Kaloyanova, D. (2026). Identification of learning motives in preschool children, *SCIENCE International journal, 5*(1), 101-106. doi: 10.35120/sciencej0501101k UDK: [373.2.015.3:005.32]:159.953.5

IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNING MOTIVES IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Dimitrina Kaloyanova[1*]

[1]BSU "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" Burgas, Bulgaria, e-mail: d_kaloyanova@abv.bg

Abstract: The formation of learning motives in preschool age is a key factor for children's successful adaptation to school education. Learning motivation during this developmental period has a significant impact on the development of cognitive activity, self-regulation, and attitudes toward learning activities. The present study is aimed at analyzing the leading learning motives among preschool children and examining their specific characteristics with respect to gender differences.

The study was conducted with a sample of 30 children aged 5–6 years, using M. Ginzburg's methodology for diagnosing learning motivation. This diagnostic tool makes it possible to identify various types of learning motives—cognitive, social, positional, play-related, and external—as well as the degree of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The results indicate that the leading learning motive among the examined group of children is the cognitive motive (36.7%), which can be regarded as a significant and positive indicator of adequate school readiness. A predominance of mixed motivation (40%) was also identified, creating favorable conditions for the development of an active learning position, self-regulation, and a stable positive attitude toward learning activities. Gender-based analysis reveals that girls are characterized by more strongly expressed intrinsic and socially oriented learning motives, whereas boys more clearly exhibit positional, play-related, and external motives.

The obtained results confirm the importance of cognitive motivation as a foundation for successful school readiness in preschool age. The predominance of intrinsic and mixed motivation may be considered a positive indicator of children's future learning engagement. The observed differences between girls and boys in the structure of learning motives highlight the need for differentiated pedagogical approaches that take into account developmental characteristics and preferred forms of activity.

Keywords: *preschool children, learning, motives, development.*

Field: Humanities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning motivation in the preschool years represents a key component of child development, determining the extent and nature of a child's active engagement in the educational process. This developmental period is critical, as it is during this time that stable interests, cognitive curiosity, and attitudes toward learning begin to form, which have long-term implications for children's success in the early stages of formal education (Ollonen et al., 2025).

According to Leontiev's (1977) conceptualization, a motive is a psychological phenomenon that endows activity with personal meaning. In the context of early childhood, learning activities acquire meaning when they are emotionally engaging, socially significant, and practically oriented, corresponding to the child's needs and experiences.

Learning motivation is understood as a complex psycho-pedagogical construct encompassing both intrinsic motives (curiosity, interest, enjoyment of activity) and extrinsic motives (rewards, praise, social approval). These motives facilitate the child's engagement with learning tasks and active participation in the educational process (Veleva, 2024; Ratinho et al., 2025). In the preschool years, however, extrinsic motives have a limited regulatory function and do not lead to enduring learning motivation unless they are complemented by the development of intrinsic motives (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Deci and Ryan (2000) posit that the most sustainable form of motivation emerges when three basic psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy (opportunities for choice and control over activities), competence (a sense of effectiveness and capability in task performance), and relatedness (a sense of support and belonging with significant adults and peers). This theoretical approach is particularly relevant for designing learning situations in preschool education that deliberately support the development of children's intrinsic motivation (Wang et al., 2025).

In the preschool years, play is the leading activity, functioning as a natural and effective context for learning. Through play, children encounter diverse situations that stimulate cognitive activity, experimentation, hypothesis testing, and repetition—processes that form the foundation of learning motivation (Tsokova, 2025).

Empirical studies of motivational tendencies in preschool children indicate that learning motivation is associated not only with successful task performance but also with individual characteristics such as executive function development and gender (Veraksa et al., 2022). Further research shows that active

*Corresponding author: d_kaloyanova@abv.bg

teaching methods, including play-based and project-based learning, significantly enhance children's intrinsic motivation by providing opportunities for active, creative, and meaningful engagement in the learning process (Viñuela et al., 2023).

The educator plays a key role in stimulating and maintaining learning motivation by creating a supportive, emotionally positive, and developmentally enriching educational environment. Implementing play-based approaches, problem-solving situations, and encouraging children's autonomy and initiative contributes to the development of intrinsic motivation and a sustainable attitude toward learning (Wentzel, 2012).

The aim of the present empirical study is to examine the structure and dominant learning motives of preschool children and to analyze the degree of expression of cognitive and social motives for learning.

The object of the study is learning motivation in preschool-aged children.

