

APPLYING PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AT SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *In the introduction of this work the author sets a newly framed branch of psychology – positive psychology, its objects of examination, its targets and the possibilities when being applied. The middle part deals with some possibilities when applying some principles and perceptions of this trend at schools. Towards the ends it expresses a conviction to pay more attention to the positive aspects in human life.*

Keywords: *health, school, positive psychology, explanatory style, optimism, pessimism*

Theoretical terms when defining health

Even though the word health is commonly used in various situations we need to realise that when it comes to its meaning people can implement it in various ways. An interesting definition is given by Křivohlavý (2001) who understands the concept of health as a complex (physical, psychological, social and spiritual) condition of a human being that enables to gain an optimal standard of living and, at the same time, it does not become an obstacle while other people try to gain the same condition. The reason we are inclined to this definition confirms the fact that in such specification optimal qualities of a human being are examined while still concerning the individual diversities. Hence reaching certain qualities for one individual while keeping both inner and outer determinants of his development in mind can be presented as health, however the same qualities cannot be considered optimal for another individual.

Health is affected by many factors; however we engage in the issue of how a human being, a pupil in our case, can reach an optimal quality inside school environment and how do such gained qualities contribute to his health during his life. Therefore we ask the question: “Who or what can contribute to the health of pupils at school?”

School as a social institution has its rules, a specific hierarchy of roles and clearly set contents of these roles. School is an environment that stimulates and develops a child in some way. It has its requirements and expectations that can be hardly met by some pupils. Evaluating children’s performance and behaviour is, in one way, an incorrect kind

of relation that has a significant influence on child's self-evaluation and self-relationship – self-respect (Vágnerová, 2004).

Teachers can certainly have a great influence on a child. Therefore how can a teacher help a pupil to reach an optimal quality that corresponds to his age and personal abilities? This question has been addressed by many scholars including pedagogues, psychologists, social workers and other workers in professions that engage with children. Many of them came out with some effective strategies, procedures, methods or techniques in education of pupils. One approach contributing to building-up children's health at school is also the approach of positive psychology. This very report focuses exactly on the issue of positive psychology.

Defining positive psychology, the subject of research, aims, applicable possibilities, the need of interest in positive aspects of human life

Positive psychology can be declared as a science of positive individual features, positive life experiences, positively operating societies and institutions (Mareš, 2002). Positive psychology declares itself as a nascent movement that might be fully developed in the 21st century. Positive psychology acts as a scientific examination of optimal human performance and prosperity. Instead of addressing the defect models it focuses on the factors that enable to reach success and build the best in lives of both individuals and societies.

The subject of examination of such psychological trend is a wide range of phenomena which can be divided into the following groups (Snyder, Lopez, 2002). Cognitive area: wisdom, desire to learn, hope, optimism, subjective well-being, creativity, self-control and self-discipline. Emotional area: experiencing happiness, positive emotions, high emotional flows, emotional intelligence, emotional indefatigability, tenaciousness, positive self-assessment. In the interpersonal area researchers emphasize mercy, social closeness, forgiveness and mitigation, gratefulness, love, empathy, altruism. Another area is a theme concerning moral motivation, the way of managing life-important issues, conflicts and distress, searching for meaningfulness of life. They examine humour, meditation, spirituality, recalling positive experience, addressing and recording positive experience, special individual life approaches, personal authenticity, humbleness, managing ideas and illusions, personal identity, ways leading to self-realization. From the point of time dimension the positive psychology concentrates onto three fields that are 1st – past (e.g. subjective well-being, contentment with the present life), 2nd – presence (e.g. experiencing happiness and high emotional flows) and 3rd – future (e.g. hope, optimism [Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 200]). As for an individual positive psychology deals with positive phenomena: ability to love, courage. For interpersonal relations it focuses, for example, on willingness to forgive, within social groups then positive psychology deals with features of human societies and institutions that are to help people to become better, altruism, family sense, courtesy, self-restraint, tolerance, ethical conduct and as for population it deals with the problems of quality of life concerning large groups of people, experiencing subjective well-being of individual nations, communi-

ties and so like (Diener, 200). Positive psychology observes four targets: 1st – to develop two mutually complementary trends in both theory and reality. One focuses on prevention, respectively on restraining, and minimization of negative personal qualities and experiences. The other supports the occurrence of subjective well-being, experiencing happiness and joy, 2nd – to identify and expand client's positive qualities through psychotherapeutic procedures, 3rd – to create curriculum for teaching positive psychology at universities and high schools, 4th – develop empirical researches in the given fields, 5th – create a working net of researches that would like to focus on empirical examination of themes in the area of positive psychology (Mareš, 2001). The possibilities of applying the findings of positive psychology are to be implemented especially in supporting families and schools that enable children to prosper in the world, in supporting workplaces that create satisfactory environment, enable high individual productivity, support of communities that engage in civil affairs and last but not least in supporting therapists that look after strong aspects of clients (Solyi, 2003).

