

STRATEGIES OF PROMOTING WELL-BEING IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Flavia Mălureanu

University of Bucharest, Romania

Luiza Enachi-Vasluianu

University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract. *The concept of well-being, although has been an issue of great relevance in the international literature and practice, is granted little time or attention in the Romanian educational system. As a matter of fact, teachers have to deal with overcrowded curriculum, not enough time to teach it, overcrowded classes with up to thirty or more students in the urban areas, especially. The only classes which lay little emphasis on well-being are those with disciplines which are not enlisted for the national exams, such as PE, Music, Arts.*

This paper aims to study a series of strategies meant to implement well-being in school activities. The selection of strategies was done according to specific literature, teachers' systematic observations and experiences in the classrooms. The conclusions reached were that for students well-being is transposed into interactive fun activities with emphasis on discovery, experiment, role-playing, game, humour in all aspects of actions and communication, instructional activities out of the school area etc. Teachers' discussions in focus-groups resulted into a questionnaire, used as an instrument to gather data.

The research methods were the investigation based on questionnaire, the conversation and the systematic observation. The participants in the research were 100 teachers from two school levels: primary school (students 6-11 years old) and gymnasium (students 11-15 years old). Their experience in the didactic field varied from 2 to 15 years. The data collected were processed using the SPSS analysis. The results emphasized teachers' awareness that the use of strategies of promoting well-being in school activities increase the efficiency of the educational activity.

Keywords: *didactic activity, Romanian educational system, well-being.*

Introduction

By tradition, well-being has been identified with happiness, content, health, economic and social success (Bradley, 2015). More perspectives lay emphasis on well-being as the core concept of mental health: „in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization, 2014). Research has insisted that well-

being in childhood ensures positive development across the life course: „the foundations of well-being would help children develop satisfying relationships, optimal health, lifelong learning abilities, social responsibility and purposefulness” (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003). As such, it is imperative that school should be a major promoter of mental health and well-being for the children (Aggleton, Dennison, & Warwick, 2010).

Students spend most of their time in school and as such this should be a place, which generates wellbeing, at social, physical and emotional levels. Children’s wellbeing influences their ability to benefit from quality education and reach their full potential. In order to learn, to achieve successful learning, students need wellbeing, first of all. The Romanian school, such as it was built culturally and historically, does not grant much attention to this issue, since the common perspective insists on obligation: children have to go to school, they have to learn. Moreover, adults’ attitude, be they teachers or parents, overcrowded curriculum, overcrowded classes, the stress of high marks, inappropriate school schedule lead to learning achieved under pressure and this results in minimum efficiency and rather unpleasant consequences on a long and medium term.

The purpose of this study is to put under the lens a series of strategies used for the promotion of well-being in the Romanian schools, their degree of efficiency for this purpose for two school levels, primary and lower secondary. The strategies have been selected according to specific literature and submitted to discussion in focus groups. It has been agreed that well-being can be best promoted through the following strategies: interactive fun activities, humour in communication, out of hours learning activities, safe learning environment, positive identity, belief in future, techniques of efficient organisation of the after-school time, family-school partnership, all of which are dealt upon in relation to the Romanian educational context.

The issue of well-being in school activities in the Romanian educational system

As a rule, interactive school activities are based on dialogue as a means of instruction in an attempt to put in harmony students’ individual involvement with the group work. Interactivity stimulates cooperation and competition. It helps discover one’s own abilities and limits as it offers the opportunity to learn through individual’s effort and productivity. Teachers should promote interactive fun activities with emphasis on discovery, experiment, role-playing, game and any other challenging experiences and opportunities to participate in the activity. These kinds of activities ensure a dynamic atmosphere in which children can be themselves without feeling the effort and the pressure generated by the obligation

to learn.

Humour in all aspects of actions and communication can consolidate the image of a school with happy students. In the Romanian school, adults (parents and teachers) put much pressure on students as they are expected to become fully competent on intellectual and social levels. In this context, most of the times, humour in classes is mistaken for superficiality and is disregarded as school has to be serious and the classical learning image does not have much in common with a classroom with students smiling or laughing. In reality, when children laugh or enjoy themselves, time passes more quickly, the effort to learn does not seem so difficult and the students will come to school out of pleasure, not obligation. The jokes, the humorous comparisons or explanations, the puns, the humorous expression of nonverbal and paraverbal communication generated by teachers and students can humanize the relationship established among them. Research and school practice demonstrate that students develop a better relationship with the teachers who allow the use of humour in their classes (Enachi-Vasluianu & Mălureanu, 2014).

Out of hours learning activities refer to activities which students and teachers take part in after school, in weekends, during the special week which happens once an academic year dedicated to instructional activities out of the school area or in holidays. In the Romanian educational system out of hours learning activities mean visits to museums, Zoos, various economic agents, theatre trips, curriculum related clubs, trips to explore various natural environments. These types of activities offer diversity by taking the students and the teaching staff out of the school space and its rigorous atmosphere. At the same time, they stimulate curiosity and volunteer involvement in activities, cooperation, the development of social, motric and intellectual skills in children. All in all, out of hours activities promote a relaxed learning environment supporting the wellbeing of all the people involved.