The subject of the study is the structure, content, and relationship between cognitive, social, intrinsic, and extrinsic learning motives in children aged 5–6 years.

To achieve this aim, the following research tasks were formulated:

1. To identify the leading learning motives in preschool children.
2. To determine the ratio between intrinsic and extrinsic learning motives.
3. To establish the presence of differences in learning motivation between girls and boys in the preschool age group.
4. To quantitatively analyze the results obtained from the applied research methodology.
5. To draw conclusions regarding children's motivational readiness for school entry.

The study was conducted with 30 children aged 5–6 years attending kindergarten. The sample included an equal number of girls and boys—15 children of each gender—representing 50% of the total number of participants in each subgroup. The educational environment of the study was the kindergarten, which provides structured conditions and a stimulating setting for the social, cognitive, and emotional development of children in this age group.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed the methodology developed by M. R. Ginzburg (1988), which is designed to diagnose children's motivational readiness for school education. The method uses a set of pictures depicting:

- learning situations (children in a classroom, a teacher, learning materials);
- play situations;
- social interactions (communication with peers, receiving approval);
- external attributes of school (a schoolbag, notebooks, grades, etc.).

The pictures represent six possible motives for attending school. The cognitive motive reflects intrinsic motivation and the desire to acquire knowledge, whereas the social and evaluative motives emphasize the role of external approval and feedback from significant adults. The positional motive is related to the social role of the student, which is particularly characteristic of early school age. The play motive reflects age-specific characteristics of children and the potential conflict between play and learning, while the external motive highlights the influence of coercion and pressure on learning activities.

The study was conducted individually in a calm environment, minimizing the influence of external factors and creating conditions for more authentic responses. The pictures were presented to the child sequentially. The psychologist/educator asked questions such as:

- "Which of them do you think is right? Why?";
- "Which of them would you like to play with? Why?";
- "Which of them would you like to study with? Why?";

The child selected pictures and justified their choices. Not only the selections themselves but also the explanations, emotional reactions, and spontaneous comments were taken into account.

The data were processed using frequency analysis, percentage distribution, and calculation of mean values. These methods are appropriate for quantitative analysis and allow for objective interpretation of the results. They provide a basis for drawing general conclusions regarding the dominant motivational tendencies within the studied group.

3. RESULTS

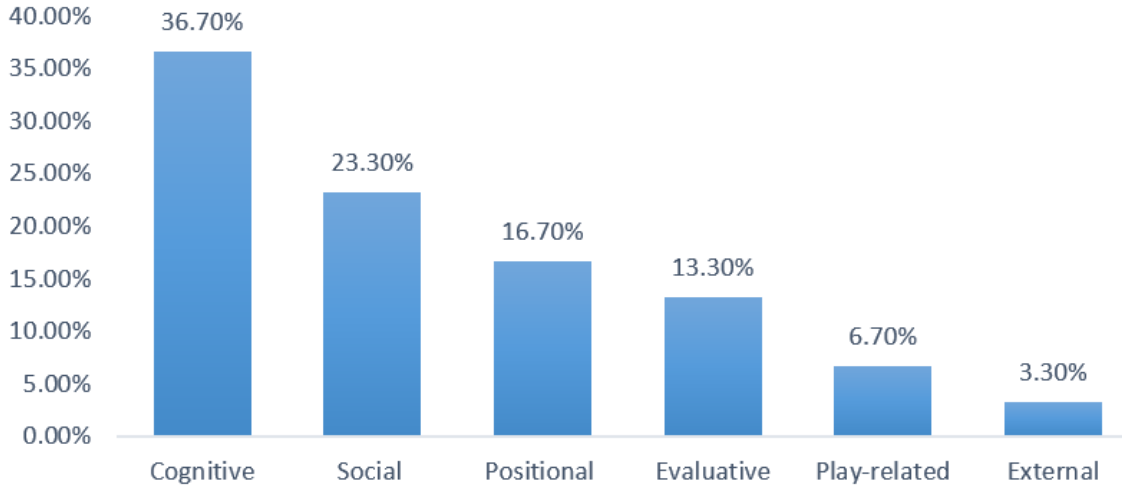
Table 1 presents the distribution of learning motives according to the number of children, while Figure 1 illustrates their percentage distribution.

Table 1. Distribution of learning motives among the children in the sample.

Type of Motive	Number of Children
Cognitive	11
Social	7
Positional	5
Evaluative	4
Play-related	2
External	1

Source: Author's own survey data (2026)

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of types of motives among preschool children.



