



## **Learning Motivation in High School Students and the Impact of Physical Education on Students' Academic Performance – a Teachers' Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Nowadays high school students have a low level of learning motivation. This study aimed to assess the opinion of high school teachers regarding their perception of the level of motivation of high school students, using the questionnaire method. The questionnaire consists of 14 questions, applied to 52 teachers, balanced in terms of the social environment of the school (rural or urban) and heterogeneous in terms of experience and curricular area to which the teachers in the target group belong. The survey aims to highlight their personal opinion formed by observing the students in terms of motivation, causes of lack of motivation, and possible solutions, to improve their performance. Data was collected through a Google questionnaire and subsequently analysed. The surveyed teachers noticed a constant decrease over time in the level of learning motivation among high school students, considering it to be a real educational hazard. There are multiple causes for this matter, and the applied solutions must be individualized depending on the learning contexts and the group psychological profile of the class.*

**Key words:** Academic performance; high school; motivation for learning; physical education; students; teachers

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## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, it is often circulated the idea that the current generations, whether we are talking about Generation X, Generation Y (also known as the millennials), or Generation Z, are difficult to motivate (Morell, 2019). Moreover, it is difficult to maintain an adequate level of motivation for a longer period, regardless of whether it is education or profession. The motivation to make a constant effort to educate oneself today contradicts several "axioms" promoted in society: you don't need to learn, you can find the answer to everything on Google; fun is most important; even if you have a degree, you end up in a poorly-paid job; it is not important to have certificates, what you can do is what really matters, and so on.

The issue of motivation for learning is not a new one. In his study, Bishop shows that lack of motivation has multiple sources, in school and out of school (Bishop, 1988). Inadequate or non-existent infrastructure, poor financial resources, lack of concern on the part of parents and teachers, certain trends among teenagers, as well as lack of recognition may lead to absenteeism and lack of engagement on the part of students. One important influence factor for improving learning motivation is the teacher-student relationship, as revealed in another study (Pedditz & Spigno, 2012). The study shows that if the student is well integrated into the educational environment, he/she engages in regular examination situations and has a good relationship with the teacher. Moreover, the student is motivated to achieve higher performances in the academic field. Sevil et al. (2016) highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation in improving one's physical activity with moderate to vigorous intensity, to achieve a good quality of life, personal well-being, and integral development. Lack of learner motivation is a concern for teachers because motivation is the "motion vector" for reaching academic accomplishment. More than this, today's youth have a passive attitude toward learning in general and physical exercise, in particular.

Struggling with these shortcomings is a Sisyphean process that can lead the teacher, at some point, to give up on the energetic promotion of his/her endeavor, divert him/ her from his/her goals, and, worst of all, lead him to adopt these "laws" himself, so that, alongside the student, the teacher is fighting a continuous battle both with those around and within himself/herself. Education is an important aspect in the life of every human being, and this chapter does not close once a certain age is reached, but accompanies the human being throughout life. The whole process of adapting to changing conditions in society depends on the individual's ability to learn throughout life. The theory and pedagogical practice revealed the existence of two categories of conditions that, through their interaction, lead to successful learning (Dimitriu & Dimitriu, 2004): the internal conditions of learning are those related to the biological and psychological factors characteristic of an individual; the external conditions of learning include specific socio-cultural conditions, ergonomic factors, the family and social environment, and the quality of teacher-student interaction.

Motivation is probably the most important internal dimension, which has the role of supporting the various mental processes and the activation of some capacities that the individual possesses. There are various motivation theories on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors targeting performance with a focus on intrinsic motivation (Teixeira et al., 2012). Williams and Williams (2011, p.105) argue that the "key ingredients impacting student motivation are: student, teacher, content, method/process, and environment". On the other hand, the psychologist Henry Alexander Murray who identified the causes underlying human behavior, has highlighted three important motivational factors (Sălăvăstru, 2004): the need for achievement, which determines human behavior aimed at performance, success in what one undertakes; the need to belong to a certain human group, based on some criteria; the need for power, which includes the desire to dominate, to hold authority.

The most intense studies have approached the need for achievement. Psychologists John W. Atkinson and David C. McClelland investigated how this need manifests itself, formulating a definition (Sălăvăstru, 2004) that says that motivation "is the aspiration to achieve, in a

competition, a goal according to standards of excellence." This definition came due to the findings they had following the application of some projective tests, the results of which showed that when the individual is aware that his actions will be compared to some standards, and the results are subject to assessments, the need to achieve will be felt more strongly. Their team was also able to identify several factors that influence the level at which the need for achievement will be felt: the strength of the motive; probability of success; the attractiveness of the performance. Put together, these factors generate a synergistic effect, which causes the individual to identify and capitalize on the energy and creativity necessary to achieve the intended goal.

