THE LEVEL OF POSITIVE SOCIO-HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IN YOUNG SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

The article comprises a theoretical perspective on the proposed theme and presents the importance of a positive school and family environment regarding the young school children in order to ensure an individual and collective state of wellbeing, self-acceptance, to develop creative abilities, autonomy and learning motivation.

Key words*: Human (moral) virtues, school success, well-being*

1. Introduction

Children have a native predisposition towards happiness: they get angry easily, but they quickly forget about it and are capable of laughing while crying. However, the beginning of school brings about some challenges that are managed differently by children, this meaning the beginning of social life, which is similar to adult life. The difference is that it is the school environment that positively or negatively affects the well-being of the young schoolchild. The state of wellbeing is connected to personality, the accomplishment of goals, social adaptation or social comparison.

The young child's 'wellbeing' focuses on the psycho-social aspect which is approached from different perspectives: the subjective "hedonic perspective" (derived from the philosophy of Epicurus) and the "eudaimonic perspective", from a psychic viewpoint (derived from Aristotle's philosophy) composed of the "I" particle, meaning good / well and "daimon", meaning spirit, inner state (Negovan, 2013, pp. 64-65).

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An essential element in what we call the level of positive behavior in young school children is the genetic basis: some are born with a predisposition to be happy, while others are inclined to be unhappy. The dominant temperament types demonstrate the same thing: the sanguine types are normally sociable, optimistic, whereas the melancholic types are introverts, non-communicative, sad. The elements that largely contribute to shaping the wellbeing of the young schoolchild are: school context, leisure time, artistic activities, community activities, family. The school environment is something new for a 6-year-old child, it is the instructive-educational context, and the child's happiness depends on his / her relationship with the school and academic success. Many times, students with a high level of wellbeing have good and very good results at school, have few or no absences, are more responsible and have no problem of adaptation that might be manifested as sadness, anxiety, depression. The results obtained by researchers at Research International Schools highlighted a significant correlation between happiness and school success and interpersonal relationships are fundamental to student happiness. As a result of the studies, it was found that, on average, the students who declared themselves happy obtain higher grades. They live positive emotions, of joy and satisfaction, which help them in school work. Research has shown that "the factors which contribute to the wellbeing of pupils are: demographic, psychological and academic factors" (Negovan, 2013, p. 72). The demographic factors refer to age, health, socio-economic status of the family.

In Romania, the school age is situated between 6/7 and 10/11 years of age, that is from the preparatory to the fourth grade. The children who attended kindergarten are somewhat familiar with an organized instructive-educational framework, compared to those who did not go to kindergarten and the organizational system proposed by the school is an absolute novelty to them. From the very beginning, one can observe that some children can easily adapt to the school program, whereas others find it more difficult to adapt. The most important aspects of this age are school adaptation and learning, as a fundamental type of activity that demands intellect and affectivity. The student learns, at this stage, the tools of intellectual work: reading, writing, calculating, which are necessary throughout the entire life. Also, "school creates the switch of mentality towards the world of complex reality" (Şchiopu & Verza, 1981, p.162). Adaptation is needed, and it involves many confrontations. The level of wellbeing of the young schoolchild depends on these elements.

The child's family plays an essential role in assessing the level of wellbeing: by the time school starts, the only patterns of life that the child observes are those of his/her parents, grandparents, brothers and other relatives. The child comes to school with certain values which were acquired in the family: to be respectful, to greet, to be obedient, to be punctual, to be loyal.

These values are more easily learned if parents respect them too. A dysfunctional family will negatively influence the child, who will exhibit the same behavior as seen in the family. Physical and mental health represents an important factor in the wellbeing of the child during the primary school years. The child begins school with a "luggage" of mentalities, habits, values acquired within the family. The school creates the conditions for children to establish relationships with their peers and adults. Schoolchildren are allotted to different classes, corresponding to their age group, having a common instruction curriculum, school rules and regulations. The child has to face social situations, and obey rules.

The school, in turn, offers models of life, social models, models of thinking, acting, relating. New attachments and fears are formed. The children's wellbeing depends on how they manage these aspects. Among the psychic factors, the most common aspects of wellbeing are: meeting basic psychological needs and setting goals in life. The psychological needs are: to express emotions, to feel protected and stimulated, to connect to others, to belong to a group, to feel valorized and recognized. Directly related to the wellbeing of the child, we can also refer to spiritual needs: the need to believe in something, the need to have goals, the need to feel useful in relation to oneself and to society, the need for love, peace, beauty, the need for purity, hope, harmony. These needs are involuntary and are extremely important in achieving the wellbeing of the child. In class, in the middle of the class group, the child wants to be seen, heard, understood. This is the need for play, both at school and at home. Other activities also appear, which are performed together with other students: visits to museums, watching shows, participating in age-specific competitions.

