríguez, Núñez & González-Pienda, 2006). But this lack of interest is the result above all of teaching methods that generate little or no enthusiasm in the majority of students. Moreover, such methods have changed relatively little over many years, and even in the best of cases the changes that have occurred are insignificant compared to the profound cultural changes our society has undergone in the last few decades. Bearing all of this in mind, the first problem to be addressed is one of motivation related to educational content and its teaching.

CONTENT AND ITS TEACHING

Although all human beings are born with the desire to learn and an enthusiasm for discovering the world around them, the positive experiences associated with learning progressively decrease as children move through the school system. Learning experiences, which were initially fun and exciting, become after a few years at school monotonous, boring, and even sometimes unpleasant. Therefore, something must happen to make pupils who start out with a desire for learning and enthusiasm for schoolwork gradually lose them as they progress through their education.

Thus, the question that arises is as follows: why is it that large numbers of pupils do not want to study or are not at all interested in what they are taught at school? Clearly, part of the answer has to do with the scarce utility the students themselves perceive in what they are taught. The general opinion is that what they learn at school has little to do with their lives, their interests, their concerns or their curiosities. The knowledge imparted at school is, in most cases, highly theoretical, removed from reality and with little possibility of application; it is what experts call "inert knowledge", which has strongly negative effects on motivation.

Therefore, if we wish to stimulate in pupils the desire to learn, the first thing to be done is to attempt to relate what we teach in schools to the real world – to give it sense and meaning and to show how it can be useful. The greater the students' perception of this link between real life and what they are taught, the more interest they will have in learning and the greater the satisfaction that learning will produce. And a second, highly important point is that what is taught should be in close correspondence with what is learnt. That is, if we want our pupils to understand what they are taught, we must bear in mind at all times that learning has its limits and its optimum pace, and in general, that quantity is one of the chief enemies of quality, so that teaching too much material almost always leads to reproductive and low-quality learning.

But in addition to questions of content is the problem of how that content is taught. In general, teachers tend to focus their activity on the transmission and assessment of knowledge, and in either case the same procedures have been in use for several decades. In spite of the enormous transformations in the media through which information can be discovered and assimilated, the transmission of knowledge in schools has hardly changed. Moreover, given that the focus of interest in education is no longer teaching and the teacher, but rather learning and the student, the principles of learning should become the basic point of reference that guides the work of the teacher. All of this implies substantial modifications in the form of teaching, in interpersonal relationships, in the way of dealing with individual differences between pupils, and so on, but the current reality suggests that such changes have not yet made themselves felt in a comprehensive way in our education system.

THE STUDENT

As stressed above, apart from aspects related to content and its teaching, it should not be overlooked that changes

in relation to education over recent years have resulted in a significant shift in the way learning is understood and with regard to the student's role in the education process. The centre of attention is no longer the teacher and teaching; now the protagonist is the student and learning itself, which has ceased to be conceived as a process of mechanical reproduction of what is taught, becoming considered as a process of the construction of knowledge. From this perspective, motivation is also no longer conceived exclusively as something external to the student, as a kind of entity that should be present in every task, as something that can be dispensed in measured doses by the teacher; now it becomes something that is within the students themselves. Therefore, we face a new problem of motivation, in this case linked in a personal way to each student.

In the same way that constructivist approaches to learning consider it to be the student who ultimately gives sense and meaning to what is learnt through a process of personal construction, with regard to motivation it can be asserted, as mentioned above, that motivation is internal to the student, so that it is the students themselves who actually decide to take an interest or not, become involved or not, show enthusiasm or not, in relation to a given learning task. But this decision taken by the student is not as simple as it might appear; rather, it requires at least some degree of balance in the individual between three factors considered by experts as the three basic pillars on which academic motivation rests: self-efficacy beliefs and perceptions of control, personal reasons and goals, and the emotions elicited by learning situations.

With these considerations in mind, and in line with the most current approaches to school learning, it is time to reappraise our understanding of academic motivation and, above all, to change the way we influence it and work with it. The key is in helping the student to generate mechanisms of self-motivation, and in relation not only to study, but also to coexistence with schoolmates and to life in general (Beltrán, 1998). In fact, it has been demonstrated that self-motivated students not only learn more, but also show higher levels of comprehension and recall of information. Moreover, enjoyment of academic work tends to be associated with lower levels of anxiety and distress in the school context. If this can be achieved, we shall almost certainly be stimulating in our students the desire to keep on learning, a goal advocated over half a century ago by the philosopher, psychologist and educator John Dewey as one of the major objectives of education.

