

# MOTIVATION AS A COMPETENCE

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to deep dive into the relationship between motivation and competence, and how much this relationship affects a pupil's academic results. As a matter of fact, while motivation is the emotional drive towards an aim and a goal, competence concerns the ability to use knowledge in real contexts. It can be said that motivation concerns the "desire to do" and competence refers to "knowing a certain thing and mastering how to do it".

Competence can be understood as an emotional and motivational meaning for the evaluation of the expectations that the individual builds on his adaptation skills. It is therefore what he thinks about himself and his own ability to get involved and adapt to the environment. In view of the fact that motivation plays a fundamental role in the learning processes of pupils, as vastly demonstrated by many studies, it can be said that it may be considered a real skill to be acquired through the scholastic path.

In this perspective, both the theoretical perspectives on motivation and the strategic interventions that can be implemented in the classroom are to be rediscovered and re-evaluated. The theoretical perspectives can provide us with valuable indications on known aspects, but which still have too little impact in practice, such as the reciprocal relationships between motivation, on the one hand, and needs, objectives, perceptions of competence, expectations of students' success (and teachers), on the other. Strategic interventions, within the framework of a positive class climate, can also directly invest the learning tasks and the dynamics that can make them more motivating: for example, perceived value, the double dimension of challenge and support to the learning, teacher feedback and impact of evaluation.

Keywords: Motivation, Competence, Learning processes, Evaluation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Competence can be understood as an emotional and motivational meaning of evaluating the expectations that an individual builds on his own adaptation skills and therefore what he thinks of himself and his own abilities to get involved and adapt to the environment. Starting from the assumption, amply demonstrated by many studies, that motivation has a fundamental role in the learning process, it can be affirmed that the same can be considered a competence to be acquired through the scholastic path.

Motivation has received considerable attention from the cognitive revolution onwards and it has contributed to a new vision of learning / teaching processes. Student and lecturer take an active part in a co-construction of knowledge and skills. For many years forms of mechanical content learning have been privileged, useful in a certain context also for the dissemination of culture. However, authors such as Vygotsky and Bruner noted that particular attention should be paid to meaningful learning that occurs in a relational context [1]. Bruner mainly focused on strategies that have become increasingly important. For example, the well-known 'learn to learn', can be a significant boost to learning, confirming the importance of metacognitive aspects, within which motivation has a prominent place.

The widespread psychological and socio-cultural determinisms force us too often into somewhat ambiguous formulas such as "you are successful because you are motivated, but you are motivated because you are successful", and, on the other hand, it is not easy to explore the galaxy of factors that constitute the meaning of "motivation" without falling into the traps of obviousness ("he does not study because he's is not motivated"). It is therefore advisable to change perspective and begin to consider this important aspect of learning as a dynamic construct and as a true multidimensional competence to be built and nurtured.

In this perspective, both the theoretical perspectives on motivation and the strategic interventions that can be implemented in the classroom are to be rediscovered and re-evaluated. The theoretical perspectives can provide us with valuable indications on known aspects, but which still have too little impact in practice, such as the reciprocal relationships between motivation, on the one hand, and needs, objectives, perceptions of competence, expectations of students' success (and teachers), on the other.



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Strategic interventions, within the framework of a positive class climate, can also directly invest the learning tasks and the dynamics that can make them more motivating: for example, perceived value, the double dimension of challenge and support to the learning, teacher feedback and impact of evaluation.

Competence can be considered both as the set of individual characteristics (knowledge, skills, attitudes) that allow to obtain useful results for the adaptation and solution of problems that as emotional and motivational capacity to build expectations on the same skills, in a context, therefore, of self-assessment. Motivation, in relation to the competence, can vary at different stages of the life of an individual and in relation to the experiences of success or failure. It is interesting to consider other aspects related to competence such as the perception of it, the perception of control, the optimal challenge and internalized motivation.

In the context of the motivation guided by aspects that are mainly internal to the individual, it is also important to choose the task or the objective to be achieved as observed in the theory of self-determination. The external environment can favor the development of this tendency if it allows to satisfy innate needs of competence and, at the same time of affection, dependence and autonomy.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

By examining the factors that contribute to outlining a student's learning performance, it is possible to see how other types of variables come into play alongside cognitive variables (knowledge, skills and strategies used in dealing with learning tasks), significantly influencing these performances. These are components that can be traced back to the affective side of behavior and which can be schematically classified into factors of an emotional nature, such as anxiety and stress, and above all factors of a motivational nature, such as the attitudes that the student manifests in relation to the process of learning, perseverance, commitment, perception of oneself and one's abilities in a learning context.

