THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL COORDINATES ON THE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the effectiveness of teaching strategies in the personal development of students from primary education. From a theoretical perspective, it provides a summary of the main approaches to the phrase "personal development": conceptual delimitations, paradigms, dimensions, factors affecting personal development. Based on these theoretical premises there has been designed and tested a psycho-pedagogical model/educational programme centred around the use of active-participative strategies with increased formative valences on the cognitive, socio-emotional and moral behaviour of students. As research methods and techniques there were used: the psycho-pedagogical experiment, observation, the questionnaire. The statistical analysis of the data obtained at the end of the research confirms the hypothesis regarding the effectiveness of the designed and implemented training programme.

Key words: differentiated instruction, educational programme, heuristic didactic strategies, personal development, wellness

Introduction

In recent decades, we have witnessed, with concern, the increasing rate of juvenile delinquency, violence, suicide, rape, drop-out, attacks with firearms in schools and universities, the authors being, most of the times, teenagers. There has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of children with ADHD, impulsive behaviour, aggressive, undisciplined, fearful, emotionally unstable, lacking self-confidence, assimilating indiscriminately behaviour patterns provided by

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the "technological force" (tablets, CD-ROM, DVD, movies etc.) which they transfer to their own behaviours. Simultaneously, we are witnessing a "crisis of the family" by the replacement of its perennial values with "modern" ones, resulting in changes and significant differences related to: the cohesion of the members of the family group, the attitudes of family members in relation to different social norms and values, the relation with the child, expression of parental authority, the application of rewards and sanctions etc.

As expected, these phenomena have become topics of studies, works, research centred on personal development as a field of knowledge and psychological and management intervention, as well as of the academic field. Personal development is a goal and a central dimension of social and educational policies for the knowledge of the child's psychic potential, in order to stimulate his/her cognitive, emotional, volitional and socio-moral development with a view to achieving professional and social success.

In this context, modern approaches in education in recent decades have highlighted the need to overcome the traditional paradigm and replace it with the modern, student-centred paradigm and the philosophy of the theory of humanistic psychology. Its applicative principles stress the student's uniqueness, individuality, the need to be respected, encouraging diversity, confidence in the potential of every student and his/her capacity for positive change, the role of self-esteem as a prerequisite for personal development.

Other studies and research have shown that in a society characterized by an ever increasing complexity, the intelligence evidenced by a student in the school context, his/her intelligence coefficient (IQ) is not always a guarantee of personal development, of social and professional success, solving different problematic situations in life. In this context, there were conducted studies that demonstrated the role of emotional intelligence in the adaptation, social and professional integration of a person (Goleman, 1995). In turn, Howard Gardner (1983) argues for the pluralistic view of the intellect, promoting the idea that intelligence is multidimensional. From this perspective, an individual is actually a *collection of intelligences* and the combination of intelligences that they possess enable him/her to successfully carry out specific activities in a specific field. In the author's conception, recognition and development of various human intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist) would contribute to a better adjustment and focusing of education on problems encountered and faced by man in life.

The educational reality shows the progress recorded by implementing these theories and models in the school practice, but also the manifestation of inertia and resistance to change in some

educational policies. Thus, careful study of the curriculum for primary, middle- and secondary education shows that, most often than not, the school continues to be focused on the informative dimension, being still centred on the assimilation of a large body of knowledge, definitions, classifications, descriptions, etc., often irrelevant and without real life applications. Although teachers apply strategies of differentiation and personalization of learning according to the age and individual psychological profile of students, most often than not, national assessments, middle-school graduation examinations, entrance exams etc. are still achieved by traditional methods and techniques and, to a very small extent, by complementary methods and techniques, authentic and capable of measuring skills, prevailing types of intelligence, attitudes and creativity of students. All these have a negative impact on the well-being and personal development of students.

Therefore, teachers, psychologists, school counsellors and students' parents have a significant role in the personal development of the child. This presupposes unity and convergence in the application of the most effective strategies for achieving knowledge of the child's mental potential, for stimulating and capitalizing on this potential in formal, non-formal and informal education.

