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Implementation of the Positive Early Childhood Education Curriculum for students with migration experience – the assumptions and directions of action

Abstract: Migration puts children in a difficult situation – it takes away their stability and constancy of everyday events and plucks them from a safe environment. The purpose of the article is to present the main assumptions and innovative ideas related to the author's Positive Early Childhood Education Curriculum, as well as indicating the forms of work with students with migration trauma experience. The applied method was the educational project description. The extraordinary nature of the Curriculum is exhibited in the relocation of metatheoretical assumptions – from pedagogy of "lack" to pedagogy of "growth". Therefore, it is recommended that the child's well-being should be nurtured (M. Seligman, A. Antonovsky) alongside the development of intercultural proximity and "soft competences", which are of importance for students with trauma experiences. The Curriculum allows as well for acquiring teacher's self-awareness. It has been indicated how to implement the Curriculum assumptions – positivity, optimality, balance, and prospectivity for students with various cultural and biographical backgrounds. Special attention is devoted to strengthening the resilience in students with migration experiences and to the directions of actions to enable them the emotional, socio-cultural, instrumental, material and procedural, systemic, environmental and preventive support.

Keywords: early childhood education, student with migration experience, Positive Early Childhood Education Curriculum, positive pedagogy, resilience

Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine made many people struggle with the trauma of wartime emigration – a threat to life and health as well as locational, geopolitical and economic instability. This leads to the risk of intensification of the situation and symptoms (Elvevåg and DeLisi, 2022) associated with post-traumatic consequences: experiencing negative emotions – anxiety, influx, depression, losses (Anonymous Author, 2018), interpersonal relationships disorder (loneliness, isolation), cognitive development disorder (Barret, 1997), e.g. lack of motivation for taking up learning and the functioning in a state of misinformation. This crisis created new challenges for Polish school. The tasks of helping a large number of foreign students, the importance of protecting their mental health, the development of resilience (Kobasa, 1979) and learning to cope with crisis situations were the most significant ones. The previous research and analyses have indicated a low level of preparation of Polish education for such challenges (Mamzer, 2018; Markowska-Manista and Dąbrowa, 2016).

Therefore, the goal is to dedicate the main assumptions and innovative ideas related to the *Positive Early Childhood Education Curriculum* (Anonymous Author, 2023) to guide the forms of work with students with the experience of migration trauma. From 2023, this curriculum will be introduced by the WSiP Publishing House as a nationwide educational program, which gives both the opportunity of getting to know with it for a wide group of teachers and the hope that it may help to apply it while working with the student with migration experience. The strategy of working with students described in the *Curriculum* enables a two-way activity. It is directed to the specific ways of alleviating trauma affected by the child (Briere and Scott, 2010; Brom and Kleber, 1989) and also to long-term supporting of resilience related to positive pedagogy and the concept of Generalized Resilience Resources by A. Antonovsky (1979, 1986, 1994, 1995, 1997), as well as to strengthening the components of comprehensibility, resourcefulness, meaningfulness (Binnebesel, 2006, Kosińska-Dec and Jelonkiewicz, 2001).

Characteristics of the Curriculum

The *Curriculum* is intended for students with various potentials determined by their cultural and biographical background. The author's inspiration to develop the *Positive Early Childhood Education Curriculum* (Anonymous Author, 2023) came from the willingness to adjust education to the current needs of the child and the new challenges of the pressent day and age. As the conceptual basis of the *Curriculum* (Anonymous Author, 2023, p. 4) was developed, it was concluded that students needed to meet the following aspects: a positive educational start, self-confidence, the proximity of others and good relationships with them. The discussed *Curriculum* underlines the value of positivity, **the relocation of metatheoretical assumptions – from pedagogy of "lack", "deprivation"** (Jacyno and Szulżycka, 1999) to pedagogy of "growth" (Szmidt, 2013) which testifies to its originality.

