Edu World 2016
7th International Conference

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, A NEW ROMANIAN CURRICULUM SUBJECT. REQUEST FOR AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

Lavinia-Aniela Popa (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) The Lauder-Reut Educational Complex, Iuliu Barasch Street no.15, 030791, Bucharest, Romania, azilculture@yahoo.com, 0040740660276

Abstract

Taking into consideration the opportunities that the new school subject *Personal development* offers to all the actors involved in the educational process, we consider that the positive psychology approach provides a key to understanding and explaining a new point of view regarding this topic. In order to identify the best ways to teach and deliver the optimum educational content in the classes, teachers should have the access to an innovative approach based on updated scientific theoretical and practical support. Investigating students' characteristics, teachers' needs and parents' expectations regarding personal development, in a theoretical and hands-on approach, it might provide a valid base to build a guidebook. This material should gather and describe the best practices for a new approach in classroom activities based on games and interaction, but always connected to the positive psychology and the real students' needs. The paper focused on a theoretical approach aims to present the plan of research that will follow in the near future.

1. Introduction

Since 2013, the Counselling and Career Guidance Area of the Romanian Curriculum, according to the new National Plan of Education for Elementary School (preparatory, first and second grade), has improved with a new school subject called *Personal Development*. The curricular documents provide information about abilities, competences, the informational content and the methodology to use, the

guidelines for the new school subject. However, the novelty of this subject calls for a different approach from a theoretical and methodological point of view, so that teachers would be able to understand the content, apply the proper instruments and achieve the main goals of this subject in their classes. We would like to emphasize that there is a tremendous need to identify an innovative approach regarding the new methodology field of Personal Development that teachers use in their classes, in order to fulfil students' needs.

2. Paper Theoretical Foundation and Related Literature

In the three years since the new curriculum has been implemented for the preparatory, first and second grade classes in Romanian elementary schools, teachers all over the country call for support in dealing with the new subject, Personal Development, being aware of its impact on the young students' development of attitudes and values. Being so, some studies have already been done to reveal some possible teaching and learning strategies related to this subject area, applied in a private school environment (Ivan, & Marin, 2014), but there is also a real need to expend these practices in our national public schools.

Despite its huge area of interpretation and psychological theories, personal development has become not only a personal goal seen as a continuous personal process, but a professional topic for teachers in order to cope with a large number of questions about the content, the strategies and practices for teaching, or about the social values to promote. According to the Romanian syllabus, the official document provides the framework to define Personal Development as being made up of "activities dedicated to learning, with the aim of developing students' abilities of self-awareness and communication in a positive way, reflecting their interests, emotions, relational and communicational abilities and their own opinion towards learning". The subject's main aim is to provide the context "to form abilities and develop attitudes, and finally to achieve self–esteem, students' well-being and be prepared for life and for the future." (Romanian Syllabus, 2013).

We also emphasize the importance of additional materials for support, especially for such a recent subject. These materials provide guidelines on specific content for students to work on. The workbooks and students' books include worksheets, short stories, activities and specific tasks organized on units with related topics. There are some different workbooks approved by the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research, published by well known educational publishing houses (www.manuale.edu.ro). They represent, in fact, a real support for teachers to use in their classes and it gives them a sense of how to use the new content in order to achieve the educational formal aims. But we must also take into consideration that teachers still need to understand what is the personal development of 6-9 year old students in a school environment, what are the highlights to follow in students' activities and identify a new approach in classroom activities based on games and interaction.

Today, the main concepts in personal development theory are using the positive psychological concepts, methods and studies done in the last decade, all these applied in the educational field.

The concept of positive psychology has had an increasing importance in educational scientific researches published in journals like *School Psychology Quarterly* (2003), *Psychology in the Schools* (2004) or *Handbook of Positive Psychology in schools* (2009). As mentioned in the journal *Research,*

Publications and Interventions for Children and Adolescents, A Positive Psychology Perspective, a lot of time has passed since Martin Seligman, in 1998, highlighted the importance of positive psychology which is, in fact, *"the scientific study of human strengths and virtues."* (Sheldon, & Kings, 2011). One definition says that "Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions."(Gable & Haidt, 2005). On the other hand, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi M. (2000), define positive psychology as "the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life."All these definitions pinpoint one more time that positive psychology enhances the key role of individuals' resources and potentials, their talents and strengths.

This provides a powerful theoretical and methodological approach in understanding the aims and the content of the school subject Personal Development, from the point of view of positive psychology. The attributes of interest to positive psychologists are creativity, happiness, optimism, well-being, hope, enthusiasm, self-efficacy, self-confidence and moral virtues like responsibility, trust, acceptance, ambition, caring, compassion or courage. Due to its large application in fields like physical education, clinical psychology, business management practice or coaching, positive psychology opens a wide field of research in education as well.