2. Theoretical premises

In the literature there are several meanings given to the term "personal development". Thus, personal development has been defined as the professional and concrete way of preserving health, efficiency, satisfaction and exploitation of the psychological resources of a person (cf. Mitrofan, 2007, pp. 9-10). Often, personal development is called *self-development* or *personal growth* (Timofti, 2012, pp. 7-8) and is associated with wellbeing.

Trying to outline an operational definition of *wellbeing*, Parker J. Palmer (2007, p. 20) notes that in fact this aims rather at a reconsideration of personal integrity, identity, completeness of our physical and mental health. Wellbeing requires a correct understanding of the role of self-control over our work, activities, life and destiny. According to the author, wellbeing is not the opposite of stress, just like health is not the opposite of disease. The New Oxford Dictionary of English, *wellbeing* is defined as a state of good comfort, health, happiness (cf. Holmes, 2005, p. 5). It covers four key issues: the good physical, emotional, mental and intellectual, spiritual wellbeing, described below.

Physical wellbeing is related to all aspects of our physical existence: fitness, endurance to effort and disease, maintaining a harmonious body and strengthening immunity by practicing physical exercise, sports, food quality, etc.

Emotional wellbeing is linked to emotional intelligence, developing the ability to recognize, understand, express emotions properly through self-control, a skill that involves a creative relationship with the states of fear, pain and desire (Goleman, 1995). Perceptual evaluation and expression of emotion, analysing and understanding emotions, emotional facilitation of thinking, regulation of emotions to generate emotional and intellectual development represent levels of emotional training with a positive impact on emotional wellbeing (Roco, 2001, pp. 143- 144).

Mental, intellectual wellbeing seems more difficult to define, its description aiming rather at factors that contribute to mental wellbeing by means of one's own activity, work. This is closely related to the emotional state, the affect being able to influence thinking, the way of looking at events and relating to them in an optimistic or pessimistic fashion. Sometimes, emotional factors can affect and even block professional activity and the level of achieved performance. Mayer and Salovey (1997) have showed that feelings as higher, complex, relatively stable forms of the affect favour the best interactions of the emotional with the rational. Emotional intelligence also means the ability to understand emotions based on their knowledge and adjusting them so that they can contribute to intellectual and emotional development.

Spiritual wellbeing. Elizabeth Holmes (2005) highlights the fact that the concept of spirit in itself has neither religious connotations nor of any other higher state. It signifies the human desire / aspiration towards fulfilment, unity, completeness, perfection of personality and implies an approach of building and self-building one's personality, as well as the ability to constructively use critical thinking, reflection, self-criticism to achieve spiritual wellbeing.

There are books and guides explaining the principles and the reason of man's internal mechanism on the path to personal development, highlighting: the role of a positive mental attitude (Hill & Stone, 2002); the importance of exercise programmes and techniques for developing personal skills and techniques applicable in interpersonal relationships (Clegg, 2003); there were developed cognitive and behavioural psychotherapies (Cottraux, 2003; Dryden and DiGiuseppe, 2003); the role of self-knowledge and interpersonal knowledge as the basis for efficient intercommunication and networking with others (Blin, 2002; Lelord and Andre, 2003).

Alain Lieury (2008) has found that ego involvement enables, in fact, refining emotions and feelings, this involvement being different in positive and negative emotional experiences. Thus,

joy occurs without involvement, pride appears when there is an increase in self-esteem; love is generated when the feeling is shared. Conversely, in the case of negative emotions, "anger would result from self-destruction, fear could be triggered by a personal attack and sadness by the destruction of one's self-image" (Lieury, 2008, p. 280).