Why is addressing positive aspects of a human's life needed? This question is not surprising and the answer is surprisingly simple. Because such areas exist in human life. Naturally their existence was known long before; however psychologists have rather paid their attention to negative, respectively to psychopathologic, phenomena as anxiety, fear, worries, depression and others. Positive psychology emphasizes that negative psychological phenomena are not the only ones and that above that there are also positive ones, vital – stimulating life and health. Positive psychology does not strive to delight in positive areas of human life or see the world through pink glasses, but strive for harmony of both sides of human life. It is not a universal cure; its focus is aimed at complementarization of the picture of human mind. Many topics concerning examination of positive psychology have been drawing people's attention for a long time. The first records are from antiquity (issues of wisdom, virtue, moral excellence). However what is utterly new in positive psychology is the approach that can be defined as an effort for systematicness and empirical verifying of examined phenomena. Allegations and conclusions that have been reached by representatives of this movement are not built on subjective opinions, impressions or speculations but are based on methodical empiric researches exploiting a wide range of methods from observation to experiments (Křivohlavý, 2004).

School and positive psychology

With the term application of principles of positive psychology at schools is especially meant the pedagogues' focus onto the positive sides of pupils together with the use of scientific knowledge that has been reached in educational system, aiming to contribute to pupil's health. Without a doubt the way people interpret positive and negative aspects of life is closely connected with health. In this context Taylor (1989, 1995) distinguished two types of people: a personality with higher level of health (health-prone personality), which is seen especially as a concept of one's ability to control events, optimism and resilience; and on the other side there is a personality with inclination to diseases (disease-prone personality), which is indicated with pessimistic way to explain what happens around, depression, hostility and anger. Unlike Tylor, Seligman, the main

representative of positive psychology, created a theory of explanatory styles, optimism versus pessimism that is not a part of permanent personal disposition but a mental process. Every person has his own explanatory style, way of thinking about causes of events happening in his life. This style develops during childhood and if it is not deliberately altered it stays the same for life time. There has been a definite confirmation of causal connection between pessimism and physical illness. If we comprehend a difficult life situation in a pessimistic way it leads us to depression. In depression the level of catecholamines is reduced, less endorphins are produced, there is a suppression of immunity therefore it leads to an inclination to illness. What is typical for pessimistic explanatory style is experiencing of frequent depressions, low work performance, frequent health problems, more common occurrence of problems in partnership, family or personal life (Seligman, 1998).

Based on this style, a person gives interpretations explaining to himself why certain things (good or bad) happen. There are three dimensions on which the interpretations of events in our lives are based, they are: permanence, pervasiveness, personalization.

Permanence versus temporality (Seligman & al., 1995, Seligman 1998), or in other words “always” versus “not always”, is a dimension that says how long the cause of a problem will last. People with the pessimistic explanatory style believe that if something bad happens then it will occur again and again. People with the optimistic explanatory style tell themselves that next time it will come out well and they locate failure for the present time. When considering happy events it is contrariwise. Therefore a pupil that says “Oh, I’m so stupid!” says so because he believes that this is the way it is and furthermore it is more than likely that it will become a reality after all. However a pupil that sighs: “I didn’t review at all before the exam.” bases his thoughts on a kind of attitude “not always” therefore it is more likely that he is optimistic to reach better results in the future. Sometimes students claim things like: “All the teachers are unfair. Reading is useless.” In this way students with a pessimistic explanatory style pass one unfortunate experience of one subject onto everyone else. That is why then it is difficult for a pessimistic child to read the unnecessary (Solyi, 2003).

Another dimension is a dimension of pervasiveness versus globality (Seligman & al., 1995, Seligman, 1998), or in other words “everything versus not everything”. When things go wrong for a pessimist it is a disaster because he persists his own failure as general – “I will never be good in mathematics.” “I’ve totally failed as a player in our team.” “No one in the class likes me.” Even an optimist does not like failure; however he considers it as a specific occurrence. “I didn’t pass the math exam because I spent yesterday evening watching telly.” “I spoiled the whole concert because I didn’t focus on playing.” However when positive things happen there is a contrary progress. A pessimist apprehends success as something specific and exceptional. “I succeeded in maths because our teacher was in a good mood.” Pessimists do not see themselves as people who have general attributes, abilities and features that occur in every moment of our lives.

The third dimension is personal dimension, internalization versus externalization, in other words “me” versus “not me”. This dimension points out the one, who an individual blames for the fact that things happen. Pessimists blame themselves, therefore they internalize the problem. Optimists have the tendency blame others or external

circumstances that they have had no control over, therefore they externalize the blame.

