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Educators' Perceptions about Incentives and their Role in Students' Learning

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Abstract

Incentives in learning consist of one of the most important factors in students' effective learning. Although important research on the nature of human incentives has been conducted on the part of psychologists in the past, research on incentives in learning in school contexts is very limited. Therefore, in this paper, we will try to elaborate the most prevalent theories that have set the basis for the discussion on incentives in general but also, more specifically, on incentives in learning in a school context. Then, we will analyse the conclusions of the field-research that we conducted and which included a case-study formed through an interview. Finally, we will compare the results of our qualitative research with the ones driven by the existing literature. The basic contribution of this paper is the field research conducted on the issue of students' incentives in senior high school education, which indicated a frequent parents' and teachers' anti-pedagogical approach and the suggestion of a pedagogically acceptable approach in motivating students in the Greek and international educational context.

Keywords: Incentives in Learning, Intrinsic Motives, Extrinsic Motives, Student-Centered Method, Different Learning Profiles, Teaching "Contract".

Introduction

Students' incentives in learning in schools play a significant role in students' lives, as the first form students' academic choices, most probably their future profession, and their interests in life. Although researchers, especially from the field of psychology, have been preoccupied by the significance of incentives in learning, teachers in schools are not adequately informed or trained on how they should instill positive motives into students' learning experience.

Therefore, the present study will treat the issue of incentives in the Greek senior high school education as well as the educators' role in students' learning. It will start with a literature review on individuals' incentives in general and, then, it will continue with a more specific review on practical incentives in learning. It will continue with a field-research and with the results that are deducted by a case-study and an interview conducted with an educator of the secondary education. Finally, comparative results will be abstracted, a critical review will be accomplished and possible points of focus for future research will be proposed.

Literature Review

Theories of Incentives

The theories of individuals' incentives have intensively preoccupied in the past researchers from the field of psychology as well as researchers from the fields of sociology and education. According to Woolfolk (2007), incentives are an intrinsic factor that stimulates, directs and preserves a person's behavior. Similarly, Elliott et al (2008) suggest that incentives are the internal state that awakes the individual so as to act, they push it towards different directions and keeps it focused on specific tasks. Trilianos (2002) supports the idea that incentives are "urges or activated needs" that direct or alienate the individual towards an aim or away from it respectively.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Freud suggested that humans are motivated by three levels of thinking: the conscious, the subconscious and the unconscious. (Papantoniou, 2014) Thus, Papantoniou (2014) reminds that there are specific indicators of the individuals' unconscious incentives, such as "free associations, resistances, standards of living, loathing standards, jokes, verbal errors, and artworks". Every educator should acknowledge these indicators, in order to recognise the transferences that students unconsciously do towards the teacher or the classmates. This is of great importance, as these transferences direct the behavior and very often the student's achievements. The value of the unconscious motives was also underlined by Maslow, as we will examine below. (1943)

Kostaridou-Efklidi (2012) reminds that motives may be inherent or acquired through a person's interaction with the environment. Another sort of incentives distinction is the one that distinguishes them in physiological, biological and psychological. Physiological motives serve the functioning of the body and the maintenance of the physical homeostasis. Biological motives serve the human need for survival and reproduction of the species. Psychological motives have to do with the individual's emotions and personality, as these latter get formed through a person's interactions with the physical and social environment. (Kostaridou-Efklidi, 2012)

Another basic theory on motives is Maslow's theory (1943), which suggests that humans satisfy their needs according to a specific hierarchical pyramid. On the base of this pyramid there is the need for survival. The needs that are concerned with the individual's security, protection and stability follow and they include the need for releasement from fear and anxiety. On the next level, the need for love and for the sense of "belonging" follow and, right after this level, follows the individual's need for feeling appreciated. Finally, on the top level of the hierarchical pyramid, there is the need for self-actualization, that is, the activation of all the possibilities of an individual and a sense of fulfilment (Maslow, 1943)

One more distinction on incentives of high importance is the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motives. According to Maridaki-Kassotaki (2009), intrinsic motives are the cognitive motives, the self-expression motives, the self-esteem motives, the social collaboration motives and the physiological motives that were analysed above. Extrinsic motives may be positive or negative. Positive motives, also known as "positive reinforcers", offer the person the promise of pleasant feelings and may be in the form of monetary or other kind of material reward or even promises of accomplishment of a favour.