Within the class group, young school children manifest a strong interest in other children and in the new model, the teacher. Their curiosity is directed towards how the outside world functions. They discover that there are differences between their family members and their friends. For the wellbeing of the children, it is important for parents to foster friendship relationships among children and to encourage visits, while remaining connected with their own children. The child now needs more space and time to absorb his own findings, and the adult should only interfere when requested, in moments of impasse, or when they feel overcome by challenges. Parents must be flexible.

The students' happiness in the school environment has become an important objective of the current system of education. Nowadays, children have a native positivity, but "an education based on positive psychology is required as an act of knowledge and awareness" (Iluț, 2015, p. 210).

2. Wellbeing: cognitive and affective element and personality

From a psychological perspective, *wellbeing* is defined in relation to self-acceptance, that is positive self-assessment, positive relationships with others, autonomy, relationship with the environment, purpose in life, personal development. From this point of view, the greatest challenges raised by school are the ones related to the relationships with other people, autonomy, the relationships with the environment, school adaptation in general. Several "theoretical multidimensional models of the subjective state of wellbeing" are proposed (Negovan, 2013, p.65). Everyone can assess their state of wellbeing subjectively, depending on how they assess their own lives: career, family, health, various positive emotions and a few negative emotions. Thus, the child's state of wellbeing, as an expression of positivity, has, from a subjective perspective, a cognitive component and an affective component, happiness in relation to personality.

The presence of certain positive psychological features is important for the happiness of the young child: self-acceptance, personal development and increased resilience. The concept of self-awareness occurs when the child begins school and observes whether there are differences in how the teacher treats students in general and them in particular. This is when they become aware of the differences of perception regarding their own persona; the parents regard their child in one way, whereas the classmates perceive them differently. Self-image refers to how each person perceives their own personality and involves three elements: the importance of the others' perception of themselves, the elements on which the perception of others is made, and the extent to which conduct and motivation influence self-esteem. Thus, there are three perspectives: the "ego"- the one that appreciates the image, which can be positive or negative, "the other" - all that builds a judgment about that person and the reflection of the self on the self-image in relation to the concordance or non-concordance between these and the appreciation of the "other". Self-acceptance is based on how children relate to the others and to oneself. Obviously, there are children who make friends easily, are friendlier, and as a result self-acceptance is a natural process. The lonely, introvert, shy children may have a problem in self-acceptance. The child relates to the requirements of the parents, the teacher, but also to those of their friends in the desire to be accepted, praised, appreciated, loved. He "tries to adjust himself" (Şchiopu & Verza, 1981, p. 199) in order to avoid punishment, failure, rejection, and grows to lie and avoid answering. Self-acceptance starts together with self-image, which is important for the child's wellbeing when school begins.

An honest self-image means accepting defects, limits, qualities in a realistic way. This is an ability that leads to self-acceptance, that is, the acceptance of one's own person with the parts where improvements can be made. The young schoolchild attains self-acceptance, by forming their self-image consciously. The child can accept himself or not depending on his positive or negative self-image. The positive image is reached with the help of parents first and then with the help of the teacher and classmates. The child already has a positive self-image if the family has contributed through a positive attitude and communication. This is also a prerequisite for a positive self-image when school begins. Childhood successes and failures, as well as the reactions to them, shape self-image. The attitudes of the family, of the classmates, and the teacher complete this image.

A child can manifest lack of self-confidence as a result of low self-esteem in several ways: he does not dare to play with other children, does not raise his hand to answer in class, out of fear of making mistakes, or by excessive timidity. A possible cause of self-distrust may be excessive criticism. School can offer children a proper environment in order to help them regain self-confidence through play, encouragement, affection, listening and empowerment (Haddou, 2011, pp.158-170). Student satisfaction is associated with learning outcomes - academic and appropriate success in the school environment - but also with the dimensions of the school climate (support, physical and psychic environment, relationships with teachers).

3. Family and school – determining factors of school success

School success refers to the achievement of high results in school activity, according to the school curriculum and to some outstanding results obtained in extra-curricular activities. School success also includes special intellectual capacities: thinking, memory, speech, creativity, imagination, flexibility of thinking, higher learning motivation, character traits and behavior. Sometimes, even the grade "Sufficient" can be classified as "school success" when it reveals some visible progress compared to the child's previous stage. In order to stimulate learning motivation, such a student can be encouraged to make further progress by praising his performance.