The data obtained from the research undertaken showed that there are several similar characteristics in people who have this need. They seek tasks that they believe can be accomplished, are of medium difficulty, are realistic, and rational, and analyse situations very carefully, choosing to engage in those they believe they can plan and control, have self-control, and manage to delay the moment of reward, but need to know the level at which their actions have been evaluated and appreciated. Taking into account those conclusions, another study conducted on a group of students from a German university (Grund, Galla & Fries, 2022) highlighted that "even self-reported fear of failure may be a substantial predictor of momentary negative activation in everyday life". Adequately deriving the definition of motivation, it can be stated that the motivation for learning is given by the totality of the mobiles that energetically support, activate, and direct the development of learning activities (Cace, 2007, p. 86). Thus, in the activities intended for learning, two categories of motivational elements may be distinguished, and grouped according to the positioning of the source they come from:

- intrinsic motivation, which groups reasons, factors, and stimuli that come from the student's internal sources, when he/she is directly interested in acquiring new knowledge, skills, and competences, and this fact also stems from the attractiveness of educational activities, when the student engages in them, when he/she feels that he/she is becoming more complete and more competitive as a result of his efforts. Intrinsic motivation feeds with predilection from epistemic curiosity, i.e. the feeling that they need to know, as a general framework of manifestation;
- extrinsic motivation, has its origin outside the individual, when knowing is no longer an end in itself, the attitude towards learning is determined by short-term goals, usually materialized in certain benefits, rewards that the student can receive from parents, family, teachers, school, these being the mobile of learning and not education in itself, approached as a field in which one can achieve self-fulfillment. In this case, the satisfaction of knowing, of being competent, and experiencing curiosity and emotion does not appear, learning is done without inner pleasure, without attractiveness, being accompanied many times by less desirable experiences, such as fear in general and fear of failure in particular.

Intrinsic motivation may be developed by specific strategies that can be used in the classroom to enhance the student's motivation on 6 dimensions (Alderman, Beighle & Pangrazi, 2006, p. 45):

- task - Various levels of difficulty of the activities in the classroom;
- authority – students' responsibility for their own choices;
- recognition – positive feedback and focus on self-improvement;
- grouping – discourage grouping based on peer comparison and encourage students to find new partners frequently;
- evaluation – focus students on self-evaluation to achieve self-improvement;
- timing – maximize the time allotted for learning and practicing skills, individualized instructions, and practice sessions.

The pedagogical practice has demonstrated that the student can access both sources of motivation, the intrinsic as well as the extrinsic, depending on several factors such as personal interest in a certain field of study, but also the rewards he/she could receive from parents or other

people, the pleasure of attending a certain teacher's classes, but also the advantages such as a leading place in a competition, prizes in goods or money, offered by the school or the authorities.

In the area of physical exercise and physical education in school, the situation is the same (Oprescu, 2021). Being sedentary at the computer or on the phone is preferred, and the weight loss diet is preferred, which is not healthy, especially at the age of adolescence, when the body needs all the nutrients to mature harmoniously, the importance of movement is minimized, in a world globally affected by obesity and serious metabolic, cardiac, respiratory and body posture diseases. Practicing physical exercise among adolescents enrolled in lower or upper secondary school has become either a chore or a reason for skipping classes. The importance of the teacher's role is highlighted in many studies, that showed the teacher's influence in the engagement of students (Lila, 2016). The teacher's didactic strategies combined with constant support and encouragement give more positive results to motivate students and support them in becoming more resilient. Moreover, improved environmental factors can lead to better engagement in classes (Cools, De Frère & Caplin, 2023), music being one of these. The study showed that music can raise enthusiasm, engagement, and intrinsic motivation to participate in Physical education class activities. The difficulty of motivating young people and persuading them to practice movement in an organized way, especially in school, where they have no additional costs for it, is extremely difficult because they are unable to project the results they will achieve over time, they record large gaps in the area of intrinsic motivation, and the elements of immediate motivation are extremely few. Some studies showed that the hours of extracurricular physical activities are a factor strongly correlated with the emotional and motivational experience in the Physical education classes (Fierro-Suero, Fernández-Ozcorta & Sáenz-López, 2022).