The role of family and school is crucial in the formation and development of the child's personality. According to Alain Lieury (op.cit., p.278), "except the genetically programmemed response patterns ... the skills acquired in the family or at school provide what social psychology calls the response patterns". Many studies have focused on identifying and developing *coping*, defined as "the active process by which the individual, due to the self-appreciation of his/her activities and motivations is able to handle a stressful situation and manages to control it" (Ionescu, Jacquet & Lhote, 2002 pp. 115-116). The interest in *coping* is reflected by the 3392 articles with the descriptor coping, recorded in the PsycLIT base between January 1990 and September 1996. Currently, *coping* is increasingly studied from an integrative perspective (idem). In the *Foreword* of the book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman argues that "family life is the first school of emotions". It is an intimate crucible where children learn to recognize not only their emotions but also "the reactions of others to our emotions; how to think about these emotions and how to choose our reactions; how to read and express our hopes and fears". The author believes that family life is not confined to advice and efforts of parents for their children, but also to the models that parents constitute for their children regarding the management of their own emotions and those that arise between parents (cf. Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander 2007, p.11).

3. Research design

3.1. Research hypothesis and objectives

The general hypothesis of the present research is the following: Implementing an educational programme focused on formative teaching strategies and activities contributes to the students' personal development in primary education.

Specific hypotheses:

Specific hypothesis 1: there are significant differences between the results obtained by the participants before and after the training programme regarding their socio-emotional development.

Specific hypothesis 2: there are significant differences between the results obtained by the participants before and after the training programme regarding their cognitive development.

Specific hypothesis 3: there are significant differences between the results obtained by the participants before and after the training programme regarding their moral-civic development.

In order to verify the hypotheses formulated there were established the following *objectives*:

- Knowledge of the participants' level of personal development in relation to socio-emotional, cognitive, moral-civic development (before intervention, through initial assessment).

- Design and implementation of an educational programme including formative teaching activities and strategies.

- Registration of the participants' progress at the end of the training programme.

- Demonstration of the formative valences of the implemented educational programme.

3.2. The operationalization of the concepts and variables

The independent variable is represented by the temporal moment, with its two levels: before the intervention (the pre-test) and after the intervention (the post-test).

The dependent variable is represented by the expected changes following the introduction of the progress factor, the students' level of personal development. The dependent variable was operationalized in the following dimensions and indicators:

Socio-emotional development:

- exhibits self-confidence, communicates assertively

- understands and recognizes personal emotions and the emotions of others

- manifests emotional self-control in crisis and conflict situations

- properly manages personal emotions in the interaction with children and adults

- establishes positive relationships with children of close age and adults

Cognitive development:

- demonstrates intellectual operational and functional capacities (operability of thought, sense of observation, logical memory, intelligence)

- masters specific skills (knowledge, skills, behaviours) provided in the general curriculum

- possesses communication skills and vocabulary appropriate to his/her age

- exhibits positive affective-motivational resources for the learning activity (cognitive interests, curiosity, capacity for volunteer effort, the joy of knowing, discovering)

- masters the methods and techniques of effective, creative learning (reading, memory, storage, updating, observation techniques, creative strategies in solving learning tasks)

Moral-civic development:

- observes the rules of proper behaviour in the school, family, community

- demonstrates pro-social behaviours (cooperation, mutual help, positive attitude at the group level, towards people from various socio-cultural backgrounds)

- shows initiative and solves conflicts through cooperation

- demonstrates autonomy and personal responsibility for his/her own actions, behaviours

- observes the rules of personal hygiene and a balanced regime of work and rest

3.3. Subjects

The research lot has comprised 23 students aged between 9 and 10, of which 10 boys and 13 girls. The participants come from families with a modest socio-economic and cultural situation, but all of them have a normal level of development without physical, mental disabilities/delays confirmed by specialists.

3.4. Methodology

To know and verify the impact of the educational intervention programme on the personal development of students, there was conducted a formative *psycho-pedagogical experiment,* the "progress factor" consisting of the educational programme including formative activities and teaching strategies. The obtained data were corroborated with those from the *observation* and *questionnaire* method. The grading scale was structured in 3 dimensions and 15 indicators that measure the personal development level of the participants in relation to the socio-emotional, cognitive and moral-civic improvement, in two experimental situations, pre-test and post-test. The scale has 3 degrees of intensity: *to a smaller degree*, *to a certain degree (average, medium)*, *to a higher degree*. The minimum score for each indicator is 1 and the maximum score for each indicator is 3. Therefore, the minimum score for each dimension is 5 and the maximum score for each dimension is 15.