In order to achieve school success, family support is necessary, combined with the pedagogical qualities of the teaching staff on a normal psycho-socio-physiological background of the child. Thus, the family must be a cohesive group based on cooperation, understanding, respect and mutual help; parents must be preoccupied with providing an elevated education to their children so that they could have a decent and civilized behavior within and outside the family; it is beneficial to involve the children in some household activities in order to make them responsible. Parents should provide children with favorable learning conditions - study area,

sources of information - the bookcase should be present and include the favorite books besides the necessary conditions for life: food, clothing, footwear, hygiene, health. Parents must also establish a permanent link with the school so as to adequately support the child for school work; participation in meetings with parents contributes to getting to know the school requirements, but also to finding positive education methods, which lead to success at school.

In the classroom, the child should find the most appropriate conditions for developing the school activity: a welcoming and cheerful room with suitable furniture, a dedicated teacher who should practice a positive education: encouraging direct communication, encouraging emotional expression through all channels: music, drawing, dance, compositions; organizing artistic activities, trips. Obviously, in the first grade, the teacher notices differences in the level of understanding, expression and learning of students; therefore, differentiated treatment is required, when necessary. Initial, continuous and summative assessment tests help to identify learning gaps and various learning needs. The progress sheet for each student can show his school success (good and very good results) or the evolution from one test to another. The student's wellbeing is ensured if the teacher encourages school progress and good /very good results.

An important factor in achieving school success is physical and psychological fatigue. From this point of view, we will approach the issue of the homework and the rigid class program. Although homework is not recommended in the early classes of primary school, teachers give homework. Parents are often heard complaining that they have to do portfolios for their first-grade children. In these cases, two serious mistakes are made: the overloading of the students' program and the impossibility of carrying out the tasks. The child is deprived of the satisfaction of carrying out a task. The wellbeing of the young schoolchild is also achieved by promoting their autonomy. Autonomy is the ability of a person to have control over their own learning or in collaboration with other children. An independent student will assume more responsibility for his actions. In order to achieve this, the child must have the opportunity to choose, do homework by themselves, even if they make mistakes. The tasks must rouse interest and willingness to succeed, but they must also be easy enough so that children can solve them alone or in collaboration with other students. Autonomy can be encouraged in the classroom if children are taught to set up simple learning objectives, choose teammates, set team / group working rules, choose their workplace. All these processes increase students' self-esteem and self-confidence and make them understand that they have control of their actions and success depends on them.

At the same time, learning motivation also increases, this being an important factor in achieving school success. In this sense, appreciations have an educational function because they stimulate the development of a strong motivation towards learning. A student's interest in a type

of activity or task is likely to generate an attitude that produces the pleasure of accomplishing it, and generates a sense of satisfaction for the achieved results.

"Motivation is the sum of all the motives of a person. The motive is a psychic structure that causes orientation, initiation and adjustment of actions towards a more or less specified purpose. Motives represent the internal causes of behavior" (Cucoş, 1998, p. 62). The psychology of education differentiates between intrinsic motivation (determined by desires, interests, strictly personal preferences) and extrinsic motivation (determined, imposed from the outside). Thus, the child will go to school for extrinsic reasons: the desire to belong - to please the parents and to meet the demands of the teacher; the desire to be with friends; out of the habit of obeying the rules, out of the fear of not getting a certificate, of not being the same with the others or of the desire to be the first. On the other hand, the child goes to school for intrinsic reasons, because he/she is curious to learn as much as possible, as a result of a native impulse or because the teacher has woken up his interest through his methods. The students that are extrinsically motivated are less satisfied with the activity they develop than those who are intrinsically motivated, who experience the satisfaction of learning something new, of gaining a result through their own efforts, and collaborating with other classmates.

The OECD report, launched at the end of 2003 – "Learners for Life: Student Approaches to Learning: Results from PISA 2000" - clearly identifies motivation as the main factor of student success. The OECD report released in December 2004 – "Learning for tomorrow's world: First results from PISA 2003" (Popenici, 2004, p.7) - points out a particular situation in the Romanian system of education: inequality of quality, unequal chances. In this context, motivation is important, especially positive motivation, produced by stimuli such as praise, encouragement, having beneficial effects on the student's activity, contributing to the consolidation of one's wellbeing. A strong motivation is the grade, as an element that can lead to either praise or criticism from adults. However, there are several categories of learning reasons specific to the young schoolchild. The first category of reasons are the social ones, with emphasis on social purposes and on the grounds of reciprocity (to be together with other children in collective activities). Satisfaction does not lie in achieving the goal, although it has its own importance, but in the process of achieving it, during which children relate to one another.

