
EDUCATION FOR A HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE

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Abstract: *In our present society we need an education for change as the new social contexts requires the contemporary man to adapt faster to increasingly rapid changes in the everyday life. Failure to do so can have a significant negative impact on the quality of life. Therefore, the major problems of contemporary education are closely related to preparing students for a “new quality of life.” “Quality of life” refers primarily to how people experience their life, conceive and carry out their existence. The most important objectives of education for a high quality of life aim to cultivate human qualities that will allow students to live at a superior levels in the new contexts of social life. Each of them is raising specific psycho-pedagogic challenges. The article aims to identify these qualities, analyze their psychological traits and propose an education strategy for each.*

Keywords: *quality of life, stress resistance, self-confidence, emotional stability, self-directed learning, social engagement*

In a rapidly changing society people face new adaptive problems which require them to develop new capabilities for action. For this reason, the 21st century creates new requirements for education. We need an *education for change* as the new social context compels the contemporary man or woman to *adapt to the every changing conditions of the everyday life*. Failure to do so can seriously impact the quality of their life.

In these circumstances, one of the major problems that contemporary education faces is to prepare students for “a new quality of life” in our present society and in the future. “Quality of life” refers not only to the material sufficiency of the members of the society but also, mainly, to *how they experience their life, conceive and carry out their existence*. The most important goal of education for quality of life is cultivating *human qualities* important in order to *live on a superior level* in new social context. Each of these qualities raises specific pedagogical challenges. The article aims to identify these qualities, analyze their psychological traits and propose an education strategy for each.

Mental resistance to stress is one of the most useful abilities for the contemporary man. It represents the capability to successfully overcome „shocks” caused by the increasingly frequent changes that affect the personal life of an individual in our society. Stress has become a frequent phenomenon and often has des-adaptive effects

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manifested by disturbances of the normal psychic equilibrium such as neurotic or psychotic phenomena. Symptoms of mental stress include irritability, impulsiveness, emotional instability, fear (without awareness of the reason), the feeling of being watched, depression, perpetual fatigue, inability to concentrate, sweating attraction to alcohol, smoking, drugs, insomnia, feelings of surreal, chronic migraines, psychosis (in which the relationship of the individual with himself, with others and with the world is altered, false), reduced self-esteem. The sources of stress are numerous: job and financial instability, disintegrating families, economic and social crises, the death of the dear ones, diseases, the feeling of being incapable to deal with an overwhelming number of tasks at work and at home and many others.

A first strategy to increase mental resistance to stress and to the shocks of traumatic life experiences is to grow self-confidence, the belief that any difficult situation can be overcome. The person prone to believe that any attempt of a personal learning will be inevitably doomed to fail will not find the energy required to carry out a new learning project. The confidence in his abilities and chances of success are key determining factors for the individual's *level of aspiration*. A low level of aspiration, the lack of hope in the success of future projects, exacerbates the stress on the individual. *Successes* increase *the level of aspiration* while repeated *failures* lower it. To increase students' confidence in their learning abilities and to keep them on a high level of aspiration experienced teachers strive to help them succeed, to have positive learning experiences and to remove students' negative expectations and emotions toward the fields they teach.

Self-confidence involves a *high degree of integration* of one's personality substructures. Personality integrates multiple components (substructures): *motivational, emotionally – affective, of control and cognitive*. Sometimes these sub-components are *in conflict*. The subject has a *contradictory view of himself/herself* and ceases to identify with a *clear picture about himself/herself*. It can become apathetic and unmotivated. The hallmark of a high degree of integration is *activism* - the subject tends to integrate in ambient through assimilation and transformation and is "struggling" for self-realization. *Self-confidence* is an important condition of this "activism" and also an important direction for the development of personality. The role of education is to help the human being to preserve its coherence and stability, ensuring that conflicts between individual psychological substructures do not affect the overall dynamic unity of individual's overall psychic structure.

A second educational strategy, on which depends the ability to successfully overcome the stressful experiences of life, is cultivating **wisdom**. *Wisdom* is a reflexive reaction of the human being which allows it to distance from the processes of daily life, instead of being completely absorbed by them, and understand their overall meaning. Understanding the meaning of things depends on man's ability to properly classify them in the categories they belong to, beyond the particular and individual level. In order to do so he needs to use *ordering principles*. For these reasons the development (through education) of *conceptual thinking* and *capacity of conceptualization* is of great practical and adaptive utility for gaining wisdom.