4. Intervention Programme for students' personal development

We shall here briefly exemplify some of the strategies centred on students, which were used in the training programme.

Objectives	Contents/themes	Methods, procedures	Formative values
- to identify behaviours that define courage and self-confidence; - to recognize their own physical traits; - to identify their own moral traits.	***Courage and self-confidence Who am I? What do I know about myself?*** -presentation of an authentic form of greeting, defined by a personal trait; -creation of a tree with traits; -self-knowledge exercises; -exercises for supporting personal preferences for conducting certain activities; -game: *The treasures from my backpack; Connecting hands.*	The Tree of Traits The technique *Draw and write* The method of Thinking Hats Role play Dramatization	- self-awareness, self-acceptance; valuing personal experience and colleagues. - stimulating the expression of personal opinions, critical thinking, creating preconditions for development of assertiveness. - facing real-life situations; - development of verbal and nonverbal communication, empathy, tolerance.
-to identify similarities and differences between oneself and others; -to realize that each person must be respected, appreciated; - to show spontaneity and sincerity in relationships with others; - to respect the rules of personal hygiene; - to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy food; - to identify a series of images illustrating actions of breaching good manners; - to realize the importance of respecting a balanced schedule of activity and rest; - to communicate and relate effectively with colleagues and parents in achieving practical work.	***Me and those around me. Similarities and differences between myself and others*** **-** exercises of awareness of similarities and differences between oneself and others; - the rainbow of my personality; **-** art-creative exercises conducted in groups; - exercises for recognizing personal qualities and flaws and the desire for change – *3D Hearts* - creation of a puzzle – *The Earth is more beautiful with me!* ***Self-awareness and healthy lifestyle*** ***Perseverance – a key ingredient for a healthy lifestyle! Cleanliness is the mother of health!!*** **-** proverbs about a healthy lifestyle; - watching films about the importance of healthy eating habits; - exercises of identifying errors during mealtime through images; the food pyramid; - practical activities for the	Example Conversation and moral exercise Debate Team work Explanation Story telling Debate Practical activity Exercise Approval Disapproval *Think, work in pairs, communicate*! Role play The diary	-imagining/devising models that embody moral deeds and actions; - building skills and habits of moral behaviour, traits of will and character involved in moral attitudes and behaviour; - practicing techniques for solving interpersonal conflicts; - building efficient communication techniques. - sentient acquisition of knowledge and proper building of representations about the role of perseverance in creating a healthy lifestyle ; - stimulating reflection, critical thinking; - practicing actions to build and consolidate skills; - facilitating the transfer to real life of knowledge, skills, abilities acquired by students; - actively facilitating the exchange of ideas, experiences and knowledge, active participation, promoting interaction,

	preparation of salads and raw cakes; - contest of stories and riddles; - dental hygiene practical activity; - practical activity of selective waste collection; - filling-in questionnaire with dual choice. ***Activity with children and parents*** *– My restaurant –* ("design/layout" activities, inviting parents, presentation of rules of perseverance to achieve any goal in life, the poetry of perseverance, information about a healthy lifestyle, presentation by each parent of a homemade cake, serving cakes to parents, students put into practice the good manners they have learned, assessment of pupils by parents, debriefing document, awarding the Medal of Perseverance).		achieving active learning.
-to recognize their own emotions and expressions as well as those of their colleagues; - to identify/find solutions for emotional self-control and management of negative emotions in relationships with colleagues and adults; - to manifest the desire to change negative behaviours; - to realize the importance of patience and forgiveness.	***Emotional and social development*** - recognition of basic emotions in different presentations (videos, images, drawings); - exercises of association of emotions experienced in different situations with the corresponding images; - exercises of expressing emotions through drawing or mimicry; - project of verbal expression by drawing emotions and finding solutions – *The Box of Joy and the Box of Trouble*; - activity for acquiring positive moral values "The Octopus of Values"; - activity with the school counsellor – *The Planet of Emotions* ****On shyness and confidence*** **-** exercises for identifying shy characters; - game for facilitating the expression of wishes – "The Circle of Wishes";	Debate Moral explanation Role play The method of clock faces The technique "Draw and write" The circle of wishes Dramatization	- self-discovery for acquiring emotional wellbeing in order to positively stimulate cognitive processes and learning activities; - conflict manifestation of emotional self-control in situations of crisis and conflict; - dealing with emotions, reducing shyness, optimal development of interpersonal relationships and effective interpersonal communication; - assisting the child in identifying the qualities needed in the self-updating, self-realization process; - manifestation of self-confidence, encouraging empathy, tolerance, assertive communication ; - awareness of the influences of emotions and feelings on a person's moral development.