Another category of cognitive reasons is the students' desire to learn and the interest in one school subject or another. Intrinsic motivation develops satisfaction, wellbeing, happiness, because of the desire to know, sometimes doubled by achieving good results in learning. The affective reasons are based on positive and negative emotions such as love and respect for parents, the feeling of duty towards parents, the desire to offer joy to parents, the attachment to

the teacher, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the fear of punishment, the feeling of regret, shame. Only the affective positive motivation can generate happiness. Generally, primary school children want to obtain very good results at school, and also to be appreciated by the class group, the teacher and the parents at the same time.

Human relationships are fundamental to the happiness of the young school child: relationships with classmates, relationships with adults-teachers, but the most important are relationships with parents. Children who are happy at home, in the family, have all the prerequisites to relate happily with both their classmates and the teacher. In the case of relationships, positive attitudes and character traits of the students are confirmed. Positive features of character and moral qualities are important for establishing positive rapport, but the basis of these features is formed in the family, especially through the adults' examples. We have been able to observe children's behavior over time and came to the conclusion that there are two categories of children: those who socialize easily, speak politely, are willing to share food, toys, books, school supplies with their fellow students, and children who are mean, selfish and who later turn into ignored, marginalized students. One case that particularly impressed me was the following: a child coming from a family with an average socio-economic status was rejected by the class group, and when I asked why, the children told me that he was physically and verbally violent, he was ill-behaved. During the class I noticed that he refused to "share" the coursebook with his friend and also desk mate, who forgot his book at home. Such a negative relationship did not come out of the blue. When I explained how exaggerated his behavior was, he smiled and offered to share the book with his desk mate. I showed him other students in the class who did the same.

4. Human virtues: classification, structure, practical examples

In the work, "Positive psychology applied to education", V. Negovan (2013, p. 122) states: "positive character traits lead to specific configurations towards a concept of great complexity and functionality: virtues". The most common are Christian virtues: faith, charity, forgiveness, patience, courage, justice, truth. In fact, Christianity defines best man's "areté" (the Greek term "areté" means excellence, virtue). These virtues should be cultivated and practiced starting from early childhood.

Our society, however, faces a crisis of values, because there is also a crisis of models. Children watch on TV cartoons, video games that contain a lot of violence, revenge, and a person's appearance matters more than character. That is why the school should educate the young children in harmony with the true values - virtues – so as to build strong characters.

The young school child needs to see that an adult does not praise, speaks calmly, kindly, uses nice words, is fair, honest, gives equal opportunities to all, is kind, tolerant, encouraging. By making a distinction between good and evil, the child will choose the good model.

Researchers (Negovan, 2013, pp. 126-127) identified 24 positive features (moral qualities): creativity, curiosity, receptivity to novelty, love of learning, perspective (all these build wisdom); bravery, perseverance, integrity / authenticity, vitality / enthusiasm, (these lead to courage); love, kindness, social intelligence (these qualities build humanity); civic spirit, fairness, leadership (these qualities build justice); forgiveness, mercy, modesty, humility, prudence, self- discipline (they build the virtue of temperance); the appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality (these lead to transcendence). All these positive traits and virtues are built over time. In our school, for example, emphasis should be placed on creativity rather than on mechanical learning, because in the development of wisdom, creativity is important. The best way to cultivate creativity is brainstorming, even though not all the ideas generated in this way are equally valuable. Also, the pleasure to learn is necessary to make school activity pleasant. This is directly related to the motivation of learning, to competence and valorization.

Regarding the virtue of courage, this is related to "the management of emotions, such as the mastery of fear" (Negovan, 2013, p. 133). At school, children face more types of fear: the fear of being asked to tell the lesson, fear of low grades, fear of failing to become integrated. Overcoming these fears is important for the wellbeing of the child. The virtue of kindness (idem, p. 138) includes, in fact, the essential Christian virtues: humility and modesty, love, kindness, mercy. In Christian families, children learn these virtues and their behavior has all of the following characteristics: they make friends easily, they love animals, they are always willing to help their classmates, they share their food with others, they are attached to the teacher. Such children can be examples for other children because they relate very easily, they are not short-tempered, but forgiving. Christian education helps in the formation of positive features of character, which also determines the wellbeing of children. Young school children have a developed sense of fairness and justice: they pay attention to what is happening around them, that is why the virtue of justice/impartiality is based on civic spirit and impartiality. Children are aware of how the teacher reacts in each class and observes if everyone is treated the same way.