Nowadays, in the educational environment, there is a general concern that students of all ages are affected by a trend of decreasing levels of motivation to take part in educational processes, for involvement and performance. Moreover, the transfer of the motivational center can be observed, from the inside of the individual to the outside, although the experts' opinion is that extrinsic motivation is not permanent in the long term. In this sense, we initiated an investigation, using a questionnaire made up of 14 questions, either with a multiple-choice answer or with a short answer, to more easily process and transform them into numerical indicators, for analysis and conclusions.

The study aims to investigate the opinions that teachers in public general secondary education have based on their teaching experience and their level of training in the field of expertise. This investigation is useful to establish a framework in which these opinions are valued, so that, based on them, a series of intervention tools can be identified to improve the level of motivation and the performances achieved by students, both in the subjects of the curriculum and in extracurricular activities. The study is based on the following concerns, reflected in the applied questionnaire:

- What is the teachers' general opinion regarding the level of motivation among students these days?
- Are there any differences regarding the level of motivation according to the students' background and the profile to which the students are enrolled?
- What is the influence of social trends on education?
- Can we identify solutions to raise students' level of learning motivation?
- What is the teachers' opinion about the need to reform the education system?
- Is Physical Education a discipline that can significantly impact the student's overall performance?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The investigated group comprised 52 teaching staff, with an equal share regarding the environment in which they carry out their activity, respectively urban/rural. Also, the group of teaching staff consists of teachers with different specializations and seniority at the department, but the vast majority have more than 10 years of teaching length of service. Table I includes the structure of the target group, according to the following criteria: the environment in which the school unit is located; the teaching length of service of the teaching staff; the curricular area to which they belong.

**Table 1.** The structure of the targeted teachers' group

The environment in which the school is located		Length of service			Curricular area %					
Rural %	Urban %	<5 years %	5-10 years %	> 10 years %	Physical education	Language and literature	Mathematics and sciences	Humanities	Arts	Technologies
50	50	10	30	60	65	5	15	0	5	10

### 2.2. Research methods and instruments

For this investigation, a 14-item questionnaire was used, with multiple choice or open answers, depending on the type of information expected. We have designed a questionnaire that includes the following questions:

Question no. 1. In your opinion, nowadays is there a problem with students' learning motivation?

Question no. 2. If so, what do you think are the reasons?

Question no. 3. Do you think that the student's performance is directly proportional to his/her level of motivation?

Question no. 4. If your answer to question no. 6 was affirmative, what solutions have you found to get students to activate their resources to achieve higher academic results in the subject you teach?

Question no. 5. Do you think the social trends that exist today influence student achievement?

Question no. 6. Have you noticed any differences between the level of motivation in students enrolled in classes with a real profile and those enrolled in classes with a human profile?

Question no. 7. Have you noticed differences between the level of motivation in students from rural areas and those from urban areas?

Question no. 8. Do you think that the educational system needs to be reformed also from the perspective of improving the perception of the benefits of Physical Education among the younger generations?

Question no. 9. Do you think that the time dedicated to Physical Education (1 hour/week or 2 hours/week, depending on the study profile) is enough for students to build good motor skills?

Question no. 10. Do you think that the current Curriculum for the subject of Physical Education is adequate to the current educational needs?

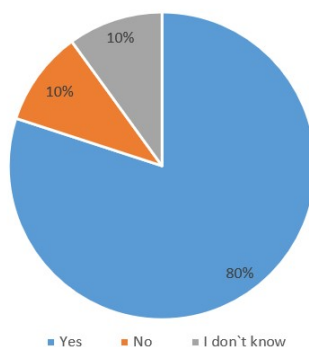
Question no. 11. Do you think that boosting motivation in Physical Education classes can lead to an overall increase in school performance for the student?

### **2.3. Procedure**

The questionnaire was applied and completed by 52 teachers, out of which 50% work in rural areas and 50% in urban areas. The data collected was statistically processed and interpreted. The questionnaire was applied online, due to the restrictive measures of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic. This way of application also has the advantage of facilitating its processing and obtaining statistical output data.

### **3. Results**

Question no. 1 refers to the subject of the investigation: motivation for studying and its level in high school students. The fact that we are facing a real problem regarding the existing level of students' motivation to study is clear for 80% of the teachers surveyed, the percentage being self-obvious. In equal proportions, of 10%, the respondents opined that no, it does not exist or that they cannot figure it out (Figure 1).