	- role play – in pairs, on various topics; ***Activities with parents and children - Patience and forgiveness - forces of personal development*** - therapeutic story "The story of the potatoes" and the moral of the story presented through symbols – the balloon of pride and forgiveness.		
- to discover internal and external conditions that can facilitate the learning activity; - to find their own ways to facilitate learning and form their own learning style; -to develop a daily schedule of activities and leisure time; - to apply knowledge gained in practical activities; - to show positive motivation towards learning; - to show self-confidence and creativity in formal and non-formal learning activities.	***Cognitive development. Creativity*** **** How do I learn?*** - developing posters about how we learn; - fill-in exercises; keeping a learning diary; - practicing active listening; - exercises for developing intuition, imagination and creativity. **** Why do I learn?*** - discussing proverbs about learning; - general knowledge competition – *I learn, therefore I know.* - Project – *Learning* ****Daily schedule*** **-** building a daily schedule; - game "I was wrong, you say it well"! - keeping a diary with outdoor activities; - elaborating a family project "I learn and I am creative through Origami" ***Activity with parents and children – Creativity and its importance in personal development*** - enumerating the rules of creativity; - reciting the poem of creativity; - creating a handprint painting by parents and children "Playful hands". - distributing and filling in the debriefing documents for the activity; - distributing the homework worksheets; - awarding the Medal of Creativity.	The therapeutic story Moral explanation Problem solving The method of clock faces Role play Portfolio Competitions, Trips, Carnivals, Projects for parent-child teams Art therapy	- exploring interests and practicing learning skills; - capitalizing previous experience and anchor-knowledge of students; - exploiting personal interests and skills, expressing emotions and students' attitude toward the learning progress; - building group cohesion by reflecting "together" on products created individually or in teams; - building a secure environment, valuing results by providing positive feedback to each student; - building an optimal framework for shaping a positive self-image, development of learning motivation and self-confidence; - practicing skills and attitudes in an educational environment conducive to learning, development of cognitive processes and creativity.

5. Results and discussions

The general hypothesis and the specific hypotheses have been confirmed. Thus, the scores obtained by the students at the end of the educational intervention programme are higher than the scores obtained by them in the initial assessment carried out before the introduction of the "progress factor". Table 1. Paired Samples Correlations show the correlation coefficient between the two variables r (21) = 0. 833 and the associated threshold of significance p = 0.000 (<0.05), for the socio-emotional development; the correlation coefficient between the two variables r (21) = 0. 836 and the associated threshold of significance p = 0.000 (<0.05), for the cognitive development; the correlation coefficient between the two variables r (21) = 0.751 and the associated threshold of significance p = 0.000 (<0.05), for the moral-civic development of the participants.

Table 1. Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	socio-emotional development before the intervention & socio-emotional development after the intervention	23	.833	.000
Pair 1	cognitive development before the intervention & cognitive development after the intervention	23	.836	.000
Pair 1	moral-civic development before the intervention & moral-civic development after the intervention	23	.751	.000

The results of the Paired Samples Test (pre-test and post-test) with 95% CI, show significant differences between the participants' scores before and after carrying on the formative educational programme (Table 2):

- socio-emotional development [t (22) = 12.46, p= 0.000];

- cognitive development [t (22) =11.17, p= 0.000];

- moral-civic development [t (22) =5.05, p= 0.000].