The virtue of transcendence includes hope, spirituality (faith), gratitude, appreciation of beauty. These features are cultivated in primary school through vocational subjects, such as: religion, visual arts and practical skills, music and movement, physical education.

In the Religion class, the child learns about Christian virtues, love being the most important. They learn about God, hope, gratitude, which contribute to the child's happiness. Speaking of

gratitude, Emmons shows that it is an "emotional response to receiving benefits according to a few conditions that the beneficiary has to fulfill: a) to be positively assessed; b) to not be attributed to his/ her own effort, and c) to be deliberately offered a benefactor" (Negovan, 2013, p. 149). The effects of gratitude are important because they contribute to an increase in satisfaction, positive affection, happiness. Children first express their gratitude when they are offered gifts, sweets. In the family, they are taught to say: "Thank you!" whenever they receive something. At school, children learn about gratitude in many other situations, especially within the class group: when they are helped, or when they are appreciated. Thanksgiving can be practised by keeping a diary in which the child writes down at the end of the day every time he says, "Thank you!". Specialists believe that gratitude should be explicitly educated in children in order to stimulate the state of wellbeing.

Hope contributes to the happiness of children, as it helps increase self-esteem, confidence and control over ongoing events. Children with a high level of hope can adapt more easily to failure, are less stressed about school testing. Regarding hope, optimism was considered to have a native character, as a belief in the possibility of achieving some expected results, under conditions of uncertainty. "In positive psychology, optimism has been conceptualized in two main ways: in terms of dispositional optimism and in terms of explanatory style" (Negovan, 2013, p.158). Dispositional optimism represents an expectation that favorable, rather than unfavorable events will happen in the future; explanatory style optimism refers to the assumption that optimism can develop. By linking this to the schooling period, optimism must be seen as an adaptation, after accepting reality, and the expectations of the little school child are positive.

Optimism is learned directly by children from parents, grandparents, teachers - when adults express their positive thoughts - and indirectly through encouragement and help in solving problems. Moreover, the person that best affects the wellbeing of the child is the mother (as an example of the explanatory style) (Negovan, 2013, p. 160). Optimism is important for the young school children, since it represents an aid in adaptation process to the school curriculum and in relating with others. Moreover, researchers believe that optimism can be taught and learned in order to reduce the problems which occur at the beginning of school through role-play, or stories. Children should be able to distinguish between positive and negative thoughts and change their negative thoughts.

According to the Rodawell model (Nedelcu et al., 2018), the wellbeing of the young school child can be built through a friendly learning environment: classroom, hallways, labs, school yard. The "learning environment" also comprises the social dimension, the community to which the child belongs. The researchers introduced concepts such as "positive institutions" and

"positive community", realities that can positively influence the child's life through positive emotions. The physical, social and emotional environment, where the students spend much of every day, affects the child. A beautiful, friendly school provides children with a happy environment, an environment where they want to come/ return. The physical environment – the classroom, the school yard - can be arranged so as to suit the taste of children: cheerful colors, comfortable school furniture, colored pencils, soft mat, playground. In such a welcoming environment, the child will not feel the sudden change from kindergarten to school.

The school must provide a friendly, encouraging atmosphere and offer rewards to students. Activities involving children's co-operation and active learning make schoolchildren more sociable and more involved. An important problem in current Romanian schools is the aggressive behavior often accompanied by harassment and discrimination. Violence and aggression on young school children have long-term effects, that is why teachers must always superintend children, both in class and during breaks. Teachers must prevent acts of violence, be they verbal, emotional, or physical. A welcoming school maintains a close relationship with the family, by involving parents in children's activities, especially extra-curricular activities: celebrations, exhibitions, anniversaries, excursions, museum visits. The school needs to know every child's family background and their needs in order to adapt the teaching methods, to respect their family values and traditions in order to avoid contradictions, conflicts (for example, the teacher needs to know whether the students belong to any religions or confessions, in order to avoid possible violations of some values). Children need to trust that at school they are accepted as they are so that they could gain self-confidence.

5. Conclusions

A positive school environment ensures wellbeing and happiness, reinforces the sense of belonging. The effects are easily visible: children trust their own strengths, they are open, sociable, happy to play and eager to learn new things. As long as the adults - teachers and parents - are aware of the need to learn how to educate children positively in order to get positive behaviors and attitudes, there is a chance to evolve as a society. Many specialized studies focus on exploring the subject of wellbeing on a subjective, psychological and social level: school success/ failure, school motivation, extracurricular activities, appreciation, social valorization.

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