"The role of positive psychology in education is primarily focused on encouraging and rewarding the multitude of talents and strengths a child has, by presenting opportunities to display these talents and strength each day, rather than penalize them for their flaws." mention Proctor, and Linley (2004) using the researches made by Chafouleas and Bray in 2004, Clonan et al. in 2004 and Huebner and Gilman in 2003. Because of them the theory and research in the positive psychology of education extends to all aspects of the educational experience and curriculum. "The aim of positive psychology in school is helping students to develop as much as possible, raising their emotional, psychological and social well-being"(apud Williams, 2011, p. 8) in Pânişoara etal., (2016). In her study, Pânişoară (2016) highlights that "positive psychology in education is focused on developing personal abilities that help students develop resilience and a proper reaction in different situations." (Pânişoară, p. 169).

All the educational partners focus their attention on the highest potential for student development. But most of all, teachers should be able now, more than ever, to achieve this goal. They have the time, the place and should have the resources to accomplish the goal to determine students' personal development. The subject Personal Development has the opportunity, through its content, methods, instruments and timetable, to introduce in schools the positive psychology's new approach.

Focusing on the development of the abilities to achieve full potential, to reflect, to understand and to recognize true values, and to take action in order to make improvements in various dimensions of life, the national syllabus, as an official document, is focused on three main competences:

1. Showing interest for self-awareness and a positive attitude towards themselves and towards others;

2. The use of an appropriate expression of emotions in the interaction with children and known adults;

3. The use of skills and specific learning attitudes in the school.

Over the years all the six key learning areas in the Romanian Primary Curriculum assume part of the responsibility of taking care of students' personal and social development, using theoretical and methodological resources with an interdisciplinary approach. Even if the main competences are the final

result of a long lasting process, which is in progress during school time, the most important thing of all, at this level, is to build a central cornerstone focused on achieving personal wellbeing, along with the capacity of self-discovery and free expression of their interests, skills, personal experiences, through this achieving interpersonal and communicational skills.

Taking into consideration the content of the school subject Personal Development, the document from the curriculum contains three themes:

1. Self-discovery and healthy living

1.a. Self-discovery and positive attitude towards self and others

1.b. Personal Hygiene

2. Emotional and social Development

2.a. Well-being. Living and expressing emotions

2.b. Efficient school communication

2.c. Simple interaction with familiar human beings and objects

3. Specific aspects in managing learning and life management

3.a. Routines and tasks

3.b. Learning abilities and attitudes

3.c. Exploring jobs

All the topics and subtopics listed above have the potential to be explored and applied in the classroom, using a positive approach and classroom activities based on games and interaction. Seligman M. (2002) developed a theory of happiness identifying five elements that can lead to the experience of wellbeing: PERMA. This theoretical concept has the importance to deliver a new approach in classroom daily activities. So, according to this theory, if an activity includes all of these five attributes, it can be considered a successful one, from the point of view of positive psychology:

P – positive emotions; E – engagement; R – relationship; M – meaning; A – accomplishments.

Furthermore, we reinforce the importance of the teacher's experience and interest in establishing interesting aims that can be achieved with an interactive approach. School activities are not only useful, but can also be pleasant and full of joy and happiness. School can be fun when students have a positive experience (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) and this can happen when three conditions are met:

1. to be interested and fascinated by the topic;

2. to live the joy of doing activities that have to be done;

3. to live a powerful sensation of enthusiasm and hope. (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, in Panisoara G., p. 172).

3. The Author's Contribution on the Existing Theory and Practice

Taking into consideration the opportunities that the new school subject *Personal development* offers to all the actors involved in the educational process, we consider that the positive psychology approach provides a key to understanding and explaining a new point of view. In order to identify the best ways to teach and deliver the optimum educational content in the classes, we consider that some improvements have to be made from a theoretical and a practical point of view:

1. Identifying a useful definition for the concept of personal development, applied to 6-9 year old Romanian students, along with a list of specific indicators to define the level of social/emotional development. These will provide a theoretical base for building a complete teaching strategy focused on students' needs.

2. We are taking in consideration the opportunity to identify students' needs on a representative group of 6-9 year old Romanian primary school students, using specific research instruments applied in positive psychology. Using scaled and questionnaire based instruments like Child Development Supplement (2002), the short form, Devereux's scale to evaluate the strengths of students' social and emotional behavior (Naglieri, LeBuffe, & Ross, 2013) and also the Penn interaction scale (Fantuzzo, Coolahan, Mendez, McDermott & Sutton-Smith, 1998, Naglieri, LeBuffe, & Ross, 2013, p. 213). The results should offer an overall view on the emotional and social needs and provide a base for an action plan for teachers to develop in their classes.

