Education for a positive self-image in a contemporary school

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Abstract

In today's world characterized by changed systems of values and materialism, pedagogy should emphasize education for a positive self-image, especially in the contemporary school, whose educational goals are freedom, independence and individuality. This theoretical analysis provides a review of research on the importance and relationship of a positive self-image with other factors, such as social skills and academic achievement. Simultaneously, the methods and procedures by which teachers can foster a student's positive self-image are displayed. Although the degree of positive self-thinking is for the most part formed in interaction with other people, it is extremely important to raise students' awareness about their own internal strengths as well as their possibility of choice. The education of a positive self-image can be considered a part of „positive pedagogy" or „positive education" which focuses on traditional skills and happiness, but also joy - fervor that accompanies being (Fromm, 2004, p. 130).

Key words: Contemporary school, positive education, positive self-image, positive pedagogy.

Introduction

In this paper we discuss the need and importance of education for a positive self-image in a contemporary school. The reason for that is that schools must be able to cope with the changes that come with contemporary society, such as changed systems of values and materialism. In such an environment, children and young people need to build a healthy and positive self-image in order to develop into successful and functional individuals. Theoretical frameworks that underlay the theme are a humanistic approach to education, student-centered education (Maslow, 1974, Rogers, 1979; Matijević & Radovanović, 2011) and positive education (Seligman, 1992, 2002; Bognar & Simel, 2013), whose characteristics will be clearly visible in the text. Using theoretical analysis of the available and relevant literature in this field to gather data, the paper is divided into key chapters that specify the theme and give a review of important findings of previous researches.

First of all, it is important to define terms such as „contemporary school" and „humanistic curriculum". We often talk about the contemporary school and the requirements it should fulfill. The term „contemporary school" itself implies an educational and a social institution of organized nurturing, education, and training, whose humanistic dimension of experiential learning should happen as an integral part , and a step towards a new, open institution from where one can hear

the creative explorers' turmoil (Previšić, 2007). Students receive basic information about a certain subject, but at the same time they train for individual and creative ways of finding the solutions to problems (Sekulić-Majurec, 2007). That kind of school is a creative and a cooperative community created for the student, with the aim of encouraging self-actualization, freedom of speech, flexibility and uniqueness. Because of that it aspires to an open and creative humanistic curriculum that changes the traditional functionalistic curriculum, and puts the student, his/her needs, interests and capabilities at the center, i.e. meets student's individual capabilities (Previšić, 1999, 2007).

There are many definitions of the curriculum in the literature – from the first identification with syllabus to a curriculum as a theory in action (Fullan, in Koludrović & Reić-Ercegovac, 2010), to wider theoretical concepts, „open and humane" (Morin, in Koludrović & Reić-Ercegovac, 2010), that is formed (co-constructed) as a result of continuous joint research of educational practice of all that are a part of it (Marsch, 1994), with the purpose of creating conditions that will be in harmony with child's nature and which will lead to the emancipation of all participants (Miljak, in Sekulić-Majurec, 2007). In such a modern conception of the curriculum, the school is no longer a place where teachers simply teach, but it becomes a school that learns (Meyer, 2002). All of the participants in the educational process learn every day and under the influence of that new knowledge they change and improve their own behavior. Since the goal of each curriculum should be a high quality school (Sekulić-Majurec, 2005, 2007), it is clear that the curriculum of a contemporary school should be that of humanistic orientation. With that we come to an important area - humanistic education - that is still neglected and suppressed in our schools; especially the education of a positive self-image (Bognar, 1999) as its main part.

Croatian educational politics has composed a National Curriculum Framework (2008), where social and civil competency is one of the eight basic competencies that students should develop. Within that competency, among other things, confidence and self-respect is emphasized. But how can students develop that if there were no such opportunities?

We know that our students do not like school (Kuzman, Pavić Šimetin, Pejnović Franelić, 2004, 2008, 2012), and simultaneously we know that their experiences in school context are very important in developing confidence and self-respect. Frustrations they continuously experience diminish their feelings of safety (Lauster, 1997). That is why we should ask ourselves several questions: Who failed? Do teachers encourage the creation of a positive self-image within the students? and are the teachers even educated for that mission?

Education for a positive self-image

Self-image (self-concept) can be understood as a wider term that comprises self-respect (valuing oneself), which is made out of two parts: the feeling of one's own value – the belief that we have the right to be happy and that we deserve success, friendship, love and fulfillment; and self-confidence – the belief that we are capable of thinking, learning, choosing, making decisions, and overcoming challenges and

changes (Branden, in Miljković & Rijavec, 1996). That helps a person live an easier life because with it one can explain his/her own past and current behavior and he/she can predict his/her own future behavior. Without it, one's own behavior would look unpredictable, inexplicable and chaotic to oneself (Miljković & Rijavec, 1996). That is also why it is important to educate for a positive self-image in school context.