Since t is relevant, it results the fact that there is a significant difference between the two conditions, before and after the experiment, meaning that the socio-emotional development of the participants after the educational intervention programme is significantly higher compared to their level of socio-emotional development before the intervention. Thus, students show more self-confidence, displaying the prerequisites for assertive communication, showing more concern and understanding in identifying and expressing emotions in a given context, understanding and acknowledging their emotions and those of others in an easier way, thus building empathetic skills. Progress was also achieved in managing emotions in conflict situations, many participants

learned to choose the most appropriate ways of expressing affection in relation to the aim pursued, which contributed to better communication and relationships within the group.

Table 2. Results of Paired Samples Test (pre-test and post-test) with 95% CI.

Variables	M_initial	SD initial	M final	SD final	t (22)	p	LL	UL
initial socio-emotional development	7.09	2.29	10.48	2.21	12.46	.000	-3.95	-2.82
final socio-emotional development								
initial cognitive development	7.22	2.48	10.43	2.29	11.17	.000	-3.81	-2.62
final cognitive development								
initial moral-civic development	7.61	3.51	10.09	2.25	5.05	.000	-3.49	-1.46
final moral-civic development								

There is also a significant difference in the two conditions, before and after, regarding the cognitive development of the participants. It was found that the cognitive development at the end of the training programme was significantly higher compared to the level of cognitive development before implementing the educational programme. The interactive strategies applied in the cognitive development activities have increased the awareness of the process of transformation of knowledge, skills and attitudes into competences and appropriate behaviours applicable in real life, with a positive outcome for the students themselves and society. Along with the list of the specific contents set out in the syllabus, there were exploited the personal experiences of students in an integrated manner by constantly relating to their way of thinking, understanding, behavioural reaction, thus contributing to the foundation of authentic learning. The emphasis on the development of mental cognitive processes (memory, thinking, intelligence, imagination), the exercise of exploration, discovery, familiarizing the participants with methods and techniques of effective, creative learning, resulted in stimulating the learning motivation, spirit of observation, critical thinking, communication skills, all of these becoming transferable acquisitions necessary to obtain success in school, career and life.

The progress of students in cognitive and socio-emotional development positively influenced their moral-civic development, both in terms of knowledge, notions, moral judgments and moral conduct. The statistical data show significant differences in the students' moral-civic development before and after the formative programme, the final evaluation results being superior to those from the initial assessment. Alternating forms of organizing activities (frontal, team, pair,

individual activities), resorting to methods and procedures such as problem solving, moral stories, moral example and exercise, approval, disapproval turns the classroom into a space of psycho-social learning, where the child discovers him/herself and others, explores, experiments prosocial behaviours (cooperation, mutual help, positive attitude within the group, towards people from various sociocultural backgrounds etc.), under the close monitoring of adults (teachers and parents).

6. Conclusions

The results of applied research confirm the effectiveness of the implemented educational programme in relation to the personal development of pupils in primary education. Comparing the results obtained by students in the initial assessment conducted before the intervention programme with the results from the final assessment carried out after the formative programme reveals the progress of children in terms of socio-emotional, cognitive and moral-civic development.

The applicative research was based on studies and research carried out in recent decades in the field of personal development, wellbeing, mechanisms and strategies of intervention aimed at empowering every individual to effectively exploit his/her potential of skills, creativity, attitude in the professional, familial, societal development. The activities included in the implemented formative programme were correlated with clear objectives (appropriate to the age and individual profile of students) and interactive, participatory strategies that boosted their motivation, initiative, creativity, involvement in the understanding, formulating and solving of problems. The children were familiarized with techniques of self- and interpersonal knowledge, exploitation of personal experience, development of empathy, emotional self-control, effective, assertive communication of tolerance. Putting students in real life situations, presenting models that embody facts and moral action, facilitating the exchange of ideas, experiences and knowledge, promoting interaction contributed to the formation of skills and habits of moral, civic behaviour and outlined the prerequisites for positive traits of will and character.

From a theoretical perspective, further developments on this subject may contribute to a more rigorous delimitation, to a definition of terms and phrases such as: *personal development*, *wellness*, *self-development*, *personal growth*. From a methodological perspective, efforts could be focused on the identification of specific indicators, relevant to the various facets of the term *personal development*, and the development of assessment and diagnosing techniques, meeting the methodological requirements of validity, reliability, calibration.

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