3. In order for us to complete the study, we are considering to take a deeper look into teachers' needs related to this topic. Being so, it will be useful to investigate the teachers' needs focused on their training requirements, about how to find and apply a new methodological approach based on interactive and action activities. The fact that some studies have been already done is remarkable (Herman, 2015), having placed the emphasis on the importance of teacherstaff training needs on this topic.

4. Also we should consider that investigating the parents' expectations can provide a good prospective on this topic. This point of view will enrich the perspective and give an overall picture on the topic, with the aim to complete the students' and teachers' perspective.

Starting from the point of view of positive psychology, we consider that the three factors analyzed, students' characteristics, teachers' needs and parents' expectations along with a methodological input, in a theoretical and hands-on approach, could provide a valid base to build a guidebook. This material will gather and describe the best practices for a new approach in classroom activities based on games and interaction, but always connected to the positive psychology and the real students' needs.

From the research's point of view we propose an investigative approach based on three levels: initial, middle and final on horizontal level and theoretical, investigative and results based level on vertical side, each of it being followed by an input of information made by a group of control. The aim of this input is to provide an extraset of information from the parents and teachers point of view related to behavioral indicators to increase.

The picture below describes the steps we propose to follow in our research on a representative group of 6-9 year old students, their teachers and parents, for at least 3 years long, from the preparatory to the second grade.
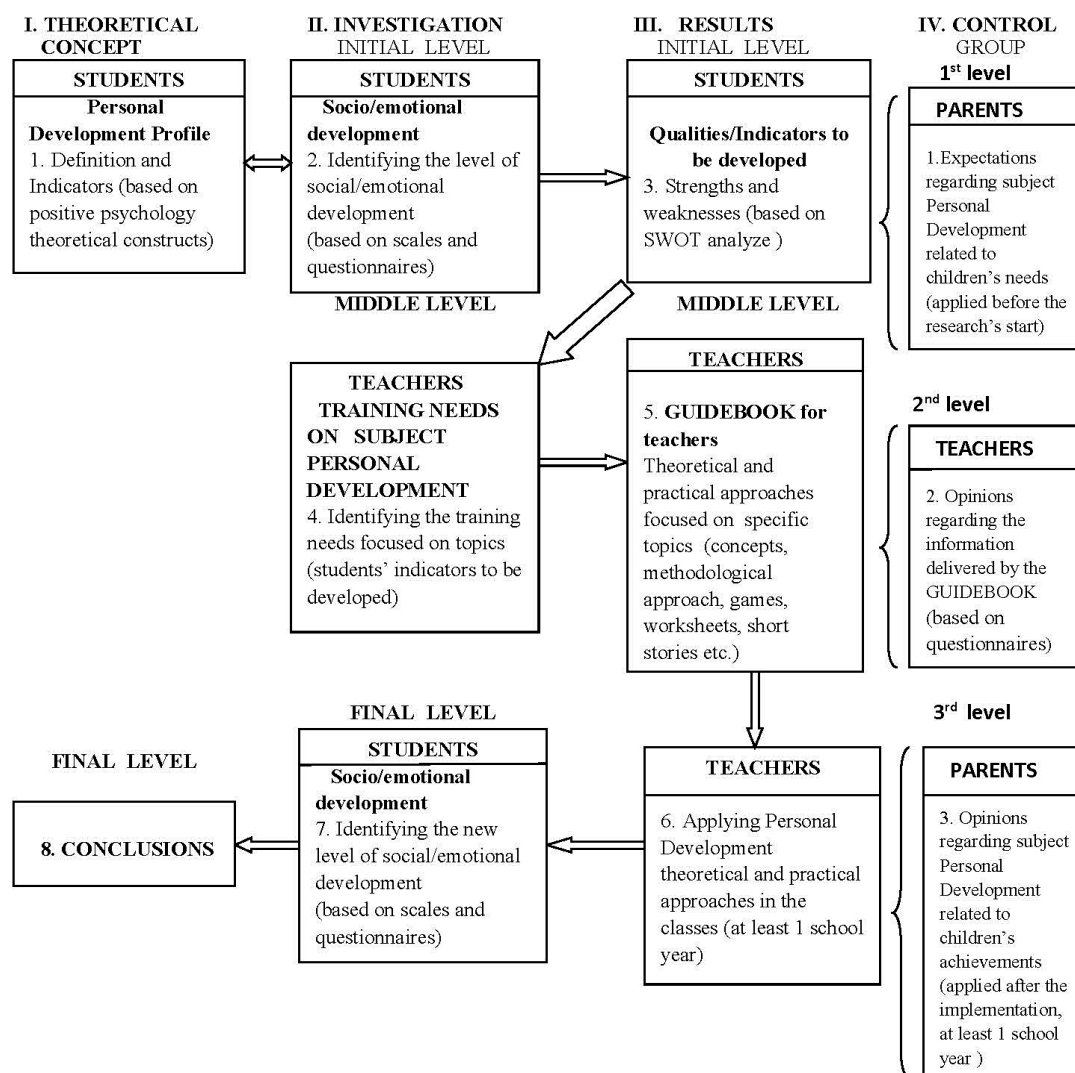
I. THEORETICAL CONCEPT	II. INVESTIGATION INITIAL LEVEL	III. RESULTS INITIAL LEVEL	IV. CONTROL GROUP 1st level
STUDENTS	**STUDENTS**	**STUDENTS**	**PARENTS**
Personal Development Profile 1. Definition and Indicators (based on positive psychology theoretical constructs)	**Socio/emotional development** 2. Identifying the level of social/emotional development (based on scales and questionnaires)	**Qualities/Indicators to be developed** 3. Strengths and weaknesses (based on SWOT analyze)	1.Expectations regarding subject Personal Development related to children's needs (applied before the research's start)

