Freedom of Choice in the Activity - A Pedagogical Condition for Stimulating Students' Motivation for Discovery Learning

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Abstract: Objectives: The objectives of the research are to highlight the role of freedom of choice in activity as a central element in stimulating motivation for discovery learning; arguing the importance of this pedagogical condition in creating a flexible educational framework adapted to the pace, interests, and cognitive needs of students; identifying the dimensions and principles of applying freedom of choice in the instructional-educational process. **Prior Work:** Previous studies present the authors' views on student autonomy, experiential learning, and pedagogical constructivism. The paper is based on relevant theories and research (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Kolb, 1984; Piaget, 1965; Bruner, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), which show that offering personalized options stimulates student initiative, active involvement, and self-regulation. **Approach:** The methodological approach involved a critical analysis of the specialized literature, theoretical synthesis, comparison of explanatory models, and the development of a conceptual framework applicable to freedom of choice in discovery learning. **Results:** The research results show that integrating freedom of choice into activities increases intrinsic motivation, cognitive and affective involvement, and the adaptation of the learning process to individual characteristics. The curricular, methodological, and psycho pedagogical dimensions support a student-centered educational process oriented toward active learning. **Implications**: The results can support the design of educational activities, teaching strategies, and school curricula that promote autonomy and personalized learning, contributing to the optimization of the school climate and the

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strengthening of long-term motivation. **Research Value:** The study lies in highlighting freedom of choice as an essential pedagogical principle for stimulating motivation and developing the skills necessary for lifelong learning.

Keywords: pedagogical condition; freedom of choice; motivation stimulation; discovery learning

1. Introduction

Modern education is undergoing a continuous process of transformation, with the major shift being from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. In this context, intrinsic motivation and active student involvement become fundamental elements for the success of the learning process. An essential factor in stimulating this motivation is freedom of choice in activities, which gives students the opportunity to take an active role in building their own learning experience.

2. Research Problem

In traditional education, students often play a passive role, being subjected to a rigid teaching process in which the teacher controls the content, method, and pace of the activity. This approach limits intrinsic motivation and active involvement in learning. In the context of discovery learning, the lack of freedom of choice reduces students' opportunities to capitalize on their cognitive interests, develop autonomy, and explore content in a personalized way. The problem identified is the need to create a flexible pedagogical framework that stimulates motivation by granting freedom of choice in activity.

3. Research Objective

The objective is to analyze the role of freedom of choice in stimulating intrinsic motivation and active involvement of students in discovery learning, as well as to identify the pedagogical dimensions and principles that enable the creation of a flexible educational framework, tailored to the needs and interests of each student.

From a pedagogical perspective, freedom of choice involves creating a flexible educational framework in which students can choose content, methods, and work rhythms tailored to their own interests and cognitive needs. This is based on the principle of relevant education, according to which school activities respond to

personal development needs, and the teacher becomes a facilitator of the exploration process.

Pedagogical conditions represent the set of organizational, methodological, and psychological factors that ensure the optimal development of the educational process. In discovery learning, they facilitate active involvement, the development of critical thinking, and the formation of self-learning skills.

4. Theoretical Framework

Motivation for learning represents the set of factors that, within the educational process, guide the student's behavior toward achieving the proposed objectives. When it is positive, it promotes academic success, while a lack of motivation usually leads to either modest results or significant failures. Motivation involves a complex set of internal processes that activate and sustain our actions.

According to J. Brophy (2010), motivation can be analyzed in two main dimensions:

a) General motivation for learning and development: a stable and strong disposition to acquire knowledge, skills, abilities, and values in various educational contexts. It is important that this dimension be present throughout life, as lack of involvement, indifferent or self-sufficient attitudes, and monotonous and outdated teaching activities can compromise its maintenance.

b) Specific motivation for learning and development: a specific state of engagement in learning, manifested towards a particular lesson, chapter, or subject, within a specific period of time.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Motivation in Learning

Starting from the distinction between the two dimensions of motivation in learning, general and specific, it is essential to understand the mechanisms by which they can be stimulated and maintained over time. In this regard, research in educational

psychology has established several explanatory theories and models that highlight the role of autonomy, learning experience, active participation, and tailored support in the development of motivation. These theoretical frameworks, presented in Figure 2, provide the conceptual basis for transforming motivational potential into sustainable and relevant educational outcomes.

Figure 2. Fundamentals of Motivation and Learning

1. *Self-determination theory* (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Carver & Sheiner, 1981; Bandura, 1986) – this theory is based on the premise that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs that are essential for healthy intrinsic motivation. Autonomy refers to the individual's ability to exercise freedom of choice and engage in activities that they consider relevant and meaningful. When students have the opportunity to decide on the content to be learned, the pace of work, and the methods of approach, their emotional and cognitive involvement in the task increases. Bandura's research on self-efficacy complements this perspective, emphasizing that a sense of control over one's own learning enhances perseverance and performance.

2. *Experiential learning theory* (Kolb 1984) – Kolb's model proposes a learning cycle involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Autonomy plays an essential role in this process, as it allows students to initiate and direct their own learning experiences. Personal exploration consolidates knowledge and develops critical thinking, as well as the ability to transfer skills to new contexts. An example of this is community-based project activities, in which students choose the issue they want to document, plan their research, and present their conclusions in a creative way.