Source: Author's own survey data (2026)

The analysis of motivational factors among children reveals a clearly expressed diversity in the reasons for participation in learning activities, highlighting the presence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motives.

The cognitive motive is the most prevalent among the children, observed in 11 participants, representing 36.7% of the studied group. This relatively high percentage indicates that a substantial proportion of the children demonstrate intrinsic motivation for learning, driven by natural curiosity and a desire for understanding rather than by external incentives such as grades or rewards.

The second most frequent is the social motive, identified in 7 children (23.3%). This motive is characterized by an orientation toward interaction with others—namely, a desire for cooperation, approval, and recognition from peers and teachers. The presence of this motive underscores the significance of the social environment in the learning process and highlights the role of group activities in the development of social and communicative skills.

The positional motive was registered in 5 children (16.7%) and reflects students' aspiration to maintain or enhance their status within the group. This type of motivation is associated with competition and a desire for recognition, often grounded in external evaluation by significant others. Although it may stimulate activity and achievement, the positional motive tends to be less stable over time, as it depends on external factors.

The evaluative motive, observed in 4 children (13.3%), is related to an orientation toward receiving grades and formal acknowledgment of effort. In this case, learning activity is primarily perceived as a means of attaining a specific outcome rather than as a value in itself. This indicates the predominance of extrinsic motivation, where cognitive interest is secondary to the importance of assessment.

The play motive is the least represented among the primary motives, identified in 2 children (6.7%). Despite its low frequency, it holds considerable importance, particularly in the context of early education.

Learning through play fosters the development of creativity, imagination, and intrinsic motivation, while cultivating a positive emotional attitude toward the learning process.

The least common is the external motive, reported in only 1 child (3.3%). This motive is associated with external pressure or incentives, such as rewards, punishments, or pressure from parents and teachers. Its low prevalence may be interpreted as a positive indicator, as it suggests that more autonomous and socially oriented motives for learning predominate within the studied group.

The empirical data presented in Table 2 reflect the distribution of children according to the dominant type of motivation for participation in the activity.

Table 2. Classification of Motives.

Type of Motivation	Number of Children	%
Intrinsic Motivation (Cognitive)	11	36,7%
Mixed Motivation	12	40,0%
Extrinsic Motivation	7	23,3%

Source: Author's own survey data (2026)

The analysis indicates that the largest relative proportion is represented by children with mixed motives—12 children, accounting for 40.0% of the studied sample. This suggests the simultaneous presence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that interact and complement one another in the learning process.

In second place are the children in whom intrinsic (cognitive) motives predominate—11 children, or 36.7%. This result points to a relatively high level of cognitive engagement and interest in the content of the activity itself, which constitutes a prerequisite for sustainable and in-depth learning.

The smallest proportion is observed among children with predominantly extrinsic motives—7 children, or 23.3%. This implies that, for a smaller segment of the participants, motivation is primarily determined by external incentives such as rewards, approval, or sanctions.

Table 3 presents the mean values of the different types of motives among the girls and boys in the sample.

Table 3. Mean Values of the Types of Motives among Girls and Boys in the Sample.

Type of Motive	Mean value	
	Girls	Boys
Cognitive	4,5	4,0
Social	4,3	3,8
Positional	3,5	3,8
Evaluative	4,1	3,9
Play-related	4,1	4,4
External	3,5	3,8

Source: Author's own survey data (2026)

The analysis of different types of academic motivation reveals clearly defined differences between girls and boys, outlining specific motivational profiles associated with both intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Regarding the cognitive motive, a higher mean value is observed among girls (4.5) compared to boys (4.0). This 0.5-point difference indicates a more pronounced intrinsic motivation for learning among girls, oriented toward knowledge acquisition and understanding of the academic content. The data suggest a stronger focus on the learning process itself rather than solely on its outcomes.

A similar pattern is evident in the social motive, where girls again demonstrate higher motivation (4.3) compared to boys (3.8). The 0.5-point difference indicates that social relationships within the school environment—including approval from teachers and peers—play a significant role in girls' academic engagement.

An inverse relationship is observed in the positional motive, where boys (3.8) surpass girls (3.5). Although moderate, the 0.3-point difference suggests that the pursuit of social prestige, peer comparison,

and attaining a higher position within the school hierarchy is more characteristic of boys.

With respect to the achievement motive, gender differences are relatively small. Girls show a slightly higher value (4.1) compared to boys (3.9), indicating that high grades serve as an important incentive for both genders, albeit with slightly greater significance for girls.