Safe learning environment is supported by promoting tolerance and cooperation in school. Schools should implement a strict policy regarding bullying and aggression. Teachers should provide care and support to ensure healthy relationships among students, to create a learning environment where everyone feels comfortable and safe.

A harmonious personality is based on the development of a positive feeling of identity. The adult contributes to the formation of child's identity through support and guidance. School should boost students' self-confidence and self-esteem, thus helping them in the long run to develop winners' mentality, to trust themselves. They need to understand that through involvement, effort and perseverance any obstacle can be surpassed. In this context, teachers and counsellors should perform specific activities, with individuals or in groups, which should value their abilities and encourage their learning efforts.

Belief in future makes reference to an optimistic perspective on the possibility of professional fulfilment based on school education. Both in primary and lower secondary school levels, children do not have a clear vision on their professional options, on the social and professional insertion. As such, in order to avoid tensions and fears, to ensure children's emotional balance, teachers should help students discover their predilections and abilities, to show them possible variants for a primary professional orientation.

Learning about after-school time use is necessary because time represents an efficient tool of orientation in fulfilling a series of didactic tasks during a day. Rationalizing after school time means a conscious, continuous and perseverant organisation of activities (Cucuș, 2002). The schedule of primary schools in Romania is from morning to noon with 4 or 5 classes of 50 minutes each and 10 minute breaks. For the afternoon there is the afterschool option which is private and costs money. If they do not go to an afterschool institution, children go home. The time allotted to homework is generally rather vast as it is customary to have two or three tasks to solve as homework for each discipline. As such, children are busy with homework most of the afternoon and the evening and, as a result, they tend to develop a negative perspective on school. That is why an efficient organisation of the time is necessary. Children should be taught to obey the resting programme after they get home, distribute equally their efforts, with breaks after each task fulfilled and not to leave things unfinished. They also should be taught to eat nutritional food to maintain the proper level of energy. These things will help them focus on the task, use efficiently their intellectual resources and have enough spare time for play and relaxation (Voiculescu, 2004).

The family-school partnership aims at child's harmonious development. It is tightly connected to the satisfaction of child's emotional, educational, identity needs. This partnership involves an active and responsible involvement of the parents and it creates unity of action and request for the education of the children (Mălureanu, 2010). Parents have to cooperate with the teachers and take part in any activity organised together with or for children. Thus, they get involved in specific didactic activities, they organize and coordinate workshop, activities, either curricular or extra-curricular, volunteer together with their children. Parents' involvement in children's school activity confers them support, psychic comfort, motivates them to learn and fulfil school and parents' expectations (Boca, 2008).

Methodology of Research

Objectives

The research objectives a) to identify a series of strategies meant to implement well-being in school activities at primary and lower secondary school

levels, b) to make descriptive analyses of the selected strategies to determine a hierarchy in two school levels. The Romanian educational system is conceived of three school levels: primary school (with students aged from 6 to 11), lower secondary school (with students aged from 11 to 15) and upper secondary school (with students aged from 15 to 19).

Participants

The sample involved in the research consisted of 100 teachers from Vrancea County, Romania: 50 primary school teachers and 50 lower secondary school teachers. Their experience in the didactic field varied from 2 to 15 years. They are teachers willing to change some aspects of the negative image of a school with mandatory activities and reliance on obedience.

Research instrument

The main method in the research was the questionnaire-based investigation. We built the questionnaire using specific literature, focus-group discussions with the teachers involved in the research and our long term observations in school practice. The corroboration of data led to the identification of a series of strategies which can be used to implement well-being in school activities: interactive fun activities, humour in communication, out of hours learning activities, safe learning environment, positive identity, belief in future, techniques of efficient organisation of the after-school time, family-school partnership.

The respondents chose one variant of a five-step scale: (1) to a very low extent, (2) to a low extent, (3) to an average extent, (4) to a large extent, (5) to a very large extent. The answers showed the relevance for each strategy in promoting wellbeing in primary and lower secondary school in the Romanian educational context.

Results and discussion

For the descriptive analyses, we used SPSS software and a t-test for the independent samples.

