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**PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY
STUDENTS**

Ileana-Loredana Vitalia (a)*, Nicoleta Răban-Motounu (b), Magdalena Stan (c), Manuela
Mihaela Ciucurel (d), Andreea Bădulescu (e)

*Corresponding author

- (a) University of Pitesti, Pitesti, Romania, ileanavitalia@yahoo.com
- (b) University of Pitesti, Pitesti, Romania, nicoleta.motounu@upit.ro
- (c) University of Pitesti, Pitesti, Romania, Magdalena.stan@upit.ro
- (d) University of Pitesti, Pitesti, Romania, Manuela.ciucurel@upit.ro
- (e) University of Pitesti, Pitesti, Romania, andreea.badulescu@upit.ro

Abstract

First year at faculty means a new experience for young students with the purpose not only to help them acquire new information in their chosen field of specialization, but also developing skills to independently obtain and operate with it. In this paper we will present the experimentation of a personal development program using dramatization, role-play, relaxation and awareness techniques focused on enhancing socio-emotional competencies. The practical objectives were to increase creative expression, the problem solving and interpersonal abilities, to support the awareness capacity resulting in more balanced emotional regulation, focused attention and self-assessment. The participants took part in more complex program preventing academic abandonment. The results showed changes concerning the motivation oriented towards relations. Students became more able to identify their personal needs and purposes, more relaxed, even-tempered, tolerant and sincere and they learnt to better co-operate in the group, to be more sensitive to other's needs and emotions, to trust each other in group activities. We consider these changes as real and significant personal resources able to stimulate and to guide the students' behavior toward action (including planning, organizing, carrying out tasks) and goal achievement. A stronger intrinsic motivation would help students face the challenges they met in their academic development in a more adaptive manner and to view their academic progress from a more adequate perspective, one that has a very personal and unique relation to other aspects of their life (family, society, environment, spirituality).

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1. Introduction

Existing research in career development and career counselling suggests two directions: some studies are interested in identifying the factors involved in first year students' experience leading to academic abandonment and other studies explore the topic of workplace readiness and they examine institutional career preparation. The main goal of both directions of study was to develop career guidance and counselling strategies and programs that are more adapted to students' needs.

Access to university education could be considered as is one of the most important moments in life and has the greatest impact on people's lives. A wide corpus of research has highlighted that employment prospects, social mobility opportunities, and personal development depend in large part on undertaking and continuing higher education studies. However, several works have indicated that a high percentage of students that enrol in university do not successfully finish their degree. In particular, it has been observed that most dropouts occur during the first year, making this group the most vulnerable university population (Zalazar-Jaime, Losano, Moretti, & Medrano, 2017)

Many times college students enter university without having sufficient information about their individual aptitudes, interests, values, personality and after graduating university they enter employment in society, again without being confident about their career. In terms of career development, university is a time for a student to prepare a practical career plan based on their aptitudes, needs and personality and to develop competencies relevant for a career suited to their past, present and future needs. Universities from all around the world focus their efforts on developing career guidance and counselling centres to address both individuals' and groups' needs. For example, Yoon and Yang (2017) suggested counselling strategies for college career guidance based on the efficacy of career group counselling programs. They described the effects of this type of career counselling on career identity and career decision efficacy in a group of 22 students from Seoul. Subjects and contents of this group counselling were: finding identity and having a positive mind, exploring interests and aptitudes, career choice and occupation analysis, understanding the occupational world and social change, career survey and interview, marriage and work together, career problem and problem solving, employment preparation on behaviour and designing your life. They emphasized the need that group counselling should first identify the students 'cognitive abilities, individual traits, and desires and then reflect the individual, psychological, and socioeconomic factors related to career choice. They also discussed the necessity to offer regular time counselling programs and up to date job information to prevent career indecision.