3. *Constructivism* (Piaget, 1965; Bruner, 1970) - from a constructivist perspective, knowledge is not passively transmitted, but actively constructed by the learner, based on their previous experiences and representations. Autonomy in this framework requires the student to be an active agent, capable of setting learning goals and choosing the appropriate strategies to achieve them. Piaget emphasizes adaptation through the processes of assimilation and accommodation, while Bruner emphasizes the importance of guided discovery and the progressive organization of knowledge. In practice, this is reflected in discovery learning activities, where the teacher provides resources and challenges, but the students decide the order and manner in which they approach them.

4. *The theory of the zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978) - the concept of the zone of proximal development describes the difference between what a student can achieve alone and what they can achieve with the support of a more competent person (teacher, colleague, mentor). Autonomy in this context develops through the gradual adaptation of tasks to the optimal level of difficulty, challenging enough to stimulate progress, but not impossible to achieve. The choice of tasks and how to solve them increases student engagement and supports the development of metacognitive skills. For example, the teacher can offer several variations of exercises on the same content, with different levels of difficulty, and the student can select the one that suits their current level.

Another theory, the expectancy-value theory (J. Eccles, A. Wigfield), argues that students' expectations of success and the value they attach to learning tasks are determined by their beliefs and behaviors regarding success.

The expectancy-value theory explains student motivation through two essential components: expectancy of success and value attributed to the task. Expectancy of success refers to the student's perception of the chances of success in a particular activity, and the value of the task reflects how meaningful, useful, or enjoyable the activity is for the individual (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

In the educational context, freedom of choice plays an essential role in amplifying these components. When students can select tasks that correspond to their interests, level of competence, and personal goals, both their expectation of success and the perceived value of the activity increase. For example, offering personalized projects or multiple options for solving a problem allows students to choose activities in which they feel competent and motivated, thus facilitating active engagement and discovery learning.

Thus, the expectancy-value theory complements the perspective of freedom of choice in activity, showing that student motivation depends not only on autonomy in choosing tasks, but also on how these tasks are perceived as achievable and relevant. Integrating these principles into curriculum and methodological design contributes to the creation of a stimulating educational environment that supports the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills through active involvement and personal responsibility.

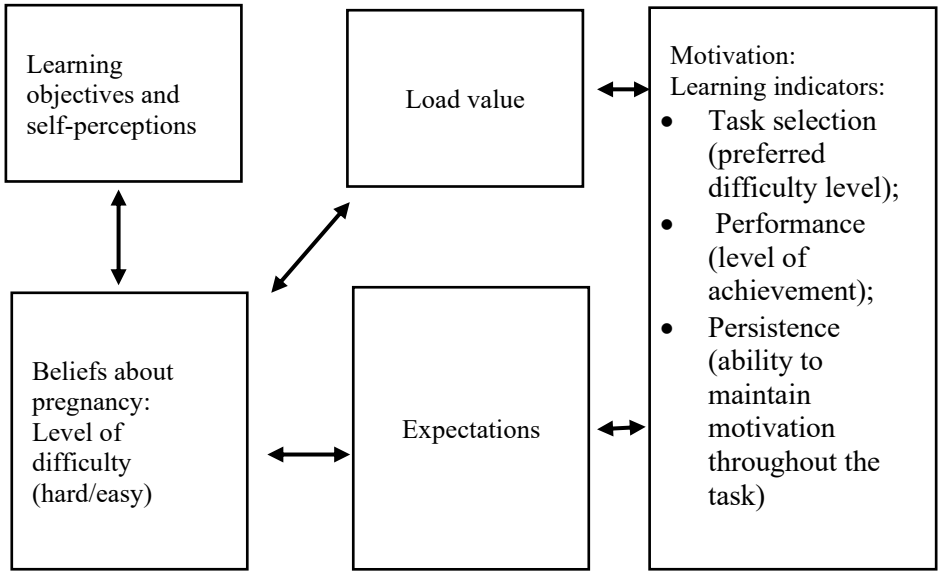

Figure 3. Schematic representation of Eccles and Wigfield's model (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2015, p. 4)

The diagram illustrates how Eccles and Wigfield's expectancy-value theory connects learning objectives and students' perceptions of themselves, beliefs about task difficulty, the value attributed to the task, and expectations, highlighting how these influence motivation, task choice, performance, and persistence in the learning process.

The theoretical framework argues that motivation arises when students perceive control over their own learning process, have the opportunity to explore areas of interest, and feel that they are making visible progress.