MIDDLE LEVEL   **MIDDLE LEVEL**

TEACHERS	**TEACHERS**
TRAINING NEEDS ON SUBJECT PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT 4. Identifying the training needs focused on topics (students' indicators to be developed)	5. **GUIDEBOOK for teachers** Theoretical and practical approaches focused on specific topics (concepts, methodological approach, games, worksheets, short stories etc.)

2nd level

TEACHERS

2. Opinions regarding the information delivered by the GUIDEBOOK (based on questionnaires)

3rd level

FINAL LEVEL

FINAL LEVEL	**STUDENTS**	**TEACHERS**	**PARENTS**
8. CONCLUSIONS	**Socio/emotional development** 7. Identifying the new level of social/emotional development (based on scales and questionnaires)	6. Applying Personal Development theoretical and practical approaches in the classes (at least 1 school year)	3. Opinions regarding subject Personal Development related to children's achievements (applied after the implementation, at least 1 school year)

Fig. 1. Research design

4. Conclusion

The new curricular subject Personal development provides an opportunity to apply the positive psychology perspectives, based on theory and practice, as well as on the existing researches, applications and instruments that can be used in developing new studies. Even if the new topic in our curriculum is more than necessary to accomplish students' needs, we consider it mandatory to be accompanied by a methodological guide, as a support for teachers. Theoretical and practical support from the point of view of positive psychology will provide a new professional perspective for teachers and will assure also the proper way to optimize the development of students' abilities and talents.

References

Clonan, S.M., Chafouleas, S.M., McDougal, J.L., Riley-Tillman, T. C., (2004).Positive psychology goes to school: Are we there yet ?*, Psychology in the Schools*, Volume 41, Issue 1, pp. 101–110

Gable, S. L. and Haidt, J., (2005). *What (and Why) Is Positive Psychology?, in* Review of General Psychology, Vol 9(2), pp. 103-110

Herman R. I., (2015) *The importance of the personal development activities in school,* International conference "Education, Reflection, Development", ERD 2015, 3-4 July 2015, Cluj-Napoca, Romania,Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 209, pp. 558 – 564

Ivan, A.O.; Marin, E. (2014). From "learning about" to "learning to be" in the National Curriculum for Primary Schools, Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 127, pp. 204 – 208

Ministry of Education (2013). Romanian Syllabus, Personal Development, No. 3418/19.03.2013

Ministry of Education. (2016). Retrieved from http://www.manuale.edu.ro

Naglieri, J.A., LeBuffe, P.A., Ross, K.M. (2013). Measuring Resilience in Children: From Theory to Practice", in Goldstein, R.B. Brooks, *Handbook of Resilience in Children*, New York: Springer Science +Business Media, pp.241-260

Pânişoară, G., Sălăvăstru, D. and Mitrofan, L. (2016). *Copilăria şi adolescenţa. Provocări actuale în psihologia educaţiei şi dezvoltării*, Iaşi, Ed. Polirom, pp.168-180

Proctor, C. & Linley, A. P.,(2004). Surveying the Landscape of Positive Psychology for Children and Adolescents, in *Research, Publications and Interventions for Children and Adolescents A Positive Psychology Perspective*, Springer Publishing House

Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic Hapines: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize YourPotential for Lasting Fullfilment*. New York: Free Press

Seligman, M.E.P., Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). "Positive Psychology: An introduction" in *American Psychologist* 55 (1): pp. 5–14

Sheldon, K.M.; Kings, L. (2011). Why positive psychology is necessary? *in American Psychologist 56(3):216-7*

What-is-positive-psychology (2016). Retrieved from http://positivepsychologyprogram.com/what-is-positive-psychology/-