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Representations of study and students' academic motivation

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Abstract

The motivation and attitudes of students towards studying influence the way they learn, their performance at school and the objectives they set themselves. The study, based on a sample of 200 Italian eighth graders aims to explore students' metaphors of study. An integrated approach was performed analysing the data with an inductive, data-based, qualitative approach as well as a deductive, theory-based, quantitative approach. The results identified some key attributes of metaphors based on their semantic and figurative aspects. The most frequent categories that emerged are closely associated with classic constructs of the literature on academic motivation.

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1. Introduction

Different kinds of motivation and attitudes towards study are generally seen as factors that have a decisive impact on the way students learn, their performance at school and the type of objectives they set themselves (Ormond, 2003). The various different techniques for the assessment of motivation can be differentiated (Alivernini, 2012a) on the basis of the data collection strategies employed (e.g. self-report measures, interviews), the method adopted (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods), and the conceptualization of academic motivation applied. Although there is a wide range of techniques and possibilities for assessing students' motivations towards study, those that are based on mixed methods are particular interesting (Alivernini, 2012b; Alivernini, Lucidi, & Manganelli, 2008) as they allow us to discover new features of students' motivations and attitudes by means of a data-driven approach and they use one or more theoretical perspectives for analyzing the data collected. Applying

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this methodology to the analysis of students' representations of study can help us to understand the various cognitive, emotional and relational elements involved in the complex processes of learning and being successful at school (Pintrich, 2003).

1.1. Metaphor as a research tool

The linguistic device of the metaphor was used to examine students' representations of study. The metaphor is a mental function by means of which a particular phenomenon or experience is represented as an analogy in the terms of another. It is useful for understanding complex concepts and unfamiliar situations (Vosniadou & Ortony, 1989). On the basis of the idea that metaphors are linguistic tools used in literature as well as in everyday life, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) developed a cognitive approach towards interpreting metaphors as an inevitable aspect of human thought (Kovecses, 2007), which allow us to anticipate, simplify and share a range of meanings, ideas and experiences, as well as to give our perceptions and experiences a specific form and structure. Thanks to the metaphor people can broaden the range of their conceptual and linguistic systems, categorizing and giving meaning to their shared experiences. Metaphors are culturally and socially mediated and they can be used as an important textual instrument for understanding the way individuals represent the world and their immediate environment through a synthesis of direct experience, learning and opinions.

1.2. Theories regarding students' academic motivation

From a theoretical point of view, many studies on academic motivation (Alivernini, 2012) refer to self-determination theory (SDT). The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002) claims that there are various different styles of regulation as regards academic motivation in students, which reflect differences in their relative levels of autonomy. The SDT establishes a distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, in a similar way to most other motivational theories (Harter, 1978). Intrinsic motivation consists of doing something because it is interesting, pleasant and satisfying in itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When one is intrinsically motivated one undertakes an activity because one knows that one will enjoy it. Instead, people who are extrinsic motivated do something because it is useful and instrumental for attaining another objective, with results that do not directly pertain to the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

2. Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To identify the main features of the way students perceive learning and studying, by means of an inductive, data-based, qualitative approach
- To analyze the resulting pattern of emerging attributes by means of a deductive, theory-based approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1997)

3. Method

3.1. Data and instruments

The data used for this preliminary study is based on a random sample (N=200) from within the broader sample of students in the eighth grade of school (with a mean age of 13.5 years) who participated in the national option of the IEA-ICCS 2009 international survey¹.

The key question analyzed was an open question, which asked respondents to formulate a phrase starting with the words: "*Studying is like...*".

¹ The study is IEA ICCS-2009 (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study), a comparative survey promoted by IEA. www.iea.nl.

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