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

But lack of motivation also has other determinants beyond those directly associated with teacher and learner, factors situated at another level, probably easier to identify but much more complex to try and act upon. We are referring here to determinants of a cultural nature, related to profound changes that have occurred in our society in recent years and that have to do with way of life, family relationships, new technologies, predominant values, interpersonal relations, and so on. These socio-cultural factors add an extra dimension to the form of dealing with students' lack of motivation, which in turn raises a further motivational problem different from those already discussed.

In today's world, education is not exclusively the province of the family and the school, as was previously the case. Indeed, the school has ceased to be the principal source of knowledge; there are other educational routes and agents with much more powerful and determinant influence than that which can be exercised by school and family, among other reasons because they use resources that are far more efficient for arousing the interest and enthusiasm of the young, and even of the not-so-young. The borderless and globalized world is a clear reflection of the impact on our lives of the era of telecommunications, in which television and the Internet are probably the most potent and influential media. Indeed, some experts (see, e.g., Seoane, 1998) consider that the Internet, more than a technology and a product at the disposition of modern society, is something that represents it, a kind of model of the society in which we live.

Therefore, the most important changes at a social and cultural level in recent years are directly or indirectly related to the technologies of information and communication. This technological revolution has accelerated and radically altered the way we communicate and access information, resulting in significant changes in the sphere of work, in human relations and in the way we learn. Given that the principal resource handled by the new technologies is information, they have come to constitute a first-order educational instrument, which, moreover, tends to generate enormous interest in the majority of students, making it a substantial source of motivation. The attractiveness and the power of fascination of everything associated with these new technologies is something of which education should not fail to take advantage.

Even so, we should not be so naive as to see the new technologies as the magical resource that will radically

change education or solve its main problems overnight. We must be clear about the fact that they represent nothing more than an instrument at our service, so that they key to the impact of these resources on education must be found in the educational model behind their use and, of course, those who guide their use (Beltrán, 2001).

Thus, the new technologies can be at the service of a pedagogical model centred on teaching and the teacher, in which learning is conceived as the mechanical reproduction of information, or, on the other hand, they can be assimilated into a model that is much more flexible, more focused on students and their learning, in which this learning is understood as a process of the construction of meanings. Whether the new technologies are used on the basis of one educational model or the other implies taking advantage or not of an instrument with enormous potential and with incredible motivational power.

Previous experience of education legislation has demonstrated that there is no possibility for change if teaching staff do not identify with or involve themselves in the application of its principles. Moreover, one of the great failures of the previous Education Act, the LOGSE (1990), and which made it quite unpopular, was that it did not fully involve the teachers, among other reasons because it was excessively interventionist with regard to their teaching activity and it failed to take into account that education legislation cannot establish just a single route for achieving its objectives, but needs rather to offer a high degree of organizational and educational independence that makes it possible to attend to the peculiarities and specific characteristics of each learning context.

With this in mind, and given that the success or failure of the LOE will depend to a large extent on teachers themselves, it focuses closely on the development of proposals in relation to their training and to social recognition of their work. Encouraging and aiding the use of information technologies and promoting the learning of foreign languages, together with support for training activities oriented to educational research and innovation, are some of the basic pillars of the ongoing training of teachers proposed by the LOE.

All of these proposals, and especially those related to teachers, will be fulfilled if the different organs of educational administration make sufficient effort and invest the necessary resources, but also if all those involved in education have the optimism, the interest and the will necessary for changes to take place. Therefore, as was the case with previous legislation, in the LOE there are many positive aspects, but everything will depend on

how it is implemented and, above all, on whether it is accompanied by effective funding that gradually brings us closer to the mean level of investment of the OECD countries. Even so, if we consider the PISA Report of 2003, spending on education would not appear to be one of the most important factors in relation to the quality of the education system. It is more likely that the way the money is invested and the resources that are prioritized largely determine the cost-effectiveness of funding.

Moreover, given that a highly important factor in the success of an education system is the improvement of student motivation, Brophy's (1998) pertinent proposal of "bringing the classes to the students", offering them opportunities to learn and to recognize the importance of real learning for their lives, complemented by the idea of "bringing the students to the classes", requiring from them effort and involvement in learning tasks, constitutes an appropriate frame of reference for achieving those rich, motivating and demanding learning environments to which the LOE refers in its introduction, and which may be essential indicators of success or failure in the application of the Act.

If these objectives are achieved, we can all congratulate ourselves on a great success; if, on the other hand, the proposals of the LOE fail to bring about substantial changes in education, we shall be obliged once again to lament the fact that "there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip".

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