Studies from Argentina (Zalazar-Jaime et al., 2017) expressed the same concern about the factors related to academic abandonment because the highest academic dropout rate in Argentine public universities occurs during the first year of study. This situation appears because when enrolling in higher education students are confronted with a series of challenges that can affect both their academic performance and psychological well-being. Therefore, these studies focused on assessing an Academic Satisfaction model in a population of 682 first-year university students, taking into account the following variables: Positive Affect, Instructional Support, Social Support, Social Self-Efficacy, Self-Regulation Self-Efficacy, Performance Self-Efficacy, Extrinsic Expectations, Intrinsic Expectations, and Goal Progress. Similar results were found on a 997 youth German sample on a study that examined the

relationships between youth's background socioeconomic status, their causal beliefs about how success in society is attained, and their career attainment (Kay, Shane, & Heckhausen, 2017).

Self-efficacy beliefs (performance, study self-regulation and social-academic) has proved to have a significant effect on outcome expectations and goal progress. The researchers explained this situation considering the fact that going from high school to university involves changes in performance standards, one's interpersonal context and study autonomy, since the student must face new academic requirements without the support and supervision they had in high school. Thus, this new context would cause academic self-efficacy beliefs to become more relevant than those they normally have in other types of academic situations. Results also stated that even though having positive expectations can motivate the student to try to achieve their goals, having high expectations and little time to meet them can negatively affect the perception of achievement.

These results are supported by other researches from various countries. Yuen et al. (2017) provided an overview of past and present trends in career guidance, career education, and vocational training in Hong Kong. Jo, Ra, Lee & Kim (2016) examined the mediating role of dysfunctional career thoughts in the relationship between career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) and vocational identity. Dieringer, Lenz, Hayden, and Peterson (2017) explored the relation between negative career thoughts (especially decision-making confusion and commitment anxiety) and depression.

Results from a large sample of 2802 Slovenian adolescents demonstrated the connection between positive youth development and academic achievement. In their efforts to explain these connections, Kozina et al. (2016) described low academic achievement as an important determinant of negative outcomes, such as early school drop-out, unemployment, substance use, and delinquency.

Using a sample of 254 students (current undergraduate seniors and first-year alumni), Gonzales (2017) explored both undergraduate and recent graduate's understanding of what it means to be ready for the workplace and how their personal experience in a higher education institution did or did not assist them in developing these necessary skills. The same need to identify solutions for education and their employment difficulties represented the starting point for other studies (Sari, 2017).

In the same context, Yu, Levesque, Bristol (2018) linked a self-determined motivation to learning outcomes in students, and investigated the extent to which these findings could be applied in the process of career development.

The present study represents a part from a Romanian Secondary Education Project – ROSE that has been developed in the University of Pitesti, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Sciences and Psychology. The participants in this project were 120 first students that are in a high risk abandonment situation. The general objective of this study is to prevent the academic abandonment in the first year students. The project proposes to offer individual support and socio-educational student-focused and flexible services, that students need to successfully complete the study programs of the university, and to ensure the conditions necessary for a quality education, which would lead to the integration of the academic and socio-vocational training.

On the basis of the needs of learning and academic integration of vulnerabilities identified, the project provides students from the target group an integrated suite of programs of learning - remedial programs to develop the scientific knowledge necessary for completion of the plan of training in the first year of study of the specialisation, programs for the development of effective learning skills, personal

development and socio-emotional competencies, access to material resources and education, information and documentation.

In this paper we will present the experimentation of a personal development program (part of one of the activities of this project) using dramatization, role-play, relaxation and awareness techniques focused on enhancing socio-emotional competencies.

2. Problem Statement

First year at faculty means a new experience for young students with the purpose not only to help them acquire new information in their chosen field of specialization, but also developing skills to independently obtain and operate with it. The course organization is very much different from high school, primary or secondary school, starting with the study formation. Thus, it relies more on personal resources, less used during previous education cycles, like self-control, emotional stability, self-esteem, self-efficiency, and also on a stronger intrinsic motivation. We must take into consideration also developmental stage, that of late or post-adolescence, characterized by a stronger influence from peer-groups and early role models. The teachers' influence reaches to students through these filters, and the need for personal autonomy is high, so that the success comes by integrating the person the student represents in the process.