This theory, known as "Operant Reinforcement Theory" or "Operant Conditioning" was introduced by Skinner (1938), and suggests that people tend to repeat the actions for which they have received "positive reinforcement". Negative extrinsic motives are in the form of fear, shame,

guilt, and other unpleasant feelings that derive from threats of punishments or punishments themselves, insults, deprivations and other kinds of punishments (Maridaki-Kassotaki, 2009), which makes reference to Skinner's principle of "negative reinforcers" (1938).

Practical Approaches on Incentives in Learning

The importance that educators must attribute to externally or internally triggered behaviour is great, because, as Ryan & Deci (1999) point out "if the person's behaviour is internally determined, (s)he will be willing to repeat it, whereas, if it is externally determined (s)he will be motivated only in the presence of a tangible reward". In particular, it has been observed that the parent, who uses external incentives extensively, can lead the child toward materialistic attitudes and the reduction of internal motivation. Thus, it is necessary that educators and parents aim at guiding students, in order for the latter to formulate intrinsic motives. This way, they will find interest in what they learn and become self-directed (Elliott et al., 2008; Woolfolk, 2007; Kostaridou-Efklidi, 2012)

However, the variety of incentives is such that no theory can itself sufficiently explain the behaviour of the individual and even less adolescents' behaviour, whose personality is still under development. Adolescence hinders students' efforts to adapt to the requirements of "the school of adults" and at the same time to become autonomous and express the characteristics of their developing personalities. (Kostaridou-Efklidi, 2012)

Willis & Hodson (1999) point to the need that teachers and parents find the way in which each child learns. They mention that moderate students do exist, because no emphasis is put on their personal interests, needs and inclinations-talents. In other words, they stress that the lack of student's motivation is the responsibility of adults, teachers and parents. For this reason, Willis & Hodson (1999) suggest the evaluation of the particular inclinations of students through special questionnaires which will be supplemented to each student. Then the teaching will be adjusted depending on the results of the questionnaire, in order to attract interest and maximize student's motivation and participation.

Schunk, Pintrich & Meece (2010) in their book entitled "Incentives in education" indicate that students' motives are of great importance in learning. This is the case, because students who are motivated to learn, opposed to others who aren't, pay attention to the lesson, take notes, study at home, revise the material and express their questions to their teacher. This process contributes to the amelioration of their performance.

Boekaerts (2002), in collaboration with the International Bureau of Education and UNESCO, conducted field-research to detect students' motives. She reached conclusions which then turned into proposals for improving the teaching process. Initially, Boekaerts concluded that students' beliefs about a course may affect their motivation in a contributory or suppressive way. So, if a student believes that poetry is a useless subject to study, then he will not have an incentive to deal with it. It is worth mentioning that, according to Boekaerts' (2002) findings, the beliefs of these students have been developed either by the school or the family environment. For this reason, she proposes that teachers investigate such beliefs and intervene subtly and creatively, in order to alter them through the exposure of students to a positive experience.

Boekaerts (2002), through her field-research results, comes to confirm the findings of the literature regarding the importance of intrinsic motivation, as she came to the finding according

to which students who have intrinsic motivation for an object of learning, have no need for additional motivation either external or of any other type. Thus, the researcher suggests that teachers seek to link the subject of the lesson with the skills, talents and interests of students, aiming to cultivate their intrinsic motivation for learning (Brinia, 2006)

What is more, the researcher refers to the fact that students, who are motivated to learn a discipline, seek for the perfection of their studying, while they have already developed learning strategies from a young age and eventually learn more on this subject compared to those who are not motivated. The latter, therefore, are directed to the “self”, as they always try to avoid the particular subject and their exposure to the class, which reinforces not only their desire to “hide” but also their selfishness as they grow older.

Therefore, Boekaerts (2002) warns that educators, who put emphasis on assessment procedures, make comparisons and refer publicly to each student’s capabilities, create a competitive climate and cause the students “self-oriented” thoughts. This fact decreases dramatically students’ intrinsic motives and their self-regulated interest in learning. In contrast, the researcher suggests that teachers consistently encourage students to seek the strategies with which they can learn and always look for mistakes and improvement. Thus, Boekaerts, presents the meta-knowledge as the way to cultivate students critical thinking and strengthen their motivation.