The means in Table 1 were used to make a hierarchy of the strategies of promoting well-being in school activities in the Romanian educational system as presented in Table 2. As such, the indicator that ranked 1st was considered highly relevant as strategy of promoting well-being in the didactic activities, whereas the item which ranked 8th was perceived as the least relevant for the same purpose.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviation of Strategies of Promoting Well-being in School Activities in the Romanian Educational System

Items of strategies of promoting well-being in school activities in the Romanian educational system	Primary school Mean (std. dev.)	Lower Secondary School Mean (std. dev.)
interactive fun activities	4.84 (0.438)	4.78 (0.418)
humour in communication	4.30 (0.404)	4.64 (0.964)
out of hours learning activities	4.27 (0.919)	4.38 (0.667)
safe learning environment	4.62 (0.733)	4.56 (0.848)
positive identity	4.36 (0.663)	4.62 (0.942)
belief in future	3.62 (1.323)	4.12 (0.940)
techniques of efficient organisation of the after-school time	4.34 (0.262)	4.50 (0.859)
family-school partnership	4.52 (0.881)	4.14 (0.661)

Source: Authors

Table 2 Description of Hierarchy of Strategies of Promoting Well-being in School Activities in the Romanian Educational System

Rank	Primary School	Lower Secondary School
1.	interactive fun activities	interactive fun activities
2.	out of hours learning activities	humour in communication
3.	safe learning environment	positive identity
4.	family-school partnership	safe learning environment
5.	positive identity	techniques of efficient organisation of the after-school time
6.	humour in communication	out of hours learning activities
7.	techniques of efficient organisation of the after-school time	family-school partnership
8.	belief in future	belief in future

Source: Authors

For primary school, the top three ranks belong to the following items: interactive fun activities ($m = 4.84$), out of hours learning activities ($m = 4.72$), safe learning environment ($m = 4.62$). For lower secondary school, the top three ranks belong to interactive fun activities ($m = 4.78$), humour in communication ($m = 4.64$), positive identity ($m = 4.62$). As Table 1 shows, both in the primary and lower secondary school levels, interactive fun activities ranked first, with means close to the maximum value. This demonstrates that teachers appreciate it as highly relevant for the promotion of wellbeing in the Romanian school

activities. Children want to participate in interactive, stimulating activities in which they should be directly involved in the teaching-learning process.

There is also convergence of opinion on the last rank in the hierarchy which belongs to belief in the future item ($m = 3.62$ at primary school, $m = 4.12$ at lower secondary school). It is commonly acknowledged that children need certain and stable perspective on their professional future. However, a greater relevance to this aspect is granted in lower secondary school ($m = 4.12$) in comparison to primary school ($m = 3.62$) as, for the next school level, students need to opt based on their abilities for a majoring in humanities or technic sciences which could substantiate their professional options later in life.

The means obtained in primary school vary between 4.84 and 3.62, whereas in the lower secondary school vary between 4.78 and 4.12. The high means demonstrate the major interest of teachers in the issue of well-being and its need to be promoted in school activities.

We used the T test for the independent groups to determine the differences of the opinions regarding the strategies of promoting well-being in school activities in the Romanian educational system. The significance level was set to 0.05. Starting from the significant differences from a statistical point of view among teachers' appreciations, we could state the relevance of the strategies of promoting well-being in two school levels, primary and lower secondary school. The analysis showed significant differences for four items (out of hours learning activities, family-school partnership, positive identity, humour in communication, $p < 0.05$). We registered statistically insignificant differences for four items (interactive fun activities, safe learning environment, techniques of efficient organisation of the after-school time, belief in future), indicating the convergence of opinions of the teachers from the two school levels. Analysing comparatively the means, we noticed that two of the items that registered statistically significant differences have higher means at primary level than at lower secondary school (out of hours learning activities: $m = 4.72$ at primary school and $m = 4.38$ at lower secondary school; family-school partnership: $m = 4.52$ at primary level and $m = 4.14$ at lower secondary school). There are also two items with higher means at lower secondary school than at primary school (positive identity: $m = 4.36$ at primary school and $m = 4.62$ at lower secondary school; humour in communication: $m = 4.30$ at primary school and $m = 4.64$ at lower secondary school). This demonstrates the relevance for each item on the school levels under the lens.

Conclusions

It is well known that modern educational policies have moved from the emphasis on high academic performance to achieving a state of equilibrium

between academic achievement and well-being (Aggleton et al., 2010). Taking into consideration the positive aspects and results of foreign educational practice (Lippman, Anderson Moore, & McIntosh, 2009; Morris, 2015; Thorburn, 2018; White, 2011), Romania tries to promote and implement strategies of well-being in school. However, these attempts are relatively new and slowly-going as there are serious impediments related to school structure, teachers' mentality, human inflexibility etc. which need to be overcome. For this study we have worked with teachers who are at the onset of their careers. They acknowledge the importance of well-being in making the educational activities efficient. They are also open to new pedagogical theories and their implementation for children's benefits.

Our research draws attention upon the relevance of well-being in the Romanian school. It also sets emphasis on several of the elements forming this concept and their transposition into current practice. The results of the study show that well-being can be better promoted if the learning process in both school levels moves from the traditional lockstep teaching where a teacher-controlled activity is taking place to interactive activities with emphasis on discovery, experiment, role-playing, game, humour in all aspects of actions and communication. Moreover, the instructional activities should expand out of the rigorous school area and provide learning opportunities that relate to concrete situations and living things in their environment. The outcomes of these strategies of promoting well-being are beneficial for the children: formation of positive identity, good management of thoughts and emotions, the development of efficient learning abilities, all leading in the end to solid social integration and contribution.

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