3. Research Questions

The present study was based on the following question: Will the personal development program be efficient to develop creative expression, the problem solving and interpersonal abilities, to support the awareness capacity resulting in more balanced emotional regulation, focused attention and self-assessment?.

4. Purpose of the Study

Through the personal development program (independent variable) we aimed to develop creative expression, the problem solving and interpersonal abilities, to support the awareness capacity resulting in more balanced emotional regulation, focused attention and self-assessment (the dependent variables).

We hypothesized that the personal development group program was an active and efficient method to develop creative expression, the problem solving and interpersonal abilities, to support the awareness capacity resulting in more balanced emotional regulation, focused attention and self-assessment

5. Research Methods

In this study we used the test-retest experiment. One group of students (experimental group) participated in this experiment. Psychometric and statistical methods were used to measure the variables and to test the hypothesis.

5.1. Variables

The independent variable was the personal development program using dramatization, role-play, relaxation. The program consisted of six three or four-hour long session, led by a psychologist. Each

session begins with a creative, spontaneous task with a certain purpose (creative meditation, dramatization, dynamic postural exercise, relaxation or mindfulness techniques) followed by a personal analysis allowing the participants to become aware of their personal ways of being and relating with others and awareness techniques focused on enhancing socio-emotional competencies.

Procedure:

First session: development of social abilities and assertivity. The metaphorical scenario, "Ocean" (Mitrofan, 2005), on wave sounds, integrates the water symbol of the unconscious involving the participants in a group activity characterized by spontaneity, emotional harmony, favouring creative interpersonal interactions, centered on finding solutions to the challenges in the scenario. Each of them chooses the element in the ocean he/her wants to be, and lives his/her life accordingly, until people come, and leave a dangerous oil stain. The whole group then searches for a solution for life to continue into the ocean. The dramatization ends with life coming back to normal. A short experiential analysis of the personal contribution to the dramatization is realized by each participant (the reason for choosing to be a part of the ocean, the elements she/he had relationships with, the reactions elicited by the people and the oil stain, their part in escaping the danger). A special time was allocated to exploring the self-perceived behaviour and the real performance and the image from the perspective of the other group members.

Second session was dedicated to the optimization of decision and problem solving ability in the form of a creative meditation with musical support called "The Mountain" (Vitalia, 2016). It is made of five phases: mountain contemplation acknowledging of the risks involved by the exit from the comfort zone; preparation with the accent on change; action of climbing each participant having the freedom to choose the form of the path; following through the path, stopping and planning for the final ascension; goal achievement reaching to the top of the mountain when the person feels in control of her life. It emphasizes the importance of effort, implication and motivation to advance. It is followed by a discussion when each group member presents her/his strategy, way of going through each step, obstacles and means to overcome them.

Third session: increasing self-acceptance and self-esteem optimization. The dynamic exercise "Mirror hall" (Mitrofan, 2005) help the participants confront their projections onto the other group members by standing in front of them and recognizing a personal characteristic they see in the other like in a mirror. Afterwards, they arranged the group members as the characteristics they were represented in their actual self-image, and then as they would have liked to be.

The fourth session was dedicated to an exercise allowing emotional expression, spontaneity, exploring the attitude towards new, discovery, conservative versus innovating attitude by means of a dramatization called "Explorers and Locals" (Mitrofan, 2004). The group members divided in two on their own choice, the explorers came from the sea. They had the time to organize their groups. Then the explorers reached the land. They found themselves in the situation of developing a way to communicate, as their ship was destroyed. The analysis focused on the reasons for choosing to be a part of the group, the role they have played in relationship with the new.

The fifth session was dedicated to experiencing a progressive relaxation technique integrating also guided imagery, completed by a mindfulness technique, as a tool to be used in facing anxiogenic situations.

The sixth situation involves the abilities to work in a team on a creative task: the making a “Secret garden” (Vitalia, 2017). After having explored the available natural elements, they choose their favourites and made up a garden. In the end, each participant explored their creation and spoke about her/his experience in both creating and exploring it.