When things are generally simplified we can see the differences between pupils using various explanatory styles as: a pessimistic pupil explains a happy occurrence to himself as the one that has happened only in the given case, only in the given time and it has been caused by others or by some circumstances. On the contrary a pessimist sees an unhappy occurrence as: "I always spoil everything, because I'm not skilful." Furthermore when we consider the advantages of the explanatory style in the life of an individual (better health, longer and happier life, less stress and anxiety, successful carrier, better education, easier dealing with failures) and disadvantages that come along with the pessimistic explanatory style (depression, early death, low immunity, health problems of physical and psychogenic character, insufficient results at work, frequent failure in critical situations, poorer relationships) we cannot undervalue this phenomenon in education process. In what way can the knowledge about explanatory styles be used in school practice?

Our suggestions are based on results of researches that confirm that about 25–50% of our personal qualities is passed onto us from our parents (we do not mean any optimistic genes but experiences from childhood, imitation of our parent's explanatory style (Seligman & al., 1995, Seligman, 1998)) Above parents also pedagogues can influence our explanatory style of pupils in a great way depending on how they deal with pupil's success and failure. Hence we think that this information of positive psychology has a wide range of applications in the area of pupil's education and that it opens other areas that are worth to pay some attention to. As teachers rather significantly contribute to formation of their pupil's explanatory style, especially in the area of evaluation pupil's success and failure, it is important to pay attention to the following questions: What is actually the explanatory style of a teacher? What expressional means does a teacher use for verbal or written evaluation of pupils? In what extend is the teacher convicted about influencing and having a possible influence on the pupils' results? In what extend does the teacher consider pupil's failure in his subject as the total failure in the academic area?

Another area concerns the possibilities of learning about pupils' explanatory styles by teachers. When can the teacher ask questions? Is he practically able to identify this style, with what tools, in what circumstances? How can he use such information to motivate pupils to better results at school? What is the difference in pupils' motivation concerning distinct explanatory styles? Is it appropriate to teach children to recognize their own explanatory style? What are advantages and disadvantages?

The third area is considered to be the most important as it concerns the core of the problem – "How can a teacher contribute in order to change the explanatory style? What strategies, techniques, and procedures should he use? Where does he learn and practice them? How should a teacher react when the explanatory style of parents and the one he strives for differ?

I have raised many questions here, to which there is a need to pay attention in training. As explanatory styles are all about thinking it is possible to change them.

The effort to form the constitution of explanatory styles is carried out through programs focusing on the mental resilience and optimistic skills. There have been changes especially in the area of increasing the ability to focus on different causes of the problem, especially on such that can be changed and are local.

Nick Baylist, a psychologist at Cambridge University, helped to establish Well-being Institute and co-operates with Wlington College in Cowthorne, Berks, boarding school and full-time-study school, dealing with the topic of how to apply the principles of positive psychology into the school concepts. Presently at this school pupils aged 14 to 16 attend a lesson that deals with the issue of subjective well-being once a week. This lesson is lead by teachers trained in a new academic discipline. The best students have the chance to participate in lessons where the issue of happiness is addressed. The director of this school considers this area more important than theoretical information. For the future they plan to conduct a program focusing on happiness, physical and mental health, negative emotions, how accomplish ambitions. These lessons are aimed at pupils at the age of 10 and 11. Nick Baylist tries to teach young people that they do not need to consume happiness only but they can also create it. What is connected with a pleasant experience does not mean that it has to be beneficial yet. In the lessons pupils also engage in examining bad experiences in life, examples of people that have overcome pain, anger and used all their emotional energy for something positive. In this program the emphasis are put so that pupils should realize the fact that fame, money and property often happen to be people's life targets however they are not the source of happiness. Children and adolescents need to learn that even though our societies are wealthier they do not become happier, which is also confirmed by researches (Both, 2006).

We believe that similar project will bring attractive results and will contribute to pupils' health on larger scales.

We are pleased that even in our environment there are effective programs that contribute to pupils' health and I believe that when other similar programs are applied the teaching of positive psychology will become inspirational.

APLIKÁCIA PRINCÍPOV POZITÍVNEJ PSYCHOLÓGIE V ŠKOLE

Abstrakt: Autorka príspevku v úvodnej časti vymedzuje novokoncipovaný smer v psychológii - pozitívnu psychológiu jej predmet skúmania, ciele a možnosti uplatnenia. Centrálna časť sa zaoberá možnosťami aplikácie niektorých princípov, poznatkov tohto smeru v školách. V závere vyjadruje presvedčenie o potrebe venovať väčšiu pozornosť pozitívnym stránkam ľudského života.

Kľúčové slová: zdravie, škola, pozitívna psychológia, explanačný štýl, optimizmus, pesimizmus