

DOES THE IMPLICIT MAKE A DIFFERENCE? A STUDY ON TEACHERS IN CONTEXTS OF MARGINALITY

L'IMPLICITO FA LA DIFFERENZA? STUDIO SUI DOCENTI IN CONTESTI DI MARGINALITÀ



Double Blind Peer Review

Citation

Moccia, C.L., & Sabatano, F. (2025). Does the implicit make a difference? A study on teachers in contexts of marginality. *Giornale italiano di educazione alla salute, sport e didattica inclusiva*, 9(Suppl.1).

Doi:

https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v9i2_Sup.1549

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gsdjournal.it

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-515-3

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate teachers' implicit knowledge (Bruner, 1996) regarding student motivation in multi-problematic contexts. The hypothesis is that motivation, conceptualized as a "relational force" and "dynamic process" (Lewin, 1961), may represent an autonomous area of development, potentially resilient to environmental adversities, especially when supported by targeted educational interventions. Investigating teachers' implicit knowledge about student motivation is therefore crucial for promoting the implementation of appropriate educational practices. The research, which is part of a broader project (Moccia, Sabatano, Aiello, in press), focuses on an area in the Campania region characterized by high rates of early school leaving (INVALSI, 2023) and adopts an interactive design approach (Maxwell, 2013). Data collection involves semi-structured interviews; these interviews are subjected to qualitative analysis through MAXQDA software, employing multiple levels of coding (Maxwell, 2013).

La ricerca mira a indagare il sapere implicito (Bruner, 1996) degli insegnanti riguardo alla motivazione degli studenti in contesti multiproblematici. L'ipotesi è che la motivazione, concettualizzata come una "forza relazionale e "dinamica" (Lewin, 1961), possa rappresentare un'area autonoma di sviluppo, potenzialmente resiliente alle avversità ambientali, specialmente se supportata da interventi educativi mirati. Indagare il sapere implicito degli insegnanti è quindi importante per promuovere la motivazione dei bambini identificando pratiche educative appropriate. La ricerca, parte di un progetto più ampio (Moccia, Sabatano, Aiello, 2025), si concentra su un'area della regione Campania con un alto tasso di abbandono scolastico precoce (INVALSI, 2023) e adotta un approccio interattivo design (Maxwell, 2005, 2013). La raccolta dei dati prevede l'utilizzo di un'intervista; le interviste saranno oggetto di un'analisi qualitativa attraverso il software MAXQDA, orientata su più livelli di codifica (Maxwell, 2013).

KEYWORDS

Educational inclusion; marginality; implicit knowledge
inclusione educativa; marginalità; saperi impliciti

Received 23/06/2025

Accepted 24/07/2025

Published 30/07/2025

Introduction

Phenomenological intersubjectivity highlights how cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions are rooted in contexts of belonging through the sharing of meanings and experiences (Bertolini, 1988). From this perspective, finding sense represents an operation that consciousness does not perform abstractly, but rather through a constitutive process by which it directs itself toward what exists outside of itself, grasping one of the "thousand possible forms of the same reality" (Bertolini, 1988, p. 45). The constitutively relational character of sense reveals something fundamental about motivation as well: the driving force that originates from the sense attributed to one's actions, rather than being just an internal fact, is rooted in a movement of openness toward alterity. Within this framework, the complex relationship between motivation to study and contexts characterized by marginality and discomfort takes on particular significance in relation to the intersubjective dimension within which the subject finds themselves elaborating their own meanings.

In some contexts, intersubjectivity develops around cultural codes and subcodes that often explicitly contradict the institutional educational project. In territories characterized by high dropout rates, low employment rates, and significant presence of illegal economies, the educational action of schools must confront value systems that are alternative and antagonistic to those it promotes.

In this scenario, the ways in which teachers read and interpret student motivation also participate in this same intersubjective dynamic. If it is true that "la cultura di appartenenza costituisce una potente "teoria implicita" alla base di sistemi di aspettative e specifiche versioni del mondo" (Goodman, 2008), the representations that orient the interpretation of reality are always culturally situated and contribute to shaping the educational experience.

Often, when teachers encounter problematic behavioral manifestations, these are promptly identified as such, calling for immediate interventions. However, such interventions are not grounded in a deep interpretation of the socio-cultural, psychological, and educational roots—aspects that often remain in the shadows. Teachers' daily practice is therefore implemented uncritically, stemming either from complete unawareness of contextual dynamics or from stereotypical meanings tacitly shared by the school community

Such interpretive asymmetry may have significant consequences on students' learning processes. Educational experiences, both those explicitly designed and those implicitly conveyed through teachers' representations of student motivation,

influence self-image and perceptions of one's own possibilities for development (Kruger & Tomasello, 1996; Santoianni & Striano, 2000).

That is, when implicit theories in schools are based on reductionist interpretations of problematic behaviors, teachers may transmit to students limiting representations of their potential, in a mechanism that recalls the well-known "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Watzlawick, 2018).