Emotional stability, characteristic of people who are emotionally robust and able to withstand the strong emotions caused by risk and uncertainty, is another contributing

factor to a high quality of life. The research on emotional intelligence opened up new horizons for educators to cultivate this human quality. "Emotional abilities are meta-abilities that determine how well we can use the talents we have, including pure intelligence" (Goleman, 2001, p. 52) They include, among other things "*emotion management*" - a person's ability to self-control, to calm down, to easily overcome anxiety, depression and irritability. They also include "*self-motivation*" which requires subordinating emotions to a main goal, delaying rewards and controlling the impulses of the moment as well as the ability to think positively, to show optimism that things will work out eventually, despite the obstacles and frustrations. Goleman proposed a program of "*education of emotions*" which involves "inclusion of the tensions and traumas that students face as part of the everyday agenda". This program consist of teacher discussions with the students *about how they feel* at that moment, or sharing important stories about their *moods*. Each of these discussions helps their self-awareness and clarifies the relationship of self with the others. The program teaches students that there are always different choices regarding reaction to emotions, helps them practice awareness of the emotions and gives them an adequate vocabulary for their expression. The students also learn to listen to what others have to say, to ask questions, to collaborate, to solve conflicts and negotiate compromises. In the education of emotions it matters a lot how the teacher leads the class, *the personal example of emotional control* he offers to his students, and the *way he disciplines the class*, because "whenever a teacher reacts to one student other 20 or 30 students learn a lesson" (idem, p. 335)

Epistemic curiosity which is interest for knowledge and alertness to the new, enhances the quality of life with the joy caused by the discovery of an answer to a difficult problem or by learning new things. The psychologists have documented the existence in humans of a cognitive impulse, which is the desire to learn new things, to formulate and solve problems. Any normal human being manifests curiosity for the new things it comes in contact with and becomes more or less interested in them if they respond to its needs. The curiosity fires especially when things are presented as problems that generate a cognitive conflict between what appeared to be known and new facts that prove old information is insufficient. Learning driven by the desire to know (not only by an immediate curiosity) is usually the result of a long educational process as it requires a previous familiarity with a given field of knowledge as well as confidence in one's own abilities to solve new problems. It sets in motion a virtuous circle: the more one knows the more one wants to know. The only reward is the understanding of something new, previously ignored.

Beside an *emotional component*, linked to the pleasure of meeting with your preferred domain of knowledge, the cognitive impulse includes an *attitudinal component*, embodied in a set of ideas about a field, ideas which often are the result of previous experiences ("this is an interesting/boring discipline", "necessary/unnecessary to be learned", "serves / does not serve personal plans for the future", etc.). *This attitudinal component can enhance or inhibit learning*. Often it is widespread among students the belief that many of the subjects studied in school are useless, unnecessary things which they should not be obliged to learn.

Many teachers realize that the *attitude* of a student toward a new discipline is very important for the subsequent learning effort. Therefore they strive to induce a *favorable*

attitude from the very beginning trying to highlight the *social utility of the issues addressed, the satisfactions its study can bring*, the reasons for which the teacher took the decision to specialize in the field, etc. Everything needs to be presented as attractively as possible, with many examples and real life stories. In general, teachers should display some *enthusiasm* for their field of study, because it is hard to believe that the attitude of a bored, disappointed, skeptical teacher will not be transmitted to students and cause them to adopt similar attitudes.

A favorable attitude toward a field, once created, has to be sustained by a permanent effort of the teacher in every class. Two things are essential in order to maintain student's interest: first, the *climate* of the class, which needs to be one of "*intellectual effervescence*" (Ausubel and Robinson, 1981) and, the second, maintaining the students *feeling that they are permanently progressing in the particular domain of knowledge*, that they are not wasting time. The first is linked to the ability of the teacher to continuously propose *interesting problems, fairly difficult but yet accessible*, to the solving of which students are invited to actively participate together with the teacher. This strategy creates among students *a sense that important problems are discussed*, problems whose solution requires some initiation and intellectual effort. The second strategy involves continuous evaluation, *communicating progress* and practicing a "pedagogy of success" With this strategy *any progress* in learning, however small, is immediately *noticed, praised* and used to induce confidence in the possibility of obtaining similar satisfactions in the future.