Case-study: Interview with a Secondary Education Educator

Methodology

For this paper, the methodological tool of our field-research was the “interview”. For the interview, as a tool of qualitative research, extensive literature has been written. Qu & Dumai (2011) suggest that conducting qualitative research through interviews is not an easy process, as it requires important planning and preparation as well as various skills on the part of the interviewer. According to Dilshad & Latif (2013), in qualitative interview research, five or six open-ended questions may be enough, if at the same time the interviewer gives the interviewee the possibility to further elaborate when needed.

There are three basic approaches to the interview as a research tool: the neopositivist, the romanticist and the localist (Qu & Dumai, 2011). According to the localist view, which we are following in this paper, the answers of an interview depend significantly on the social context in which they occur. Hammersley (2007) agrees that the social and cultural context interrelates with people’s perceptions and actions. This is very important in an educational context, since the localist view enables the researcher to adjust the interview flow, according to the social context of the specific school and the specific teacher to which the interview refers.

This is partly the reason why localists prefer the semi-structured type of interviews that provide them with more flexibility and for which the interviewers prepare thematically organised questions, but they also let room for the interviewees to elaborate when needed without interrupting them. Moreover, a skillful interviewer may change the order of the questions or the style of the questions in order to elicit, to the greatest possible extent, the interviewee’s personal experience and hidden thoughts. (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) This is the reason why the semi-structured type is widely appreciated and preferred by researchers compared to the other interview types. (Qu & Dumai, 2011) Therefore, for this paper, six thematic open-ended questions

were made and emphasis was put on eliciting the interviewee's in-depth views to the greatest possible extent.

Population Sample

The sample which the interview addressed was very limited and consisted of one single teacher of senior high school. This happened because the case of the specific teacher was thought to be of special interest and therefore worth of analyzing on its own. The specific teacher (from now on referred to as "the educator") has a first four-year degree in Economics (honors) from University of Athens, but later on she obtained another four-year bachelor's degree (honors) in the same University, entitled "Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology". This degree enables her to teach language and literature in Greek senior high schools. Therefore, she has been teaching for many years Economics, Language and Literature in senior high schools in Greece. Her case is of great interest as she is a professional of exceptionally holistic knowledge and intellect, which combines the practical and mathematical way of thinking with the knowledge of psychology, pedagogy, philosophy and the classics. Thus, her experience in teaching could be proven of great significance in our research on students' incentives in learning.

Findings

The Educator's Personality

The senior high school educator shared her personal, comprehensive experience on incentives in learning and on educators' role in developing students' motives in learning. According to the educator, the teacher's personality plays a very significant role in molding students' motivation. Thus, she points out that educators have an analogous role to the one of parents in a family. Specifically, she underscores that a teacher may inspire students, so as the latter are directed towards increased interest in inquisitive learning, including those of weaker performance. This is a result of the continuous development of trust between the learners and the teacher, independently of their performance. The educator underlines that students distance themselves from the lesson when the teacher, who sometimes is not able to "lead" the class, does not inspire them. However, she reminds us that when family issues, such as pressure or oppression, exist, the incentives provided by the teacher cannot be effective. Therefore, she concludes that there is need for systematic cooperation between teachers, parents and students.

Methods and Means in Teaching

On the question about the role of teaching methods in the development of incentives in learning, the educator answered that, undoubtedly, the teacher-centered method dominates in classes. However, she admits that the characteristics of the student-centered method are the ones that motivate students, since, through their involvement, they get motivated to participate in the lesson and seek to acquire knowledge. The student-centered method is utilised more effectively by the interviewed educator, in the subject of "Political Education"; according to her sayings, this subject includes chapters that refer to everyday life and therefore enable the teacher to trigger constructive discussions with students.

The "working-groups" method has very limited use and it is mostly utilized in the subject called "Project". In this case, this method motivates students to the greatest possible extent, since they

choose on their own the topics on which they are going to do their research project. Worth-noticing is the educator's conclusion, according to which, when students work on a project in groups, they get highly motivated when receiving constructive feedback on their work. In this way, they improve their collaborative skills and learn which technological means they need to use and how to use them, so as to accomplish and present their project.