In literature the term motivation is used in relation to drives, processes and behaviors; depending on the theory that provides its definition and explanation, it takes on different meanings, also in relation to the aspects considered. The theories that have developed in the psycho-pedagogical field in the last century can be organized according to three approaches to the study of motivation: focused on extrinsic reinforcement, when learning is a means to a purpose, on the task, when learning has a value of its own, and on the ego, when learning serves to demonstrate one's ability or competence. As stated by Boscolo [2] this schematization can be considered useful from the point of view of the exposition, but in the experience of the individuals it is more probable that an interaction between them occurs; moreover, it is important to take into consideration the motivational dynamics that lead to intellectual development and learning, which should be linked to an autonomous motivation linked to the pleasure of learning.

Learning independently means knowing how to self-regulate learning by activating and maintaining knowledge and behaviors systematically oriented to learning objectives and it is therefore important to understand how motivation can promote or facilitate learning.

One of the most important notions that contributed to improving the quality of education was the recognition of the importance of promoting in children a sense of trust in their own learning abilities. The absence of interventions oriented in this direction can favor a progressive destruction of the sense of esteem and personal dignity which in turn can induce feelings of inferiority, inadequacy and lack of power. Attack on personal value emerges as a consequence not only of the failure experienced during normal classroom learning activities but also, and even more, of the perception of messages that accompany this experience. The latter concern the way in which one is treated, the value attributed to oneself as a person, to what one has been able to do and achieve.

Some messages of this type can be transmitted unintentionally. For example, if during class discussions the teacher does not usually emphasize the contributions of his students, but merely intervenes to judge them in relation to previously defined criteria of correctness, there is no doubt that in this way he communicates a signal of poor appreciation and value in a more or less explicit manner. This attitude can undermine the genuine interest of the children to participate with potentially new and original personal ideas in particular when they are uncertain and barely sketched or opposed to what the teacher believes is right.

The notion that competences can be acquired and increased through educational processes is fairly shared. Furthermore, it can be assumed that competence can be seen as a high-level qualification arising from the effective application of knowledge and skills in specific and complex contexts.

Competence is activated by the task and, the more the task is complex, the more it is indicative of the level of competence required. Excellent mastery of knowledge and skills does not guarantee successful performances in complex environmental conditions. Individuals should be able to select between the knowledge and skills available to them according to the needs and behaviors necessary to perform a given task. This requires special skills that allow you to take into account the different characteristics of each context.

Skills are used in intricate and multidimensional situations, to which it is not possible to give appropriate answers by exclusively using problem solving abilities. Competence can also be connected with the idea of self-esteem [3]: competence would originate from the feeling of satisfaction that one feels after having successfully completed a job or a course of study. It is considered as the result of effectiveness (*effectance*), that is the satisfaction that one experiences in having one's personal professional qualities recognized following a well-done task. Barnett [4] has associated the skills to the assumption of unprepared behaviors in unpredictable and unexpected situations: the ability to deal with new situations in a creative way is assumed as the characteristic that distinguishes the competent person. He has chosen an operational approach for the concept of competence that includes the skills, results, transferability, initiative and knowledge growth. In this perspective, competence can be defined as the ability to make decisions and to act satisfactorily in specific situations. All these analyses conceive competences as generalizable abilities that allow decisions to be made and tasks to be carried out consciously and intentionally, whereas skills are instead manifested through the adoption of habitual behaviors. Cognitive skills or abilities are the mental activities that occur in the brain while we use, transform or increase the available knowledge. Skills are, by definition, limited to internal mental processes. They play a fundamental role with respect to the way in which human beings interact with reality. Skill-based training often uses repetition; this allows students to gradually improve their performance levels in terms of speed, precision and fluidity. As a result, performance skills become more and more automatic. Competences include, among other things, metacognition, since only those who are able to reflect on their knowledge and skills and who know how to apply them and combine them creatively within variable contexts can be defined as competent individuals. In the workplace the centrality assumed by the concept of professional competence has led to a distortion of the consolidated methods of understanding the qualifications, the performances and the relative ways of evaluating and certifying them. The diplomas and qualifications reveal little in relation to his behavior in a work context, where competences come into play. It is therefore necessary to analyze both the knowledge and past experiences, but also the capacities currently expressible and attitudes. It can be said that the skills are that set of skills necessary for the exercise of a working activity and the mastery of knowledge-based behaviors (knowledge and know-how) and attitudes (knowing how to be).

