IS POSITIVE THINKING MAGICAL?

Tamy Nave (a)* Alina Roman (b)
*Corresponding author

(a)) Ph.D Student, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Tamynave@gmail.com
(b) Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania,romanalinafelicia@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article deals with the Positive Thinking in School (PTS) program. Positive thinking can change the emotional, physical, and behavioral aspects of each one of us. One way to develop positive thinking is to train our minds to examine events from different perspectives. Positive thoughts can create a positive feeling, which can then lead to an active and more positive confrontation with reality. This article presents the theoretical rationale for an intervention program on positive thinking developed by the author, to be implemented in an Israeli elementary school in four sixth grade classes (11-12 years-old) over the course of an academic year. The program aims to train students to examine events occurring throughout their school day from different points of view and to use these skills to improve their positive thinking. This, in turn, may promote their academic achievements and the positive climate in class. The article expands on the theoretical roots of this program, including Positive Psychology, Phenomenological Humanistic Theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The PTS intervention program is part of a study that will examine the effect of positive thinking on academic achievement and classroom climate. The study sample consists of 130 students aged 11-12 and four teachers.

Keywords: Positive Thinking Program in School (PTS), classroom climate, academic achievements.

1. Introduction

The differences among people regarding their mental well-being, emotional health and personal ability are largely related to their personality structure, biological factors, familial relationships, personal history and exposure to life events. These components and their interactions are also affected by the individual's environment. The interaction of the individual with their environment is a significant factor in the individual's development towards health and well-being. The social context largely explains the existence of interpersonal differences as well as intra-personal differences in personal growth. Special attention has been paid to the school as a system that has a significant impact on the mental well-being of its students. Therefore, the school must act to provide an optimal educational climate that enables the students to achieve appropriate academic achievements while taking into consideration and responding to their emotional and social needs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In light of this, this paper focuses on the meaning of positive thinking and examines the impact of a school-based positive thinking program on academic achievement and educational climate.

1.1 What is positive thinking?

There is a permanent relationship between thought and emotion, body and behavior: Thoughts affect emotions and emotions affect thoughts; thoughts and emotions affect the body, and the body affects thoughts in a continuous cycle (Schwab, Baldwin, Gerber, Gomori, & Satir, 1989). When people think negative thoughts, their moods change accordingly, and they are filled with negative emotions. In contrast, positive thoughts make people feel good and help them cope with different obstacles that may stand in their way.

Two approaches in thinking can be discerned in this context: optimistic thinking, which relates to the positive aspects of reality and helps one perceive goals and purposes with hope; and pessimistic thinking, which picks the negative aspects from reality and sometimes leads to despair. In various studies dealing with reducing anxiety, treating feelings of helplessness and creating mental strength, it was found that the creation of positive thinking leads to a change in other dimensions - the emotional, the physical and the behavioral (Seligman, 2002). Through thinking we choose our point of view. Will we look at the glass half-full or half- empty? What we are focusing on and what we ignore? Will we treat things as fixed or subject to change? In the same way that we convince ourselves that we cannot do anything, we can convince ourselves that we can (Seligman, 2002).

1.2 Previous studies on positive thinking and academic achievements

Various studies have found connections between academic self-perception and the feelings experienced by students in school (Goetz, Frenzel, Hall, & Pekrun, 2008; Goetz, Pekrun, Hall, & Haag, 2006). Pleasant emotions, such as pleasure and pride, are positively related with positive academic self-perceptions, while unpleasant feelings, such as anxiety and anger, are negatively related with positive academic self-perceptions (Frenzel, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2007; Goetz, Frenzel, Pekrun, & Hall, 2005; Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006).

Support, acceptance, and love from the environment surrounding the individual are important elements in the development of high self-esteem (Witkow & Fuligni, 2010). During school years, children

begin to become more aware of the qualities considered important in society and feel high self-esteem when they have these qualities. The school also has a role in shaping self-esteem, since academic achievement play an important role in the self-esteem of the child at this age (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

School climate was linked to students' perceptions of the school, their behaviour in the classroom, and their attitude towards learning and activities. School climate is the school's "personality", the atmosphere that a person can feel when they enter the perimeter (Pashiardis, 2000). Therefore, it is important to focus on it and optimize it so the school environment will allow proper interpersonal relationships and children will develop positive feelings and a sense of belonging to the school.

Studies have shown that a stronger sense of belonging to the school and a sense of belonging to the peer group are positively correlated with school achievement (Baker, 1998). These feelings are also positively associated with positive attitudes towards school, involvement, participation in learning activities, and investment in learning (Osterman, 2000).Consequently, the intervention program focuses on these aspects.

2.   Main Body

2.1. Positive Thinking in School (PTS)

The PTS program, designed by the author, focuses on positive thinking by learning interpersonal and intrapersonal skills such as: self-awareness and self-management, self-control, empathy, assertiveness, problem solving, decision-making and coping with stress and change. It is currently being implemented in an elementary school in central Israel.

PTS focuses on the students' mental well-being. The program considers the educational staff as significant change agents and key figures in their impact on children and adolescents in a constant process of personal, educational, social and emotional development. The lessons in the program differ from the "regular" classes. During the lessons, a personal diary will be written by participants. An atmosphere of trust is created through a "class contract," in which participants can share personal experiences or personal feelings. During the activities, the participants will become better acquainted with themselves, their strengths and the things that make them feel good and make them happier (Shoshani, Steinmetz, & Kanat-Maymon, 2016).