The analyses of early childhood education (Klus-Stańska and Szczepska-Pustkowska, 2009) reveal traditional, instructional teaching methods to have lagged behind the progress of civilisation. The *Curriculum* builds on theoretical and didactic foundations inspired by the concepts of humanistic pedagogy and sociocultural constructivism (Bruner, 2006; Cole, 1995; Filipiak, 2012; Klus-Stańska 2018; Tomasello, 2002; Wood, 2006; Wygotski, 1989). The Curriculum recommends that learning should be perceived as a social process and that objectives, content and methods be customised and tailored to the learner's potentialities and educational needs. The Curriculum is aimed at facilitating conditions conducive to the positive development of learners; therefore, emphasis is put on their cognitive wisdom and responsibility, resilience and security, resourcefulness and creativity, and "soft competences" (sensitivity and cooperation, intercultural proximity). Furthermore, the *Curriculum* establishes four standards, which are the assumptions of the direction and quality of education: positivity, optimality, balancing and prospectivity (Anonymous Author, 2023, pp. 18–20).

Positivity

For more than two decades, representatives of social sciences have been advocating for a change in focus "from human weaknesses to human strength" (Trzebińska, 2008, p. 21). The shift presupposes a transformation of questions related to the learner – instead of specifying: "What are the child's weaknesses?", researchers make attempts to answer the question: "What are the child's strengths on which their education can be built?". Accordingly, the *Curriculum* suggests looking at the child in a manner related to "positive psychology and pedagogy" (Carr, 2009; Czapiński, 2019; Szmidt, 2013) and – in line with the theoretical assumptions of M.P. Seligman (2005, 2010) and the research of A. Antonovsky (1979, 1995) and A. Antonovsky and S. Sagy (1986) – it recommends that the child's well-being and resilience should be nurtured, which is of particular importance in the case of students who have experienced trauma (Witkin, 2000).

Optimality

Optimality is related to making the most of the student's opportunities and environment. As far as working with students with migration experience is concerned, it is recommended using varied methods to be adjusted as optimally as possible to the students' needs while using an efficient communication strategy (applying all means of expression).

Balancing and integration

While in class, balancing and integration will be related to the following coexisting moments (Anonymous Author, 2023, pp. 18–19):

- triggering the freedom of thought and actions enabling the thinking process to be organised;
- compensating curiosity with situations in which confidence is gained;
- using both scientific findings and intuitive perceptions of art;
- developing declarative knowledge integrated with procedural knowledge.

As regards working with the students who have experienced migration, it is assumed that they will feel confident under the following conditions:

- development of the individual's "self" and community relations;
- expression and control of emotions;
- simultaneous toughness, sensitivity and empathy;
- offsetting dynamic activity with moments of calmness and tranquillity.

Prospectivity

The teacher's actions should be related to the care for the students' future, including the ones who have fallen victim to circumstance. This objective may be achieved by, for instance, promoting competences important in future (Bakhshi et al., 2017) and using creative thinking as the students adapt to new tasks at hand.

A reflective teacher

The *Curriculum* assumes the form of dialogue with the teacher (Anonymous Author, 2023, pp. 20–21; 91). In a culturally diverse environment, it is especially important to encourage personal creativity and for the teacher to develop their didactic self-awareness. As the teacher's knowledge of teaching is expanded, the emancipatory and interpretative approach (Brookfield, 1995) is to be applied through questions allowing the teacher to initiate the reconstruction of their practice and to enable the analysis of actual school

situations. Reflection on how tasks are fulfilled with the inclusion of *positivity, optimality, balancing and prospectiveness* support teachers as they make decisions (Mizerek, 2021; Pollard, 1998). Thanks to this, they can take the role of a *"supportive companion"* (Klus-Stańska, 2018, p. 128) to the child's cultural, social and cognitive experiences.