It is therefore possible to analyze the competence under two different aspects that depend on the aims with which we want to analyze human resources. Evaluating the first aspect, the guiding principle is to discover competency profiles that correlate to the highest performances, where the content and parameters of the desired performance are given. In other words, competence is given by knowledge and skills which, on the basis of previous experience, seem to be able to ensure specific levels of quality in the exercise of any profession of reference and are taken as indicators of a predictive model of future performances. To support these analyses, the solution is to build lists of the possible contents of the competences, from which the level of motivation and involvement at work can be deduced (autonomy, reliability, planning skills)

A second aspect of evaluation is that of analyzing work competences in a contextualized way, starting from the assumption that the knowledge applicable in the concrete work activity, constitute a large part of the competences that a subject can and must express. The purpose in this case is to trace the contours of the skills needed for a given task, and to develop a model of performing competence, which however does not say much about the motivational level of the subject.

### **3 RESULTS**

In light of these considerations, it is clear that there is a strong link between the motivational orientation of the students and the results that follow in terms of learning, and that the pupil's experience in individual as well as social terms plays an important role. In this regard, Stipek [5] analyzes different motivational models and researches, highlighting the importance in determining a good level of motivation in the teachers of teachers' instructional decisions, such as the proposed tasks, the evaluation, the awards or punishments made in place, the autonomy promoted etc. Success or failure are therefore not attributable to the individual, but to the components of the situation itself; we must not forget, in fact, that the level

of motivation is directly proportional to the bonuses that are received from outside, and it is therefore fundamental that the training also becomes a pretext to reinforce the subject.

It is necessary to ask, for example, how the lesson is performed in the classroom, how a negative judgment is perceived, whether there is competition or cooperation between colleagues. Experimentally, for example, the scholars Lepper, Greene and Nisbett [6] have shown that in an "unexpected" reward situation the subjects perform better than the reward situations; theories on motivation for competence have recently focused on the concept of "expectation of success" and on the perception of self-efficacy. According to many authors, the expectation about their effectiveness, or the estimate we make of the probability of being successful, is linked to: past performance; for which one would already know how to face a certain situation if behind it there is the memory of such an experience, and one would also be more motivated to continue if that experience was lived in a positive way, to the experience by "proxy", consisting of the successes of others, encouragement, or reinforcements that we can receive from the outside. These variables would allow, according to the theory of competence, to have a certain perception of reality and to cognitively estimate the level of success / failure of each situation.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Competence is understood as an emotional and motivational meaning of evaluation of the expectations that the individual builds on his own adaptive abilities and therefore what the subject thinks of himself and on his own abilities to get involved and adapt to the environment; it is the ability to develop skills and knowledge in a context. It is the representation that an individual makes through interaction with the environment. The concept of self is articulated in various specific dimensions that differ and change with age and which are accompanied by an overall value of the self. Self-esteem can be identified with the global value of the self (*self-worth*), that is the value that an individual attributes to himself as a person. Harter assumes that the child does not perceive himself as equally competent in every field of activity: the perception of competence is not a unitary trait, but differentiated in relation to some fundamental areas of the child's life. The observation of the behavior of children at school has made it possible to identify, in particular, three areas of competence: Cognitive competence, which concerns activity and academic performance. Social competence, which concerns relationships with peers. Physical competence, which concerns sporting activity.

The motivation of competence is linked to the free experimentation of the environment in its different parts and to other aspects linked to the intrinsic need to acquire mastery and control of the situation (from motivation to self-esteem, a fundamental element to work on). The individual's relationship with success or failure plays an important role in motivation. The child learns to use a self-gratification system through positive reinforcement, his own attempts at mastering, the affirmative signals given by parents and teachers, the independence of the behavior shown. During the attempts of mastery the motivation of competence increases. The priority task of the teacher is to define the goals that enable the student to have an optimal challenge in front of him. Since intrinsic motivation is rooted in our biological history, feeling capable, feeling of succeeding produces a sense of pleasure much older and deeper than that stimulated by incentives or external reinforcements [7]. The child who learns through pleasure and fun, who is passionate, will tend to seek new learning, new experiences of competence on the contrary, without emotions and without fun it becomes difficult to learn and the only way to remember information is to use systems conscious (repetitions, patterns, review) as long as the data is fixed in the head but with great effort. The secret of intrinsic motivation is therefore revealed: motivation produces commitment and by committing ourselves we become better, and our sense of competence or sense of self-efficiency increase. Feeling competent is a source of pleasure and positive emotions. The increased sense of competence produces a new pleasure giving rise to a virtuous motivational circle, something that stimuli or forms of external manipulation are not able to produce. Motivation as a multidimensional and dynamic construct represents an important element for the development of competence in that it leads to action and the achievement of certain objectives. Therefore without motivation there is no competence. Evaluating skills also means understanding in which direction to put one's efforts and therefore where to orient one's motivation. Motivation, the subjective dimension of competence, implies giving meaning and value to the objective pursued, therefore an authentic motivational state must be recognized as a real competence.

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