2.2. Theoretical approaches

PTS was designed in accordance with three theories: Positive Psychology, Phenomenological Humanistic Theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

2.2.1. Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2003)

Positive Psychology deals with the optimal functioning of individuals and groups and the factors that promote positive emotions (Gable & Haidt, 2005), positive traits, self-realization and success (Schueller & Seligman, 2010).

Positive Psychology focuses on ways to improve quality of life and optimal personal functioning in order to bring about personal and social change (Gable & Haidt, 2005). It is based on the belief that people naturally aspire to live a meaningful and self-fulfilling life, nurture the best within themselves and

increase their experiences in love, work and play. Therefore, Positive Psychology focuses on human growth, with an emphasis on the importance of the sense of meaning and satisfaction in life (Seligman, 2002).

Positive Psychology focuses on three main issues:

1. Positive emotions that focus on past satisfaction, happiness in the present and hope for the future.

2. Positive personality traits - the development of each person's strengths, such as the potential for love and work, courage, compassion, creativity, curiosity, honesty, self-worth, moderation, self-control and wisdom (Bryan, Mathur, & Sullivan, 1996).

3. Positive ways of behaving - emphasizing the strengths of better communities such as justice, responsibility, good parenting, work ethic, leadership, teamwork, goal setting and tolerance.

2.2.2. Phenomenological Humanistic Theory (Rogers, 1980)

Humanistic Psychology emphasizes that people have a choice and the responsibility to choose, and that one acts to seek meaning and self-realization (Rogers, 1980).

According to Rogers' approach, it is not past events that affect our behavior, but the way we perceive them today. In the same manner, our expectations for the future affect our behavior in the present (Boeree, 2006).

2.2.3. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

SDT is a motivational theory developed by Deci and Ryan (2000) that expresses a humanistic view of human nature and emphasizes the universal tendency of people towards psychological growth and development.

According to SDT, responding to basic psychological needs is the basis of students' intrinsic motivation to invest effort, to persist and to be deeply involved in certain activities (Ryan &Deci, 2000).It is also essential for the development and well-being of students as well as the development of self-perceptions, primarily positive ones (Assor, 2003).

2.3. The PTS program characteristics

The PTS intervention program includes activities that are based on the principles of Positive Psychology such as factors that promote positive emotions, positive traits, self-realization and success and activities from existing programs of Israel's Ministry of Education – such as "Life Skills" and "The Key to the Heart"- with the goal of developing positive thinking among learners.

2.3.1. "Life Skills"

This program works to develop students' social-emotional aptitude and to strengthen their ability to use internal and external resources in coping with developmental issues and different kinds of risk situations.

The school is responsible not only for promoting the students' intellectual and professional knowledge, but also for their emotional and social development. The main assumption underlying the

program is that social and emotional learning serves as a basic condition for, and complements, academic learning in school. Most of the skills that are important for the advancement of students' mental well-being are not innate, but are acquired, and therefore they can be taught, trained, and mastered (Psychological Counseling Service, 2018).

Students are frequently exposed to complex life situations and to different risk situations, both directly and indirectly. This requires schools to fulfill not only their traditional goals of learning and education, but also to address the life situations that students experience and are required to deal with in their daily lives. Thus schools need to consider the different life situations that the children experience in their circles of belonging (family, school, age group, etc.) as important in the curriculum and as an inseparable part of educational activity (Psychological Counseling Service, 2018).

2.3.2. "The Key to the Heart" (Education for life in society)

This program is based on the premise that an individual is a social being who lives and works in society and who interacts with individuals, groups, and society as a whole. The program enables individuals and groups in schools to examine universal and democratic values, to study the social-moral values derived from them, and to experience the application of these values and contents in the diverse settings of daily life (classroom, school, community), while interacting with a variety of populations: children, teachers and parents.

This program is being currently implemented as a field of study in grades 1-6 as part of the regular curriculum once a week, as well as additional frameworks and times that enable the promotion of values from a school perspective (The Key to the Heart, 2017).

2.4. The PTS program goals

The goal of the PTS intervention program is to develop positive thinking among students on the assumption that it will contribute to improving their scholastic performance and the social climate in the classroom. The assumption in building the program is that positive thinking contributes to raising self-efficacy, ability and motivation, and thus can improve scholastic achievements.

2.5. Impact study

The PTS intervention program will be accompanied by a study that will examine the impact of this program on academic achievement and a positive climate in the classroom. The study population will be 130 students aged 11-12 and 4 teachers

3. Methodology

In order to build the program and plan the accompanying study, a comprehensive literature review was conducted on the definition of the key concepts noted in this paper: positive thinking, educational climate and scholastic achievement. Additionally, the review examined previous studies conducted with similar programs. Official government documents and review articles published in English and Hebrew were used.

4. Conclusion

The educational process is designed to give students a sense of growth, value and ability, success and personal fulfillment, an experience of discovery and response to their curiosity, and develop them as active people who integrate into society and contribute to it. It is important for schools to focus on personal strengths and use them to achieve self-realization and happiness, and to create tools that will help children build mental resilience. The PTS intervention program attempts to address these needs and the accompanying study will examine the program's impact on students

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