Methods – working with students with migration experience using A. Antonovsky's theory and positive pedagogy

The development of the didactic recommendations (Bernacka-Langier, et al., 2011; Guziuk-Tkacz, 2019; Jurek, 2015; Kubitsky, 2012) is substantiated here by the complexity of the situation in which a migrant family finds itself, the scale of the migration phenomenon and the current socio-political realities. As regards students with migration experience, it is requisite that non-conventional ways of support are sought, as the classical ones are not always capable of meeting their needs or fulfilling their potentialities. On the basis of positive pedagogy and A. Antonovsky's theory, the Curriculum uses methods related to minimizing the effects of trauma and developing resilience. A. Antonovsky (1995, 1997) distinguishes three aspects of life experiences that shape the resilience:

- logicality, coherence understood as the similarity of the new situation with previous experiences;
- overload/underload balance defining the relationship between requirements and capabilities, energy, efficiency, abilities and knowledge; the author attributed an equal negative role to overload (excess of stimuli) and underload (emptiness, monotony);
- participation in decision-making related to consent, responsibility and influence on the outcome of the tasks assigned to the individual;

The stronger the sense of coherence, the more resistant the child becomes to traumatic events (Jelonkiewicz and Kosińska-Dec, 2007; Sęk, 2001), searching for logic, sense and resourcefulness (possibility of action) in them.

The aftermath of crisis experience – information and cognitive support

Migration puts children in a difficult situation, as it takes away their stability and constancy in everyday events and plucks them from the environment they know and in which they feel safe. The awareness of a student's potential reactions makes the teacher prepare for unpredictable conduct, which they should consider as typically arising from the students' involvement in events *"beyond the normal human experience"* (Gałecki, 2022).

The child resorts to such conduct as they react to chronic deprivation and persistent overload attributable to migration (Borkowska, 2016, Elvevåg and DeLisi, 2022; Oviedo, et al., 2022). These exceptional circumstances, the threat to one's life and health, witnessing warfare and violence can trigger PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms (Joseph, Williams and Yule, 1997). Children go through negative emotional states, such as chronic anxiety, sadness; they become apathetic and hypersensitive (Lis-Turlejska, 1993; 2005). They reluctantly discuss their experiences or make friends. Nightmares cause insomnia and inspire terror. Children have the tendency to re-enact their trauma in their thoughts and drawings, while displaying an apparent indifference to the horror of their experience (Bryant and Harvey, 2011; Cohen, et al., 2011; Heszen, 2013; Terelak, 2001;). Trauma psychologists (Everly and Lating, 1995; Lifton, 1980; Horowitz, 1993) admit that children at first deny what took place. Later, they turn to anger. They try reversing their loss in the next phase. After the period of hope, apathy and sadness appear. In the long term, the child may also come to terms with what they have experienced and recover their self-control.

Trust and understanding – emotional support

Children with migration experience take time before they open up and they need more attention. They are less willing to help and may alienate themselves from the group or display excessive emotionality (Charlton and Thompson, 1996).

The primary task should be to carefully and discreetly observe the student. It is important not to "be around" invasively and to put what makes the child feel safe to good use. The methods that may help calm the child's nerves include (but are not limited to): music therapy, relaxation or psychodrama. In some particular situations, *conversation* plays the most essential role. Its course necessitates showing empathy and tact and creating a sense of security and psychological comfort for such a student. The forms of spoken conversation are related to the concept of A. Antonovsky (1995, 1997). The fact that the teacher may not avoid these conversations is pointed out. Such a traumatic situation should be addressed in the way that should strain the students' resilience to the least possible extent and should not aggravate the state of stress or uncertainty. As for younger children, it is good to initiate conversation with them by using drawings or games.

Emotions and safety - "Will something happen...?"

The interview should be carried out by the teacher when children are cool, calm and focused. Do not incite emotions, but do not pretend that nothing bad has happened, either. For instance, use such a paraphrase as: *"I can see that you are scared. Do you want to talk about it?"* It is important for the conversation not to turn into questioning or subjecting the students' emotions to public judgement.

Children who have experienced trauma may be more distracted or tense (Herman, 1999). Therefore, apart from conversation, put emphasis on instilling the sense of proximity and warmth; other useful methods include: planning time together, carrying out routine tasks, directing attention to activities related to students' interest, reducing emotional tension.

Comprehensibility – "What does it mean...?"

The student is likely to feel more confident if they comprehend what is going on and can make sense of the experiences around them. Talk about what you are sure of, in as simple terms as possible, in the language tailored to the students' age as you explain difficult concepts and phenomena, in a manner that will allow them to accept this emotionally.

Making sense – "Why...?"

