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The relationship between school performance and students' mentality towards school tasks accomplishment. Preliminary study.

Valerica Anghelache*

„Dunărea de Jos” University, Teacher Training Department, Street Gării, Galați, 800003, Romania

Abstract

In the specialized literature the issue regarding mentality is analysed in correlation with attitudes. If attitudes regard the individual level, mentalities are characteristic of the community. An attitude may be interpreted as a dimension of personality, reflected in an individual's behaviour towards others, or certain situations. On these lines, the research aims at discussing the issue of the Romanian students' mentality towards school tasks. The study is based on an cvasiexperimental research conducted on a lot of 200 subjects, students from “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, Romania. The results proves that, generally, students retrospect differently to school tasks: some lay stress on the involvement for successful educational outcomes, while others believe that success can be achieved in other ways as well.

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1. Introduction

The efforts of educators and psychologists to understand the mechanisms which trigger school performance are increasing. This concernment is fully justified nowadays, when the youth's tendency to evade the rules, to acquire success by any means, with minimum of effort is clearly noticeable. For this reason alone, the reflection upon the significance of education and study for each one of us, but also for students is more and more important. The way in which students understand to use the time they spend at the university and to engage themselves in tasks accomplishment may influence their academic performance.

Generally speaking, mentality can be discussed in correlation with attitude. At the attitudinal level we find cognitive processes, but also affective and conative ones. It prepossesses to action, it motivates (the conative aspect) based on information concerning the situation, the event, the object or the person in question (the cognitive aspect), which will be agreed or disagreed upon (the affective aspect).

The possibility to act for or against a situation makes the element differentiating the attitude from the rest of the manifestations of the personality dependant on the latter's bipolarity. An attitudinal continuum is established between the two extremes, individuals choosing an attitude more or less pro or against. This is, otherwise, the principle governing the construction of various attitudinal scales. For example, it is easy to figure that students'

*^a Tel.: + 40 722163254

E-mail address: vali_ang@yahoo.fr

passivity towards learning is generated by their belief that performance is easy to acquire, with the mere memorization of information taught. At the opposite pole, the attitude of active engagement is characteristic to those students who perceive the importance of the initiative and of the critical reference towards information.

The relationship between attitude and performance is emphasized by Tuckman's research (1999). He proposes a pattern of stimulating motivation for acquiring performance. This pattern is based on three basic variables:

- The attitudes or beliefs that individuals have in connection with themselves, with their abilities, as well as the factors they see as important for acquiring results.
- The wish to attain an end, based upon the value each individual ascribes it for oneself.
- The strategies or techniques that individuals use to acquire the ends they aim at.

The results we obtained confirmed the old theories and proved that attitude, aim and strategies are interdependent, contributing to the stimulation of the motivation for school accomplishment. Without attitude, there is no reason to believe that the individual is capable of acting to achieve performance and, consequently, no reason to attempt at this either. Also, in want of a vision, an aim or a wish, the human being has no energy to act. Without a strategy, selecting and orientations of the necessary actions are not possible.

The engagement exists if the motivation has a high social value for the individuals. In this respect, the teachers should strive to stimulate the students' attitudes or mentalities to get involved in school tasks accomplishment. The students' appropriation of learning strategies is also necessary.

There are nowadays various didactic materials and strategies for raising motivation for success, but the most essential aspect is related to making the actions effective and to the unitary approach of motivation, aim and strategies. Each of the variables presented by Tuckman supports the statement that each of them has a significant influence upon the motivation for academic performance.

It is also important to acknowledge the students' motivation for learning for a better projecting of the education objectives, for reshaping the contents of learning and the strategies of teaching and learning. Although the didactic experience shows us that the students with an optimal level of motivation acquire performance in most cases, there are various studies that emphasize the relativity of this experience. For example, Francis, A. et al (2004) remark that the relationship between motivation and academic performance is still ambiguous and it can be determined only with constant observation of the students. The authors' conclusions come as a result of a research study on the impact of a programme of stimulating students' motivation for learning upon the academic performance. The results gathered are inconclusive. Hence, although there were some isolated cases in which the students increased their performance, the general tendency was insignificant. The significant correlation between the study programme and the students' increasing motivation was, on the other hand, noticeable.

Lavasani, M.G. et al. (2011) proved that self-regulation of the learning strategies has a positive and significant impact upon self-efficiency and academic motivation. The researches stressed that the students who had learnt how to learn acquired better results, which also had an impact in the increased level of study motivation. They were also more active in the learning process: they set definite goals, they improved their individual learning strategies, made correlations of information, and learnt to readjust their study schedule.

There is only a reasonable correlation between the academic success and the self-ordering of the learning process, state Chou & Chen (2008). After six quantitative studies had been conducted, the results were inconclusive. There was a single case which stressed a significant correlation between the self-ordering of the learning and performance. Yet, it was clearly observable that students' performance could be correlated with the learning environment, student's own system of learning, time they allocate to study, quality of the didactic materials etc.

However, various researches support the correlation between the engagement in task accomplishment and students' academic performance. The lack of engagement may be due to poverty or dissatisfaction with school. Thus, the longitudinal researches on child development conducted in the 2003 by Willms, J. suggest that there is a set of risk factors for children when they start school: poverty, temperamental type, cognitive issues, learning disabilities, physical or mental impairment etc.

A significant issue tackled in this study is the social and economic status of the school. Willms claims that it has an impact upon the students' engagement level in learning activity and this impact is increasing when familiar environment adds. Students coming from under-privileged environments who go to a school which does not provide them sufficient motivation do not acquire performance.