There are a number of factors that can influence the creation and the development of a self-image, such as parental nurture and parents' attitudes, life values, continuous failures, self-criticism, thinking about actions we took and the reactions of others to our actions; that is, by introspection, noticing our own behavior and receiving information about our surroundings from others (SOAR, 2008; Yahaya & Ramli, 2009; Lebedina-Manzoni & Lotar, 2010). Positive self-image develops in childhood, but realistically, most people develop it later in life. According to that, a self-image is not innate and it can be changed (Rijavec, 1997; Bognar, 1999; Yahaya & Ramli, 2009). According to King (1979), the latter components of self--image can be changed: physical-self, intellectual-self, philosophical-self, social--self, emotional-self and communicative-self.

It is understandable that traditional schools are not the place where students can commit to personal growth. Bognar (1999) points out that in a school that is based on competitiveness and student ranking, a section of students is condemned in advance to the inability of developing a positive self-image, because it is thought that, according to the Gauss' Bell Curve, each class should have a certain number of bad students. Bad students are bad because others have managed to convince them that they are bad. The verification for that can be found in *Rosenthal's (Pygmalion) effect* (or *self-fulfilling prophecy*), according to which our beliefs about somebody can be fulfilled because we can incite their fulfillment with our behavior (Rosenthal & Jacobson, in Lauster, 1997; Merton, in Accel-Team, 2001). This effect shows and proves that the teacher is one of the most important factors that influence the creation of students' positive self-image (Yahaya & Ramli, 2009).

At the same time, the students can choose a negative self-image if that is the way to draw their peers' attention and to be accepted in such a negative way. By doing so, they satisfy their need for self-approval (Bognar, 1999); a need that is universal to all people, along with self-evaluation and self-assertion (Lebedina-Manzoni & Lotar, 2010). It is necessary to raise students' awareness of their choices and to make them aware of how much those choices really do help them in satisfying their needs (Glasser, 1994). Also, teachers should ask each child to be unique, to be himself, to be an authentic person (Bognar, 1999), that will in the end help the child's true self-actualization, the most important motive that moves and defines him/her (Maslow, 1974). Hence, without self-respect and confidence there is also no self-actualization.

Relationship between self-image, social skills and academic achievement

When we talk about encouragement and the creation of a positive self-image, we talk about the personal development of an individual, which should be everyone's priority. However, taking into consideration that our surroundings have an

important role in that process, it is important to study our „external projections" and the results of our actions that could be mirrored in our social skills and academic achievement. Research conducted by Lebedina-Manzoni and Lotar (2010) on 940 adolescents (age 13 – 17) shows the tendency towards positive evaluation, especially in the area of close friendships and social acceptance. Even the adolescents evaluate their self-image mainly positively; the image is mostly based on the assessment of physical appearance and physical attraction. Namely, a self-image, in the same way as an opinion, is developed by a principle that goes from concrete towards abstract, which means that the description of oneself among younger research participants consists mainly of concrete (physical) attributes, while we can find abstract (psychological) attributes among older participants (Lebedina-Manzoni & Lotar, 2010).

Further researches (e.g. Chen, Rubin & Li, 1997; Downey, in Yahaya & Ramli, 2009) confirm that there is also a significant relationship between self-image and social skills, especially interpersonal communicational skills. It is important for a student to acquire interpersonal communicational skills in order to be able to communicate successfully, discuss and exchange ideas with their teachers and classmates. The lack of those skills will indirectly jeopardize their self-esteem, self--image, and after that it will influence their academic achievements.

When it comes to the relationship between a positive self-image and academic achievement, the results of the research are contradictory. On one hand, the researchers claim that there is no significant relationship between self-image and academic achievement or that it is insignificant (Vialle, Heaven, Parriochi, 1994; Lebedina--Manzoni & Lotar, 2010; Yahaya, Ramli, Boon, Ghaffar & Zakariya, 2009; Othman & Bee Leng, 2011). On the other hand, there are researches that confirm the existence of a significant relationship between those two phenomena (Aryana, 2010; Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller & Baumert, 2005), but the causal relationship between them is still unclear (Green, Nelson, Martin & Marsh, 2006). Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs (2003) pointing out that this connection does not necessarily imply that the students with high self-esteem will achieve better results in school. However, Friedrickson (1998) suggests that psychological wellbeing (that includes self-acceptance, personal growth, life purpose, autonomy, feeling of control over life and positive relationships with others) is positively related to better learning because it increases concentration, creative and holistic thinking.

Assumptions for the development of a positive self-image in a contemporary school

Numerous factors can influence the self-image that students have about themselves, and among the most important ones are the teachers. Each Ministry of Education should set the criteria for choosing the future teachers; that is, they should accept only those future teachers that have developed a positive self-image (Yahaya & Ramli, 2009) and those who continuously work on their self-actualization process. That is the only way by which they will be an inspiration and encouragement to the development of the youth – if the teacher is being himself/herself and unique. It is important that the teachers value themselves, because the feeling of one's value

and fulfillment by self-confidence are the prescription for building healthy relation-ships with others, even with their students (Bognar, 2011).