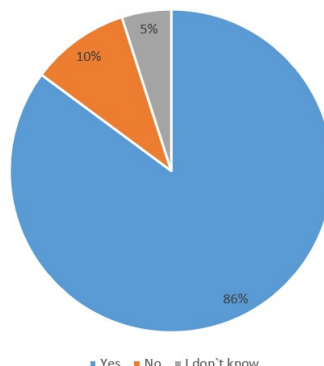
**Figure 1.** The percentage distribution of teachers' answers to Question no. 1. In your opinion, nowadays, is there a problem with students' learning motivation?

Question no. 2 is a short-answer question designed to collect respondents' views on the causes that generate such a generalized lack of motivation. From the answers collected, it is clear that there is no single cause, the lack of motivation being the result of the action of a multitude of reasons, among which we list:

- the deep penetration of digital technologies in human life;
- the lack of direct rewards;
- the lack of resources in general;
- the lack of recognition of merits;
- the acute lack of models and values in society;
- the lack of support and positive family influence;
- the lack of a well-structured value system that is also accepted by society;
- social trends.

To question no. 3, a simple question with multiple answers, the respondent had to choose an answer based on their opinion: is the student's performance proportional to his motivation level? Of course, educational psychology offers us a theoretical answer, but years of direct

observation in the classroom can confirm, sometimes even deny theoretical formulations. Thus, 85% of those surveyed answered that this fact is certain: the level of motivation and performance are directly related (Figure 2).

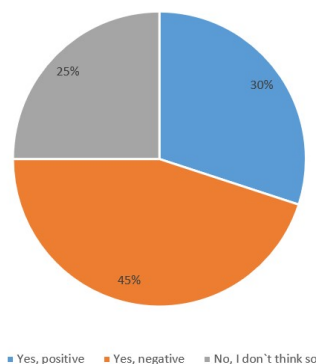


**Figure 2.** The percentage distribution of teachers' answers to Question no. 3. Do you think that the student's performance is directly proportional to his/her level of motivation?

An optimal level of motivation leads to obtaining a good school performance. The respondents who have not formulated an opinion in this regard are 10%, and those who believe that the level of performance is not determined by the student's motivation level amount to 5%. We believe that the major problem would not be actually the motivation of the student, but achieving an optimal level of motivation and maintaining this level in the long term. From personal observations I may argue that, without issuing a rule, in general, teenagers get excited easily and try to take on different tasks, but they get bored just as easily and copy negative examples more easily (colleagues who flunk, who avoid taking on and completing tasks, promoting the view that this is *cool*), than positive examples. Sometimes there is also a certain type of bullying: the tendency to marginalize and possibly humiliate those who constantly strive, are conscientious, and achieve satisfactory results.

Question no. 4, a short-answer question, is intended to highlight the teaching experience regarding the motivational tools used by colleagues, to increase its level in high school students. When asked about these ways of increasing motivation, respondents testified that immediate rewards work. Reference was made to badges, diplomas, and general recognition from the school, but also rewards from the community, where local administrations offer cash prizes to the best students and those with very good results in important school competitions. Some colleagues also resort to changing the work routine in class, including informal activities such as quizzes, competitions between classes or between groups in the same class, and watching and debating motivational materials. It also seems that guiding the student towards looking at himself/herself objectively and self-evaluating as accurately as possible can prove successful, provided that through his/her correct positioning in the social group the student belongs to, he/she can also perceive the aspects he/she still needs to work on and can activate his/her desire to improve these aspects. A less accessible tool, perhaps, but with results, also seems to be the use of testimonials from former students, who can attend a class and give advice to younger colleagues. Such a discussion can prove beneficial because the advice comes not from an adult teacher, but from a former colleague, a member of the same social group, and holder of similar experiences.

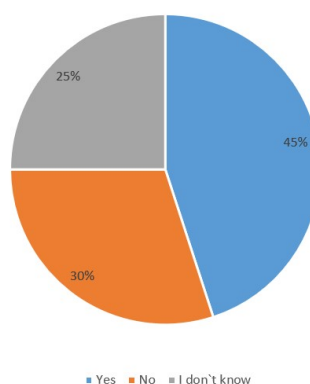
Question no. 5 refers to the influence of social trends on the level of motivation and therefore on the level of performance achieved by the student. The question is a multiple-choice one and 45% of the respondents stated that there is a certain, but negative, influence of the trends that are manifested in society, on the level of the student's performance in school (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The percentage distribution of teachers' answers to Question no. 5. Do you think the social trends that exist today influence student achievement?