Children often inquire about the meaning of the evil affecting their lives. Explain that not only good things happen to people, that sometimes one may run across evil people and find oneself in unfavourable situations. On the other hand, draw their attention to the diversity of the world and the presence of people who help others, care about safety and are willing to prevent evil.

Resourcefulness – "What can I do?"

Frequently, children feel more confident when they know they may react to the events at hand. It is worth showing them that even a situation which may seem completely beyond one's control can be affected. You may engage the students in activities allowing them to make an impact, such as helping people in need or creating networks of students who pursue similar goals. Create and foster a sense of community, togetherness, and solidarity.

Building relationships, counteracting exclusion – sociocultural support

The *Curriculum* acknowledges an important role of peers as the child develops competences. The assumption is made that a group of the student's peers also includes teachers *(peer tutoring)*. The student finds it easier to acquire new skills by learning from partners at a similar developmental stage (Sajdera, 2016). However, those of them who have experienced migration may be under the impression that they do not fit in culturally and tend to isolate themselves or to stick to their national groups only. The greater such alienation is, the more the students are missing their loved ones left behind in their homeland. The differences discovered between the new culture and one's own can surprise them or even make them feel indignant, the cognitive dissonance being displayed as **culture shock:** positive attitude towards cultural novelty (referred to as the honeymoon), disorientation (anger directed at oneself and others at a later stage), reintegration (integration into the new cultural contexts.

Incomplete adaptation can trigger concerns among such learners' peers, which are caused by environmental biases confirming the unwillingness of immigrants to adapt. It is necessary that the teacher calmly yet firmly opposes such hostile attitudes towards migrant students and inspires their classmates to help, and that the teacher draws their attention to the importance of all cultures and the indispensability of each and every member of the group. A proper form of inclusion is joint action, for instance during celebrations, as well as the representation of the culture to which the student belonged in their country of origin or serving a function in the school community. The sense of self-worth among students developed in this way contributes to greater involvement in learning and school life (Łuszczyńska, 2004).

Organisation of learning – individualization, instrumental support – positive diagnosis, strategy of positive challenges

Working with children who have experienced migration can be related to families seeking asylum in Poland for various (both economic and political) reasons. Therefore, it should be a priority to identify the child's legal status and the choices affecting their adaptation (permanent vs. temporary residence, etc.). This should be also based on thorough observation and provide for learning their needs and "strengths" (Gardner, 2002). It should be kept in mind that any diagnosis must be dynamic, non-stigmatising and focused on questions: What are the child's current options and needs? What makes the child unique? What strategies does the child adopt while dealing with difficult issues?

Ensuring equal opportunities in education provides for individualization while presenting challenges to the student. The Curriculum (Anonymous Author, 2023, pp. 48–49) makes the assumption that information discrepancy (cognitive conflict) is the most effective way to initiate learning. However, this difficulty (a sense of their own incompetence, etc.) can frequently become off-putting for the students. Accordingly, it is suggested that ignorance should be reformulated into a "positive challenge" as the starting point for working out a solution. Meanwhile, the methods of coping with the challenge are being developed (if I am trying to figure something out, it is a challenge for me, a reason to take action, not to feel deterred or to fail), a shift from "how it should be done" to "how it can be done," taking into consideration other solutions in the equation. The challenge enables the positive structuring of experiences, organizing them ("planning how I do something") and attaching meaning to them ("why am I doing something?"). Additionally, my suggestion is that the analysis and assessment of student achievement ought to be: positive and optimising - oriented towards their competences rather than deficiencies; *balanced* – using various forms of information collection; related to all spheres of one's development; prospective - presenting challenges for the future.

During the school year, however, specific issues may turn up, for instance the lack of textbooks or a student joining classes in the middle of the school year. In the first place, there are communication barriers (a different alphabet, e.g. Latin vs. Cyrillic). It is advised that teachers do not require exact correctness, that they use expressive gestures (related to *optimal "communicative totality"*), rely on multisensory transmission and seek help from a cultural assistant. What might cause issues is frequent absenteeism among migrant children due to commitments to their family (e.g. caring for siblings). However, the ability to diagnose such obstacles (and the educational needs of the student) can help reduce their risk and allow a major step to be taken towards providing equal opportunities in education (Anonymous Author, 2023, pp. 71–73).