When organizing activities and teaching a class, teachers should pay attention to the atmosphere in which the students will feel psychological safety and psychological freedom (Bognar, 2010) because those two psychological conditions are the basis for the release of the creative potential. Creativity is very important in the development of a positive self-image because the school subjects that activate students in a creative way are significantly connected with a positive self-image: they produce pleasure, contentment and sense of well-being (Smith & Tegan, 1992; Dadvar, Mohamadrezaii & Fathabadi, 2012; Compton, 2005). Ken and Donely (2000) point out that the teacher, when working with students, should also use honest and authentic feedback that will help them grow and change. They should avoid using general comments such as: "Well done!" and "It will be better next time!" and give students several opportunities to achieve success. Equally, they should make the students feel confident about themselves by giving them the option to make their own choice, to have their own understanding of consequences and to accept the results. If students have a constant feeling that they depend on others and that unpredictable things are happening to them, they feel uncomfortable and scared. Students' problems and conflicting situations should not be solved for them because life will not be considerate towards them and they should feel that they can influence the circumstances in their life by their own actions (Bognar, 1999). One possible way teachers can manage this is by using positive education, whose main part is precisely developing positive self-image.

Positive education

In recent literature, the term positive education has emerged within positive psychology (Seligman, 1992., 2002., 2009). Previous researches have confirmed that the skills that lead towards such well-being can be taught in schools (Seligman, 2009; Miljković, 2012). Accordingly, since the nurturing education is a basic pedagogical term, it is necessary to initiate a positive pedagogy whose area of agency would be positive education, along with, of course, the use of valuable conclusions of positive psychology. In this sense, positive education would be focusing on students' positive possibilities and capacities, but simultaneously giving them autonomy and positive conditions to develop their own virtues and values that will make their life worth living (Bognar & Simel, 2013).

Lately, the curriculums of positive education (in the field of positive psychology) have been more often implemented in schools, mostly in Australia, America and Great Britain. They are directed towards traditional skills (achievements) and happiness, i.e. psychological well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009), *but also towards joy – fervor that accompanies being* (Fromm, 2004, 130)[1]. As for the optimal well-being, it implies a sustainable state characterized in the first place by positive emotions and attitudes, positive relations in school, psychological resilience, self-actualization, and a high contentment to the

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[1]   Authors note

process of studying (Roffey, 2012). There are two most known programs of positive education: Penn Resilience Program in the United States (Gillham et al., in Seligman et al., 2009) and Bounce Back! in Australia (McGrath & Noble, in Seligman et al., 2009). Actualization of objectives in these kinds of curriculums has been confirmed by empirical data that indicates the decrease of psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety among primary and high school students.

In Croatia, the implementation of such curriculums, either cross curricular or independently, is still at a very low level. One of such rare researches in that subject area was conducted by Rijavec and Ivanković (2012) with students at the age of ten, with the objective of checking the influence of implementation of the positive psychology program on optimism and class atmosphere in the fourth grade of the primary school. The results have shown that these programs can be efficient for raising optimism among younger students. On the other hand, the results have also shown that pessimism was not lowered and the class atmosphere was not improved. It shows that such programs are very important in creating a positive self-image because it is the basis for the further development of psychological well-being. It can be concluded that teachers and carers again can have a major role in this – they have to generate this program with their students. But to be able to do that, teachers and educators also need to be prepared and educated for the job, for example, at their teacher training at universities (Tatalović Vorkapić, & Vujičić, 2012)

Of course, in the realization of a positive education program the cooperation with parents cannot be omitted because the development of a positive self-image greatly depends on what is happening in students' homes (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). For that reason, it is important to include the parents into the positive education program. They would not only become aware of their own inner strengths and characteristics (Seligman et al., 2009), but they would also feel the use of true partnership of the family and school: the support in the nurture of their own child from parents and other parents involved, the creation of a positive self-image and higher self-confidence, and the involvement in the life of one's own child outside of the home. Teachers would also benefit from it, because through cooperation with parents they could have much more influence on their students, they would feel much more competent for their work, and therefore they would be more satisfied. The students would get the most out of it, because they would feel safer in the school environment, they would have a higher sense of value, more self-respect and valuable nurture experience (Gestwicki, 2000).

Conclusion

This review of literature has the potential to remind teachers that the education for a positive self-image (as a part of positive pedagogy and positive education), should be priority of a contemporary school for sure, and it can encourage them to improve their practice, to become more humane and positive toward students. Data precisely showed that the teacher has a very important role in that process, but to do that, he/she must have proper education and experience in positive edu-

cation in his/her higher education and be a confident person who sets an example to his/her students. Thus, this kind of education can help each student to take control over his/her life and it can contribute to the psychological wellbeing that will help him to cope with modern society. Accordingly, students' positive self-image is in a positive relationship with his/her social skills. Conception of a contemporary school based on humanistic education can hardly be successful without positive education or positive pedagogy.

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