Teachers' folk theories and beliefs about motivation are therefore not neutral cognitive constructions, but represent actual filters that mediate the way teachers recognize, categorize, and respond to students' motivational manifestations.

Teachers' implicit knowledge about motivation—how it manifests, which factors enhance or inhibit it—acts as a lens through which educational experience is filtered and interpreted.

This interpretive process is particularly critical in marginalized contexts, where students' motivational manifestations may take novel, contradictory, or apparently paradoxical forms that teachers fail to recognize and appreciate.

Given that motivation is not a stable, intrinsic attribute of individual students, but rather a force (Lewin, 1961) that emerges from meaningful relationships and dynamic configurations of the psychological field, teachers' implicit theories must be able to grasp this relational complexity.

For example, a teacher who interprets a student's poor academic motivation as directly resulting from the "cultural poverty" of the family and/or community environment creates a filter that prevents recognizing alternative forms of motivation that might emerge from that very socio-cultural configuration.

Based on these premises, this study aims to investigate the folk theories (Bruner, 1996) and beliefs, understood as teachers' implicit knowledge about academic motivation in contexts of disadvantage and marginality.

The hypothesis is that bringing this implicit knowledge to the surface and raising awareness of it may foster a "shift in perspective" (Sibilio et al., 2020) in teachers, capable of positively influencing educational practices and promoting more effective interventions in supporting student motivation

1. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative interactive design approach (Maxwell, 2013) and includes two phases. The first phase, currently under analysis, focuses on bringing teachers' implicit knowledge about academic motivation to the surface. The findings will then be explored further during the second phase through focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2014) with participants, with the aim of activating a shared reflection process based on the categories that emerged during the first phase

The research, which is part of a broader project (Moccia, Sabatano, Aiello, 2024), focuses on an area of the Campania region characterized by a high rate of early school leaving (INVALSI, 2023). More specifically, the context examined is one of the municipalities of the city of Naples, where multiple elements interact that could hinder processes of social emancipation and democratic participation (Freire, 1975; Dolci, 1985).

Within the research context, purposive sampling (Maxwell, 2013) was adopted, identifying all primary schools in the territory. Within the educational institutions, the invitation to participate was extended to all primary school teachers, with partial adherence determining the final sample composition. While considering that part of the literature shows that teachers' years of service is a relevant element in the structuring and evolution of teachers' knowledge (Wolff, et al. 2017), this research chose not to introduce additional selection criteria—such as years of service or specific training—that could have restricted the sample, thereby precluding access to a plurality of viewpoints and significant perspectives useful for mapping the complexity of representations about motivation in this specific territorial context.

Furthermore, while this recruitment method introduced an element of participant self-selection, it may have led to conscious and voluntary involvement of the 63 final participants.

The questions included requests for conceptualization and narrative prompts related to daily practice experience. Questions that invite teachers to describe and identify behavioral signals aim to explore how implicit knowledge about motivation manifests through ways of describing and, in some cases, interpreting lived educational experience.

It is interesting to note how some elements that emerged during the data collection phase already provided significant insights from the outset. Some teachers, despite

having initially volunteered for the research, once they reviewed the interview questions expressed skepticism about the usefulness of the instrument, arguing that answering such questions would not allow them to "cambiare la testa dei ragazzi" anyway, while still agreeing to continue with the research activities.

The coding (Maxwell, 2013) on 3 levels includes organizational, substantial, and theoretical categories. The first organizational categories identified refer to:

- Concept of academic motivation
- Motivational indicators
- Good practices and advice
- Changes in motivation

As highlighted previously, this is ongoing research; however, a first reading of the data analysis seems to reveal some points for reflection.

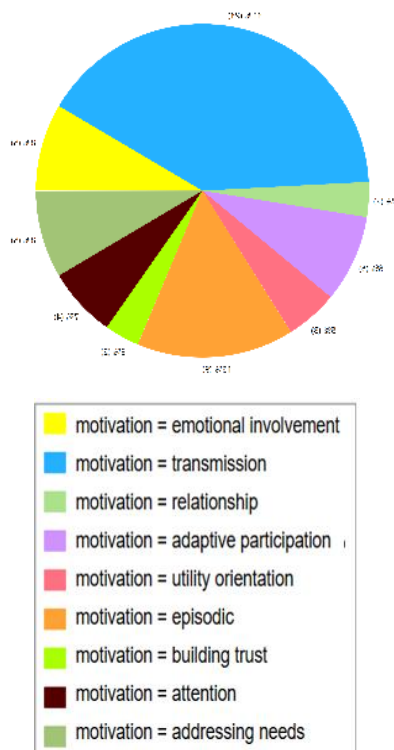


Image 1. Substantive categories of Motivation

A first significant point concerns teachers' limited reference to academic motivation as a complex and multidimensional process. The analyzed segments rarely presented code co-occurrences, revealing a certain linearity in teachers'

representations. This aspect could suggest how implicit knowledge about motivation tends to be structured around predominantly monocausal interpretations, where single factors are identified as determinants without a systemic vision of the phenomenon emerging. The limited presence of co-occurrences between different codes within the same narrative segments could indicate difficulty in grasping the interconnections between cognitive, affective, relational, and contextual dimensions that characterize motivational processes.