The dependent variables were: creative expression, the problem solving and interpersonal abilities, the awareness capacity resulting in more balanced emotional regulation, focused attention and self-assessment.

5.2. Participants

15 university psychology students from the University of Pitesti, The Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Sciences and Psychology participated in this study. The participants took part in more complex program preventing academic abandonment.

5.3. Instruments

The instruments are applicable in the context of career guidance or career counselling. Research results fully supported the validity of all the three instruments on Romanian population and testify to their high-level psychometric properties. All participants voluntarily completed the following three instruments.

PDA - Affective Distress Scale is a psychometric instrument created to measure the subjective dimension of positive emotions and also functional or dysfunctional negative emotions.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a widely used self-report tool for evaluating one's individual self-esteem. The scoring scale goes between 0-40 and a total value under 15 indicates low self-esteem.

Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale aims to assess a holistic sense of one's perceived self-efficacy, to predict the evaluated person's coping methods and his capacity of adapting to various stressful life events.

CERQ - Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire is a multi-dimensional questionnaire measuring cognitive coping strategies after dealing with negative experiences. It can be used for people starting 12 years old.

Motivational Orientation Assessment Test

The motivational orientation test (TOM) is one of the most familiar European instruments to assess motivational orientation. The instrument consists of 70 items assessing four types of motivational orientations: motivation towards objectives, motivation towards innovation, motivation towards leadership and motivation towards relations.

6. Findings

Quantitative data from test-retest evaluations were compared using Student Paired-Samples t Test (from SPSS - Version 17.0 for Windows). Descriptive Statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed for all the variables of the study.

Statistical analysis revealed differences concerning mostly the motivational aspects (Table 01).

Table 01. Paired-Samples T Test values for variable Motivation

Research variables	T	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Motivation	-3.737	15	.004

7. Conclusion

7.1. Discussions: Psychological overview on the statistical data

The statistical results lead to a sum of significant data for understanding the effects of such an interventional program, whose results indicates really valuable psychological details. First, it's important to mention the high rate of participation, leading to understand that this kind of activity (psychological support) it's attractive for fresh students, suggesting their need for emotional balance and information. The results showed significant changes concerning the motivation oriented towards relations. Based on the numerical results but also on our observations, for many of the participants some other personal dimensions were positively influenced during this program, such as self-confidence, better adapting methods, better decision-taking timing, and better communication (verbal and non-verbal) skills. Thus, as the numerical results are showing, no significant statistical data were found to sustain that these qualitative changes took place for all of the students attending this program, at the same high level.

7.2. Conclusions

The psychological support program was part of a complex intervention program, aiming to reduce the academic abandonment at the first-year students. The objectives of this psychological counselling activity were to evaluate the initial state of personal skills and potential of each participant, then apply various tools and methods for increasing students personal and social abilities, following final evaluation for measuring the activity's results. The work objectives were to increase the communication skills, creative expression, problem solving and social abilities, also supporting the student potential, all these leading to a more balanced emotional level, better emotion-regulation methods, focused attention and self-assessment, in few words improved adapting skills.

At a group level, the results indicated significant data towards a high level of motivation onwards others, meaning the participants were clearly more interested on each other, learning to cooperate and to trust each other, paying mutual respect, being more aware of their personal needs and objectives, but also caring about others needs, interests and limits.

Moreover, the empirical results based on conversations and observing the participants dynamic during this period indicated important qualitative changes, meaning high level of emotional disponibility towards others, being more opened, sincere and tolerant from one time to another, manifesting increased generosity and emotional support. During the psychological counselling program, the participants showed deep interest on personal development, increased participation and curiosity towards new information from the psychology field.

Based on both statistical and empirical details, the counselling program with these specific psychological activities aiming personal development, marked its objectives by increasing first-year students interest on themselves an onto others, a higher level of motivation for personal upgrade and social integration and adaptation.

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