These results were confirmed by Amrai, K. and Motlagh, S.E. (2011). They conducted a research aiming at emphasizing the relationship between motivation and academic performance of the students of the University of

Tehran. The results they obtained indicated a positive and statistically significant correlation between students' motivation and their respective academic performance. Elements such as: engaging in tasks accomplishment, effort, competition, and social context have a positive and significant impact upon school success. Generally speaking, the students who consider tasks dignifying and valuable are more preoccupied and more engaged in completing intellectual tasks. Also, when students value learning, it has a positive impact upon self-discipline and self-efficiency.

The analysis of numerous researches conducted by experts from various countries, and their respective outcomes made us initialize a research related to the relationship between the Romanian students' school performance and the level of their engagement in academic tasks accomplishment. We must state that when speaking of academic tasks we have in view mainly those activities related to individual learning.

2. The design of the research

2.1. Objectives and hypotheses

The research has aimed primarily at *making a point out of students' mentality towards learning*, being well-known that not all of them regard school tasks involving this activity as relevant. In order to make this objective operational, we have started from the *hypothesis that students' school performance is directly related to their attitude towards learning*.

2.2. Methodology (participants, tools, procedure)

During our research, we relied on the pedagogical experiment method, while the statistical processing was realised with the help of the SPSS16 software. Mention should be made that this was an empirical research that did not have in sight any experimental manipulation. The research was conducted between November 2011 and February 2012 on a group of 200 subjects, students at various faculties of the „Dunărea de Jos” University from Galați (Romania). According to the performance criterion, the group is made up of 100 students who benefit from stipends and 100 who do not. The average age of the subjects is 27.7 years old. Throughout our research, we had in sight the following variables:

- students' school performance (school success)
- students' mentality towards learning.

In order to determine the students' attitude towards learning, we made up the questionnaire “Mentality towards learning”. The initial tool consisted in 27 items and it was pre-tested on 65 subjects. After analysing the items with Cronbach-Alpha method, we eliminated 7 items. In order to check the content validity of the questionnaire, we relied on the experts method. The questionnaire was given to 7 experts, graduates from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, asking them to evaluate the degree to which the questionnaire items are relevant for determining the students' attitude towards learning. All items have been considered to be relevant.

In order to check the factorial validity, we applied the factorial analysis method for reducing the items to one factor. The results proved that when one factor was extracted, the variant it explained out of the total of the variants of the items was 37.60%, therefore, the questionnaire, considered as unidimensional, has a fairly good factorial validity.

The final version of the questionnaire consists in 20 items. The questionnaire has been subsequently applied on a number of 200 subjects, students at various faculties of the “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați. The subjects scoring low in this questionnaire are described as having a favorable attitude towards school tasks accomplishment and learning in general. The checking for the scale validity was carried out with the internal consistency method, determining the Cronbach-Alpha fidelity quotient, i.e., $\alpha = 0,74$. Consequently the questionnaire has a good fidelity.

2.3. Data analysis, results

In order to check whether there are significant differences between the students who have school performance and those who do not have it in what mentality towards learning is concerned, we applied the t test for independent samples, the results being depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. The results of the t test for comparing the averages for the variable *mentality towards learning* in accordance with the *school performance* variable

Variables	n	M	SD	t	df	p
Mentality towards learning				2,042	198	0,042
Students with school performance	100	4.9392	.50872			
Students with no school performance	100	4.7989	.46196			

Analysing the results gathered, we observe significant differences in accordance with the school performance in what students' mentality towards learning is concerned [$t(198) = 2,042$, $p < 0,05$]. Thus, the students who have school performance score averagely higher on mentality towards learning ($M_1 = 4.9$) than those with no school performance ($M_2 = 4.7$).

Also, in order to check the influence of the performance variable upon the mentality towards learning variable, we applied the ANOVA One-Way method (table 2).

Table 2. The influence of *school performance* variable upon *mentality towards learning* variable

ANOVA					
Mentality towards learning					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.977	1	.977	4.171	.042
Within Groups	46.385	198	.234		
Total	47.362	199			

Analysing the results, we notice significant differences between groups in what the manifestation of mentality towards learning is concerned [$F(1, 198) = 4,171$, $p = 0,042$ ($p < 0,05$)].

3. Discussion and conclusions

We must remind that the objective of the research targeted the pinpointing the mentality towards learning in the case of the students of the „Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați (Romania) and that our initial hypothesis established that school performance is directly correlated with the students' attitude towards learning.

When school performance was sighted, we had in mind primarily the results students got during examinations, which allowed them to be granted stipends. In this context, we dealt with two categories of students: those benefiting from stipends and those who are not. The results we obtained confirm the truth value of the hypothesis, in that there is a statistically significant correlation between students' school performance (in the sense we had in view) and their mentality towards learning / studying. Thus, stipendiary students consider that in order to be successful while at faculty, one should study a lot, and they condemn superficiality. They also associate the results with the quantity of work they put in for and with the amenity of knowledge. They take on supplementary tasks and do not give up when they encounter a failure.

At the opposite pole, students with modest academic performance consider they can attain success in different ways, without studying too much. For them, the status of being a student is much more important than the effort required to maintain this status and to acquire performance. Moreover, in their case we can talk of a certain conditioning of engagement with obtaining performance. They do not take on extra tasks and favour routine tasks.

We must state that this is a preliminary study. We did not have in sight at this point to make all the possible correlations. Moreover, we targeted the formal tasks and performance exclusively, which may be regarded as insufficient. The research is in progress and will target a greater number of subjects and the results will provide a wider perspective upon this issue.

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