Furthermore, an aspect seems to emerge whereby teachers define motivation through descriptions such as "when they stay quiet and listen" or "when they participate actively," effectively replacing conceptualization of the process with observation of behaviors that could have multiple meanings. Silence, for example, could indicate both engagement and passivity, or in some cases represent the expression of genuine distress (Watzlawick, 2018).

Such simplification appears particularly problematic in contexts of socio-cultural disadvantage, where ways of expressing motivation might not correspond to the behavioral codes traditionally valued by the school institution, and where students' attention is naturally more fragmented and directed toward immediate needs (Blair et al, 2016).

31 • Motivate means to stimulate their interest, convey trust, engage students in a particular interest

32 • Allow student participation in activities and praise them even when the results are not perfect

33 • Recognize the student's efforts and actively involve them in the learning experience through active teaching.

35 • It means making them passionate about studying, reading, their training process.

36 • Being able to arouse in them any form of interest in what is being propose

The expressions used by teachers during the interview ("stimulate him," "make them curious," "encourage him," "interest him") reveal a unidirectional dynamic where the teacher is the active agent who "does something to the passive student." As one teacher stated: "motivating means creating interest in content that we want to propose."

Generally, an orientation linked to an adult-centered approach to academic motivation seems to prevail. The expressions used ("stimulate him," "make them

curious," "encourage him," "interest him") seem to reveal a unidirectional dynamic where the teacher is the active agent who "does something to the passive student."

The analysis of these linguistic expressions highlights a recurring semantic structure: in all cases the teacher is positioned as the agent subject of transitive verbs that have the student as the object of the action. This linguistic configuration is not accidental but could reflect an underlying conceptual orientation that sees motivation as something that is "done to" rather than "built with" the student. This syntactic structure systematically places motivational initiative in the adult, while the student is implicitly represented as a passive receiver of motivational intervention.

The frequency of this way of speaking across different interviews could suggest that these are not individual linguistic choices, but shared representations that could be rooted in implicit pedagogical models. The conception of motivation as an action exercised "on" the student rather than "with" the student could indeed be consistent with teaching approaches where the teacher maintains control of learning processes, determining objectives, content, and methods without necessarily involving students in co-constructing the educational path.

This orientation could present some critical issues, particularly in contexts characterized by marginality and socio-cultural disadvantage, where the resources and competencies that students bring from their life environments risk not being recognized and valued in the educational process.

This teacher-centered vision does not recognize the resources and competencies that students bring from their contexts of origin, even when characterized by socio-cultural disadvantage, valuing exclusively what conforms to school expectations.

Conclusions

Revealing that knowledge is inherently incomplete allows each student, with their characteristics, to learn, to embark again on the adventure of knowing with passion and motivation, seeking themselves and building an autonomous and conscious life project. This is a long and complex process in which the student gradually acquires greater awareness, until the moment when study reveals itself no longer as external imposition but as a possibility for self-realization, when a new configuration of meaning emerges that connects learning to one's existential project. The eroticization of knowledge, the ability to transform books into bodies

(Recalcati, 2014) makes the student not a passive recipient, but a Lover who has learned to love discovery.

The educational challenge therefore plays out on a subtle level made of actions and inactions, gazes and non-gazes through which the teacher supports that insight (Perls et al., 1951), fostering the generative conditions of that insight, of that meaning that opens a viable trajectory for the student in their educational process. It is therefore from the intersubjective elaboration of new meanings that—despite the concrete conditions of their life context—study becomes interpreted by the student as a catalyst for their future, for dignity, for social contribution. This appears particularly relevant when considering that motivation to study configures itself as a horizon of meaning within which to deliberately orient one's existence toward alternative directions compared to those prevalent in their life context (Bertolini, 1988). In this didactic-orientative perspective, disciplinary contents are not ends in themselves but become tools through which to realize broader educational processes that transcend mere instruction to be configured as accompaniment to integral human growth.

Within these terms, teacher training should involve the deeper dimensions of professional identity, questioning those beliefs and representations that constitute the implicit core of daily educational action. In this sense, attention to implicit knowledge becomes fundamental precisely because these interpretive "prejudices" are a constitutive part of the phenomena (Gadamer, 1960): they do not simply represent external filters to be removed but constitute the structure through which we understand and act also in educational reality. The training task therefore becomes that of making these horizons of understanding conscious and critically oriented, transforming them from unconscious constraints into more refined and flexible tools for reading the complexity of student motivation, to effectively support those insights that orient students in difficulty toward new existential possibilities, recovering, in this sense, "le specificità come espressioni di interazioni complesse tra fattori subpersonali, personali, ed ambientali, che pertanto, rendono necessarie traiettorie non lineari delle prassi didattico-educative" (Aiello, 2016, p. 267).

Author contributions

Carmen Lucia Moccia wrote Introduction and paragraph 1; Fausta Sabatano wrote Conclusions.

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