It should be noted, however, that 30% of those who participated in the investigation believe that these trends have a positive influence, and 25% do not believe that there is any connection between the way society evolves and the academic results obtained by the student. The scores obtained in this item are relatively close, but the opinion that social influences negatively affect the level of student performance seems to dominate among teachers who teach in high school.

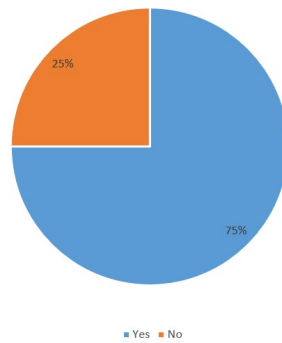
The investigation continued with question no. 6, which is intended to clarify whether there is a difference in the level of motivation between students enrolled in the science profile and those enrolled in the humanities profile. Each teacher develops his/her sense of observation and intuition over time, which allows him/her to approach each class differently, depending on the specifics of the personality of the respective group, to adapt his/her methods and approach to lessons according to specific factors. In this case, too, it is difficult to detect a firm trend; we notice that 45% of the respondents noticed differences regarding motivation between the science and humanities profile classes, a close percentage (30%) did not notice this, and the remaining 25% say that they do not know, probably they did not look at the problem from this perspective (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The percentage distribution of the teachers' answers to Question no. 6. Have you noticed any differences between the level of motivation in students enrolled in classes with a real profile and those enrolled in classes with a human profile?

Given that in high schools in the county, students come from both urban and rural environments, the investigation also wanted to show if there are differences in motivation that may be the result of the influence of the student's environment. This aspect was addressed by question no. 7 (Figure 5).

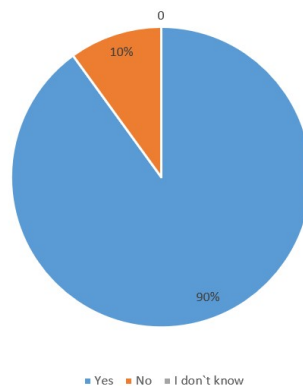




**Figure 5.** The percentage distribution of teachers' answers to Question no. 7. Have you noticed differences between the level of motivation in students from rural areas and those from urban areas?

The vast majority of respondents (75%) noticed clear differences between the level of motivation of students from the rural environment and those from the urban environment, only 25% being of the opinion that the environment of origin does not influence the level of motivation of the students. We have to note that students from rural areas make an extra effort, either by commuting, which reduces their free time or study time, or by additional expenses to ensure accommodation during high school studies, and this fact could increase the level the motivation needed to achieve results similar to colleagues from the urban environment. Regarding the benefits of practicing physical exercise in an organized way, during Physical Education classes, we have often debated this, either informally, in the classroom or with the teaching staff, or formally, through various articles or interventions. The benefits we are referring to are reflected not only in the physical tonus and health but also in the performances that the student can have in any field in which he/she decides to activate. Educating patience, work discipline, and above all, building motivation are factors that have a positive impact on the individual's quality of life.

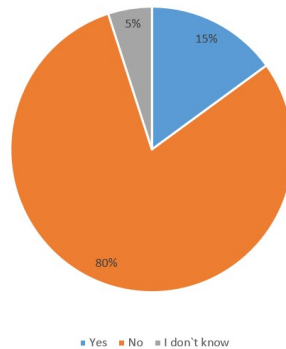
I asked colleagues to express their opinion, if they believe that the system should be reformed, including from the perspective of improving the perception of the benefits of Physical Education (question no. 8). Thus, 90% of the respondents believed that the system must be reformed and rethought, so that the young generations are open to practicing physical exercise, both as a way to improve their physical condition and as a tool of reducing stress, increasing their well-being, of ensuring good health, both physically and psychologically.



**Figure 6.** The percentage distribution of teachers' answers to Question no. 8. Do you think that the educational system needs to be reformed also from the perspective of improving the perception of the benefits of Physical Education among the younger generations?

Only 10% consider that they do not have enough information to express a strong opinion (Figure 6).