Cooperation and integration with parents – systemic and community support

The student's environment has a significant impact on their attitude towards school; educational awareness and cultural norms of parents are also significant; for instance, parents may consider school necessary, indifferent or harmful. For that reason, the student's education is to be supported by an important pillar that is the ability to unite parents around common goals. As a result of their erratic rhythm of life (Figley, 1986), they may not see the importance of their children's education in a country which they consider to be a stop on their way to another location. Consistently, and for causes related to language, parents may not be interested whether their children make progress at school or not. In the case of major cultural and linguistic differences, it is therefore important to facilitate the mediation of an assistant to validate the teacher's intentions and to establish good relationship.

Minimising antisocial conduct and learning to cope – preventive support

Aid measures do not always bring about a lasting result with immediate effect. Most frequently, the disturbance of one's everyday life, chronic stress and unstable socio-economic situation foster negative attitudes (indifference, passivity and lack of confidence) and antisocial conduct. The measures are aimed to attract the teacher's attention or to work one's way up in the hierarchy of peers. Their source usually lies in some issues with self-esteem, low resilience and inappropriate stress management mechanisms. Consistently, preventive measures to counteract anti-social conduct, e.g. disregard for duties, aggression or inciting violence, are to be implemented at the same time. In the *Curriculum* (Anonymous Author, 2023, pp. 59–62), 3 forms of preventive student support are recommended.

The educational strategy of *positive discipline* (Nelsen, 2015) assumes that the student and purposes of their actions should be understood; focus should be on solutions instead of punishment; efforts and endeavours should be appreciated, not only relying on measurable success; responsibility and positive relationships are to be shared; instilling feelings of shame or guilt should be avoided. The perception of a sense of belonging, the respect by students with migration experience, the emphasis on prospectiveness, responsibility and sensitivity both affect anger management and reduce the occurrence of problems. The patient and consistent establishment of limits to misconduct is to be combined with: training in the application of socially permissible methods of dealing with frustration and negative emotions, building up the student's confidence in their own skills, strengthening self-esteem but also joint responsibility and trust in others.

Predictability and peacefulness on the part of the teacher, giving rise to comprehensible, organized and foreseeable situations develops resilience – *resilience, bravery, sense of coherence* (Antonovsky, 1995; Flach, 1990; Hanson and Hanson, 2018; Sikorska, 2016; Strycharczyk and Clough, 2021), ability to handle difficult situations (mental flexibility, ability to self-correct). According to Antonovsky (1995), there are three aspects of experience shaping this: *logicality, coherence* – similarity of a new situation to a previous experience; *overload/underload balance* – defining the relation between requirements and capabilities and *involvement in making decisions* (influence on the task outcome).

Outdoor methods related to elements of *adventure education and experiential pedagogy* suggest that the students toughen up under stressful conditions with positive values (Anonymous Author, 2023, p. 61). They facilitate the creation of experiences during which challenges are confronted, obstacles are overcome, and the child is taught to handle difficult circumstances. They increase the sense of control, boost confidence and can solve difficulties encountered by over-sensitive students.

Conclusions

The extraordinary nature of the situation, uncertainty, threat to life and health, fear for loved ones adversely affect students' emotions, self-image, self-esteem and motivation. The long-term consequences of limited social life, chronic, persistent stressors have adverse effects on the emotional well-being of children (Dudek, 2003). The program aims: to promote optimism, positive attitude towards oneself and to reduce anxiety, which, according to the assumptions of M.P. Seligman (1997, 2005, 2010) and the research on the sense of coherence by A. Antonovsky (1995), is conducive to the health and resilience of students (Mroziak, Czabała and Zwoliński, 1996). Yet, most of all, it builds and strengthens a young person's sense of meaning in life. In conclusion, the *Curriculum* will be aimed at creating positive conditions for the students that have experienced migration so that they can learn and

participate in school life to the full extent. The stable, balanced and versatile processes of adaptation and, above all, healing the trauma experienced due to migration facilitate their development of cognitive responsibility, resilience and resourcefulness.

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