Regarding the use of various means in the teaching process, such as images and videos, she suggests that it is indispensable for accommodating all the types of learners, such as the visual learners. However, she suggests that the use of such means does not render the teaching process student-oriented -since it can still be teacher-centered with the simultaneous utilization of technological means- and therefore does not constitute a panacea in the effort of motivating students.

School Climate, Companions, and Learning

According to the educator, the school climate, in terms of school facilities and each school's board of teachers, exerts great influence on formulating students' motives. In other words, if the board of teachers has set rules and has managed to persuade students to follow these rules, then this determines whether students are going to behave appropriately or not to a great extent. Motives for appropriate behavior are also automatically set through the climate that exists in each department separately. Thus, one can easily understand that there is continuous interaction between students and their external environment. However, the educator underlines that students with excellent performance do not let a bad school climate influence them in a negative way. Moreover, on the question about how much students' companions and peers may influence the incentives in learning, the educator answers that this kind of influence stops at lower classes at school, especially at junior high school classes. She adds that students at senior high school classes have already formed their personality and the motives that come along.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Incentives in Learning

The educator admits that in the short-term, material-materialistic incentives are more effective than intellectual incentives, such as a teacher's advice to the student. Nevertheless, she underlines that this does not mean that the use of such material prizes is pedagogically correct. In fact, she claims that such extrinsic incentives, like promises to fulfill a favour that the child has asked for or some similar promises for rewards are humiliating for the educator. The use of such incentives indicates teachers' insecurities or even inadequacy and implies that they deny their pedagogical, moralistic role and that they seek for an easy way to get rid of the students.

Furthermore, the educator adds that, in primary school, the use of extrinsic motives may be carefully chosen to a certain extent. However, students on the age of sixteen or seventeen have developed critical thinking and, therefore, teachers should have a higher level of expectations on their part. Similar is parents' wrong tactic to leave the children in front of the TV screen, so as they do not need to be preoccupied by them for a while. Extrinsic incentives result in students of higher classes not having developed their critical thinking and mindset, since they were probably never explained the real reasons why they are expected to study all the subjects that are taught in schools. This is part of meta-knowledge, which also includes the ways in which students can study a topic in-depth. Therefore, the educator underscores the significance of developing

students' meta-knowledge skills, that is, to learn the reasons why we learn as well as the appropriate strategies for effective learning.

Nevertheless, the educator claims that neither intellectual motives, in the form of advices, are effective themselves. Thus, she suggests that teachers talk to students through examples of their everyday life and try to make them think about their future and what they want to do later in life, trying to alleviate their doubts and fears. She, however, underlines that the above approach depends on the characteristics of the students, whom the teacher addresses in each different case.

The Educator's Role in Learning

The educator reminds us that students in senior high school classes, in which she teaches, have already decided their aims and, therefore, have formed their motives. The educator's role is to develop a relationship of trust with each student. This trust will be based upon the "teaching contract", which will have been formed by the students and the teacher and upon which all will have agreed, right from the beginning of the school year. Students will respect the terms of the "contract" more easily if the teacher is a behavior model for students to mimic. That is, if teachers respect and follow the rules themselves, then students will get inspired to do the same. Besides, students understand the limits set by the teacher when necessary and the point to which the teacher's concessions stop because (s)he has no other choice. Each student's behavior, the limits of which are "prescribed" through the "teaching contract" has a certain weight in the final grading for the interviewee. Finally, the educator reminds that the teacher's role should be creative, flexible and not coercive or procedural. Teachers have to believe in and love their profession. In this way, students can be effectively motivated towards learning with their teachers' guidance and support.

Results

The educator's sayings largely confirm the literature on students' motives for learning, but also disagree on certain points. First of all, the educator confirms the point of view of Willis & Hodson (1999) on the need of using a variety of teaching methods so as to satisfy the different learning profiles that exist in each class and, in this way, motivate students. At the same time, the educator confirms Brinia's (2006) view, according to which teachers have to try to link the subject of the lesson with students' personal interests and talents.