Table 1. Dimensions and Principles of Freedom of Choice in Activities to Stimulate Student Motivation in Discovery Learning

Dimension	Description	Applicable principles
Curricular	Offering a variety of topics, resources, and learning formats that allow students to choose according to their interests and needs.	Flexibility; Relevance; Individual adaptation
Methodologic	Using student-centered methods, such as project-based learning, independent research, or learning stations.	Promoting personal initiative; Flexibility; Adaptation to learning style
Psycho-pedagogical	Creating an educational climate based on trust, respect, and encouragement that supports student autonomy and responsibility for learning.	Relevance; Promoting personal initiative; Encouragement; Respect

The table above summarizes the main dimensions and principles of freedom of choice in activity, highlighting the direct link between the options offered to students and stimulating motivation for learning through discovery. The three dimensions—curricular, methodological, and psycho-pedagogical, cover the essential aspects of educational organization: learning content and resources, teaching strategies, and the psychosocial climate of the classroom. Each dimension is correlated with fundamental pedagogical principles, such as flexibility, relevance, individual adaptation, and the promotion of personal initiative, which provide a framework conducive to exploration and active student involvement.

The table thus serves as a practical guide for teachers, highlighting how student autonomy can be integrated into educational activities to facilitate discovery learning and stimulate intrinsic motivation.

In the view of I. Cerghit (2006), individualization and differentiation in the educational process means "organizing and conducting the educational process according to the actual abilities of students, taking into account their age, gender, previous level of education, as well as individual differences and the intellectual and physical potential of each student". In relation to the theme of freedom of choice, this vision emphasizes that academic success is supported when students are given the opportunity to select content, tasks, and working methods adapted to their own pace, interests, and cognitive resources. By combining Cerghit's principles of differentiation with the opportunity for autonomous choice, discovery learning becomes a personalized process that stimulates intrinsic motivation, responsibility for one's own learning path and active involvement in the proposed activities.

5. Educational Implications

From the perspective of a student-centered educational strategy, freedom of choice is the basis for active engagement in learning and obtaining authentic feedback, with a view to achieving the formative objectives set at both the individual and institutional levels. The possibility for students to select content, methods, or ways of presenting results is an essential prerogative for any school that aims to stimulate intrinsic motivation and develop skills for lifelong learning. This freedom is not manifested in a random manner, but is planned and methodically supported so that, through the design and implementation of activities with a high degree of autonomy, the student is guided towards learning through discovery and self-regulation. In this regard, Braghiș (2020) emphasizes that students' motivation increases when they perceive learning as relevant to their own interests and when they are given space for expression and initiative, within an active partnership between school, family, and community.

This way, students feel valued and encouraged to explore their potential, perceiving learning not as an obligation, but as a meaningful personal process. Constant collaboration between teachers, parents, and community representatives provides diverse resources and positive examples, strengthening students' confidence in their own abilities. Education becomes a joint endeavor, in which each actor involved contributes to creating a stimulating and motivating environment.

The literature recommends creating flexible learning contexts in which students can choose the type of task, the resources used, the pace of work, and the mode of collaboration. Examples include thematic workshops with free exploration points, individual or group projects with open themes, the use of digital portfolios, and interdisciplinary activities in which students can define their own research questions. In this framework, the teacher plays the role of facilitator, providing guidance, resources, and emotional support, but leaving the student the space they need to test hypotheses, make mistakes, and find their own solutions.

Freedom of choice also requires a safe and stimulating learning environment, where students feel encouraged to express their curiosity and take intellectual risks. Teachers can reinforce this freedom by integrating interactive methods such as problem-based learning, research projects, experiments, case studies, or academic debates. Through this type of approach, students develop cognitive, social, emotional, and metacognitive skills that help them organize their learning process more effectively.

Freedom of choice is a means of diversifying activities and an essential psycho-pedagogical condition for increasing student motivation and responsibility for their own educational path. It ensures continuity between formal learning and informal exploration, between school requirements and personal interests, giving students a sense of relevance and belonging to the educational process.

"A student-centered educational process requires the development of an inclusive and supportive learning environment in which students feel valued and involved" (Oprea & Șova, 2024, p. 411). In this context, freedom of choice in activities becomes the methodological tool and essential psycho-pedagogical condition for the authentic involvement of students. The role of the teacher becomes that of a facilitator of open communication and cooperation, supporting the free expression of ideas and collaboration between colleagues. The integration of these elements: autonomy in choosing tasks, emotional support, and encouragement of cooperation, promotes the development of intrinsic motivation and supports learning through discovery in a relevant and personalized setting.

As I. Neacșu (2010) points out, the development of school motivation is strongly influenced by the teacher's ability to create learning situations in which the student takes on an active and responsible role. Freedom of choice, combined with constructive feedback, encourages students to perceive the educational process as a personal and meaningful experience. Furthermore, as V. Chiş (2005) shows, learning becomes effective when students are given the opportunity to decide how to approach a task, which develops their self-regulation and perseverance skills.

In the context of contemporary Romanian education, the concept of "students as active agents of their own learning" (Cucoș, 2002) is becoming increasingly relevant, as it stimulates autonomy, responsibility, and self-confidence. These premises are consistent with the modern pedagogical vision, according to which freedom of choice is not only a motivational tool, but also an essential strategy for developing key skills for the 21st century.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, success in discovery learning does not depend solely on the amount of effort put in by the student, but also on how the teacher designs educational experiences that include freedom of choice as a central principle. By respecting these conditions, personal motivation, self-confidence, and the pleasure of learning are

developed, transforming the educational act into a process of personal discovery and holistic growth.

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