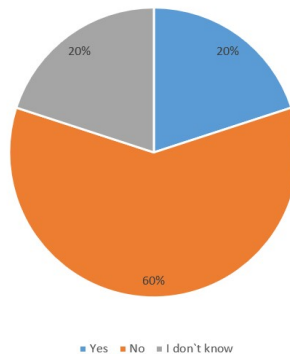
Question no. 9 is intended to reflect the teachers' opinion regarding the sufficiency of time dedicated to Physical Education (1 hour or 2 hours weekly, in the core curriculum, depending on the study profile), for the acquisition of good motor skills. An hour or 2 hours a week is insufficient, especially from the perspective of WHO indications in this regard (minimum 30 minutes daily), so Physical Education classes can only create some healthy habits and encourage the student to do more. Thus, 80% of respondents (Figure 7) believe that the time dedicated to Physical Education is insufficient for acquiring good motor skills, and only 15% believe that an hour or 2 hours per week is enough and can provide satisfactory results. Only 5% do not know, they have not formed a clear opinion.



**Figure 7.** The percentage distribution of teachers' answers to Question no. 9. Do you think that the time dedicated to Physical Education (1 hour/week or 2 hours/week, depending on the study profile) is enough for students to build good motor skills?

Reforming the system and the curriculum has been on the agenda for a very long time, but so far, no important steps have been taken in this regard so that the student has a harmonious development both from an intellectual and a physical point of view.

Question no. 10 investigated this very fact, i.e. the level of suitability of the program in the Physical Education subject to the current educational needs. To this question, 60% of the teachers who expressed their opinion reported that the current curriculum in the subject of Physical Education is not adequate for the current needs, when the tendency is to be sedentary, to avoid physical effort, and to accept activities that do not demand the student's physical resources (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** The percentage distribution of teachers' answers to Question no. 10. Do you think that the current Curriculum for the subject of Physical Education is adequate to the current educational needs?

In equal proportions, 20%, of the respondents' opinions were either yes, the curriculum is adequate, or they do not know, they do not have a clear opinion in this regard.

Regarding the ability of the Physical Education subject to generate long-lasting motivation, motivation that manifests itself not only in this subject but in general in study and education came the question that logically followed. To this question, all the teachers who participated in the investigation agreed that the development of students' motivation does not have an impact only on one of the subjects studied, but is generally reflected in the entire school performance. If we look at the problem from this perspective, it is easy to understand why students who are good in most subjects, even if they do not perform identically in all subjects. They work harder and give importance to each subject, keeping themselves at a level that allows them to approach a successful career with ease.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Analysing the results of the investigation as a whole, we can formulate a series of conclusions that we may be able to take into account in our future activity, especially after going through this difficult period of seclusion, in which all our internal, physical and mental resources were put to the test and we, students and teachers alike, had to reconsider our attitudes, style, and level of work quality, to achieve our goals. It is clear that there is a lack of motivation in today's education, but also a lack of adequate tools to increase motivation in high school students. The existing level of motivation in an individual is influenced by many factors: personal, social, environmental, and material. These factors influence each student to a different extent, but often they accumulate, the effect being a synergistic one and constituting a barrier that prevents the achievement of personal goals, of the expectations of those around, lowering self-esteem and blocking the individual in an area of minimal development.

In today's education system, the teacher does not have many tools to stimulate and increase the student's motivation level. In general, each teacher is on his own, but there are also situations where the school and the community can join forces to recognize the students' merits and reward them. The teacher can reward not only with grades. He/she can award titles, diplomas, and badges, he can vary the work routine by including some testimonial activities when he can bring former students or personalities with impact on the class, he/she can use games or activities that can increase group cohesion, games with different prizes. Videos with motivational potential can also be designed and watched.

Given that general social trends are not in a position to positively influence the student's motivation level in the area of study and education, and the environment of origin, the material condition of the family, the study profile also have a significant impact, we note that most of the teachers participating in the current investigation believe that the educational system, that is so conservative, must be reformed and aligned to the needs of the individual and society, one of these needs being health, well-being and long-term perspectives regarding quality of life. For this, one hour or two hours a week is not enough, but Physical Education needs to be treated with the same seriousness as any other subject, given that it has the potential, through the effects it can produce, to exert a beneficial influence on the general level of performance of the individual, in the short, medium and long term. For this reason, the identification and use in Physical Education class of appropriate tools to stimulate and increase motivation to practice physical exercise can only help the individual in his/her development, lead him/her to have better work discipline, to be patient in achieving the proposed goals and enjoy the results of his/her efforts.

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