Furthermore, the educator agrees with Kostaridou-Efklidi's (2012) view according to which motives may be influenced by a person's external environment. First of all, the educator claims that the school climate is a significant factor of motivation and of the improvement of students' performance and, thus, confirms Zavlanou's theories (2003) regarding the school climate and the related students' performance.

Secondly, the external environment may refer to the teacher's methods and means of teaching that greatly influence students' motives. For instance, the teacher-centered method, although it is a "bad habit" of a large number of teachers, it would be better to be avoided as it motivates students to the smallest possible degree. However, one may argue that the complete absence of teacher-centered method is not possible, because some parts of the teaching material need to be covered through lecture, as they seem difficult to be presented to students in a different way.

Nevertheless, in the most demanding parts of the teaching material of any kind of subjects, conducting research through the project method can be a useful tool for both students and teachers and can adequately replace lecture. This would be a great opportunity for students to enhance their critical thinking and develop cooperative skills, avoiding, at the same time, the passive attendance of a lecture.

Moreover, the interviewee's empirical approach confirms the major importance of cultivating intrinsic motives to students and avoiding activating extrinsic motives, since, in the long term, the extrinsic weaken the intrinsic ones, as Boekaerts (2002) also suggests. At this point Skinner's (1938) "positive" and "negative reinforcers" do not find their place in the pedagogy field, as they consist of extrinsic motives and therefore have negative effect in the long-run. The importance of intrinsic motives is also confirmed by Ryan & Deci (1999); Elliott et al (2008); Woolfolk (2007), who suggest that there is a tendency to automatically repeat actions that stem from intrinsic motives, while actions that stem from extrinsic motives may only be repeated in presence of a reward or punishment.

In addition, the educator mentioned the "teaching contract" as a highly important factor in motivating students to learn. The extent to which the teaching contract is related to creating and maintaining a relationship of trust with students confirms the literature regarding motivation. Specifically, the notions of the "teaching contract" and the trust agree with Maslow's (1943) pyramid on the second level of which stand the need for security and protection and the need for releasement from fear. However, the extent to which the teaching contract refers to the students' fear that if they do not conform to it, they will be penalised, the incentive is considered as extrinsic motive and although it is effective, it is not recommended per se.

Finally, the specific educator's case-study stresses the value of students' motivation through the cultivation of their meta-knowledge skills, a fact that is also stressed by (Boekaerts, 2002). The latter claims that students seeking for new strategies in learning and looking for mistakes to correct develop the so-called "meta-knowledge skills" and, thus, cultivate intrinsic motives. Otherwise, Boekaerts (2002) warns, that teachers who cultivate an in-class exam-centered and competitive climate will lead to the development of selfish students without self-regulated interest in learning.

Limitations of Present Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The present research was limited to a literature review and a case study, without carrying out further research activity. However, the conclusions are of great value because an extensive and systematic field-research in Greece or abroad regarding the incentives in education –apart from Boekaerts (2002) field-research- has not been conducted yet. The research, which has already been conducted mainly by researchers in the field of psychology, has been limited to approaching incentives from a psychological, psychoanalytic and sociological point of view, without putting emphasis on the educational, pedagogical and ethical role of incentives in school learning. The need for an interdisciplinary approach to the issue of incentives in learning in general and in particular in schools is therefore evident. Thus, this study attempted a basic, theoretical and practical approach, which can trigger further analysis and research.

Conclusion

The importance of motivation in learning and more specifically in educational practice can be easily understood. However from an educational perspective, the activation of intrinsic learning motives to students is preferred to the activation of extrinsic motives, which in the short term may seem effective, but in the long-run, hinders students' educational and ethical development. It is important that the cultivation of intrinsic motives as a process begins from the individual's primary source of socialization, the family, because if the school's teaching effort is by principle opposed to the pedagogical methods which are adopted by the family, it is very difficult to deliver the desired results, as our field-research indicated. The need for open and systematic communication and collaboration between the school community and students' families has therefore been underlined in this paper. Finally, our case-study has underscored the significance of teachers' role, whose approach is determinant of students' incentives and, therefore, of students' progress and ethical development. Most importantly, the need for the avoidance of the teacher-centered approach, which has been introduced by the present case-study, is a factor that has not yet been discussed to the extent that it deserves, not only in the Greek educational context, but also in an international level.

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