Analysis of the game-based motive reveals a stronger orientation among boys (4.4) toward playful, dynamic, and interactive forms of learning compared to girls (4.1). This suggests that active teaching methods and elements of competition and play have a more pronounced motivating effect on boys.

Finally, regarding the external motive, a higher mean value is observed among boys (3.8) compared to girls (3.5). This 0.3-point difference indicates that boys respond more strongly to external stimuli such as rewards, sanctions, or pressure from significant adults, whereas girls' motivation appears to be more intrinsically driven.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The results of the conducted study indicate that the primary learning motive among the examined group of children is the cognitive motive, which can be considered a significant and positive indicator of adequate school readiness. The predominance of this type of motivation suggests the presence of an intrinsic need for acquiring new knowledge, an interest in the learning content, and an active engagement in the learning process. In addition, a considerable portion of the children exhibit a mixed type of motivation, in which cognitive motives are combined with social and evaluative motives. This combination of motivational factors reflects the complex nature of learning motivation in preschool age and indicates that the pursuit of knowledge is often supported by the desire for social approval and positive feedback from significant adults.

The relatively low proportion of children with a dominant extrinsic learning motive can be interpreted as an indicator of a favorable motivational environment in the kindergarten, where emphasis is placed on intrinsic interest rather than on external incentives or coercion. The prevalence of internally oriented and mixed motivation creates conditions for the development of an active learning stance, self-regulation, and a sustained positive attitude toward learning activities, which are essential for subsequent school education.

Analysis of the results by gender reveals the presence of certain differences in the motivational structure. Girls are characterized by more strongly expressed internal and socially oriented learning motives, which suggests a higher orientation toward cognitive content and social interaction in the learning process. Boys, on the other hand, show a clearer prevalence of positional, play-based, and extrinsic motives, which may be related to the specifics of their development and preferred forms of activity. The identified differences should be taken into account when planning and organizing the learning process, with the aim of applying more effective, flexible, and differentiated pedagogical strategies that align with the individual and gender-specific characteristics of the children.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Preschool-aged children predominantly exhibit a positive attitude toward learning, with intrinsic and socially significant motives playing a leading role. This creates favorable conditions for the formation and sustainable development of academic motivation during early school years. M. R. Ginzburg's methodology has been established as a reliable and validated instrument for diagnosing learning motivation in children. In girls, motivation is effectively fostered through the acquisition of engaging knowledge, participation in social activities, as well as the use of group work and discussion-based formats. In boys, more pronounced effects are observed through competitive and play-based elements, clearly defined goals, reward systems, and an emphasis on extrinsic motivation. In this context, the development and implementation of differentiated teaching strategies tailored to the motivational characteristics of students according to gender becomes imperative.

REFERENCES

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25(1), 54–67.

Ginzburg, M. R. (1988). Razvitie motivov ucheniya u detey 6–7 let. V Osobennosti psikhicheskogo razvitiya detey 6–7-letnego vozrasta. Moskva.

Leontiev, A. N. (1977). Deyatel'nost'. Soznanie. Lichnost'. Moskva: Politizdat.

Ollonen, B., & Kangas, M. (2025). Teacher motivational scaffolding and preschoolers' motivational triggers in the context of playful learning of multiliteracy and digital skills. Early Childhood Education Journal, 53(4), 1079–1093.

Ratinho, E., Santos, P., Mocho, X., Nunes, C., Santos, A., & Martins, C. (2025). Learning motivation in children: A systematic review of assessment tools. European Journal of Education and Psychology, 18(1), 1–38.

Tsokova, V. (2025). Podgotovka i gotovnost na deteto za uchilishche. Sofiyski universitet „Sv. Kliment Okhridski".

Veraksa, A., Gavrilova, M., & Lepola, J. (2022). Learning motivation tendencies among preschoolers: Impact of executive functions and gender differences. Acta Psychologica, 228, 103647.

Veleva, A. (2024). Podhodi za otsenka na motivatsiyata za uchene kato komponent na uchilishchnata gotovnost. Pedagogicheski novosti.

Viñuela, Y., & Fuertes, A. (2023). Improving motivation in pre-school education through the use of project-based learning and cooperative learning. Educational Psychology Section.

Wang, X., Ye, P., Wang, C., & Tao, G. (2025). The role of intrinsic motivation in enhancing deep learning in early childhood education. International Theory and Practice in Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(6), 274–290.

Wentzel, K. R. (2012). Motivational processes in school. New York, NY: Routledge.