Willingness to develop oneself, to self- directed learning is a human quality important for quality of life as it makes possible a fluid adaption to different social contexts and life situations. It requires some prior **psychological conditions** such as self-awareness, the will to finalize educational pursuits and resists tentations, the existence of intellectual work skills, clarity of purposes pursued, having an acquired repertoire of methods and procedures to learn and train oneself. Only as these premises are met **education** becomes possible, driven by the initiative of the person that wants to develop abilities that will allow him/her to adapt to whatever life is perceived as requiring at a certain moment.

This individual educational effort is known as self-training or independent learning. The goals of self training are designed by the individual himself and its finality is driven by the human aspiration *to rise to its authentic existential status, to fulfill its human nature*. These are the type of aspirations that guide the individual effort of independent learning. Romanian psychology of personality offer a wide perspective of the directions that guide such goals, the most general educational goals, to which human beings aspires due to their existential status. The concept of „aspects of personality” identifies the most important directions of self training. Human beings tend to assert themselves as: (a) *an epistemic subject*, able to reach awareness of self and the world ("homo sapiens"); (b) *axiologic subject*, being able to be guided by values ("homo valens"); (c) *pragmatic subject* ("homo faber") able to act effectively to transform the world and create outcomes (Neveanu, 1978). Therefore the *contents of independent learning* are as diverse as the outcomes or finalities sought by an individual at a certain moment. (language, system of values, attained knowledge, valuation criteria and others).

The appropriate educational strategy to stimulate self-directed learning is based on the natural inclination of human beings to start learning *spontaneously* when this is helping them achieve a goal of significant *personal* importance to them at a certain moment. When learning is aligned with *personal goals* and is based on *previous learning investments* students should in theory undertake *spontaneously* and *autonomously* both the learning tasks as well as the *self – evaluation* process related to the value of the education to the task at hand. The big challenge for any teacher is to convince its students that the problems he proposes for study are mainly **their** problems not the problems of the educator and the requests he makes are aligned with their personal learning interests and goals.

The desire to permanently surpass ones own achievements, for continuous improvement, represents a quality greatly appreciated in a competitive society and a driver of adaptive success of the individual. An important role in the triggering it is played by *self image*. *The self image* is the collection of beliefs someone holds about himself, about his strenghts and weaknesses in 3 main areas: (1) *cognitive competence* – the beliefs related to its own abilities and performances in the field of learning (e.g. One is intelligent, has good memory, has difficulties in learning, etc.); (2) *social competence*– beliefs related to the personal ability to relate to other people (e.g. one is friendly or has difficulties making friends, etc.); (3) *physical abilities* – beliefs about abilities to perform various physical activities (e.g. sports, physical work, etc.)

The positive or negative self-image is the result of several factors among which the most important seem to be: (a) prior performances (e.g. someone concludes that he/she is good at mathematics if in the previous years it consistently had good results in this field); (b) other's behavior toward him (e.g. one concludes is unpopular when rejected or ridiculed by colleagues); (c) other's expectations with respect to one's future achievements (e.g. one will form a positive image about his/her abilities when others imply they expect great achievements from him/her in the future in a particular field).

The role of teachers is to help students reach a positive but realistic self-image, and to gain self-confidence by influencing all these three factors.

Teachers need to strive to create *opportunities for students to succeed* in school tasks or social and physical activities. In order to do so they have to make sure that each student has *all the information and skills necessary* for success *before* giving him or her new task. Second, they need to provide *instructions on how to proceed* in order to succeed in the new task and the needed support. In order to influence the views of other students the teacher needs to treat all students with respect, *asking for everybody's opinion* and the personal point of view with respect to the subjects discussed in class and showing *interest for their personal problems*. The teacher will always communicate that he expects good things from them in the future, formulating high but realistic expectations with respect to the future performances. The concern for developing meta-cognitive capacities – awareness and control of their own thinking processes and learning – represents a pre-condition for student's desire of acceding to superior levels of knowledge but also for perseverance and intrinsic motivation for learning. Those who do not realize their ignorance and their own limits do not understand the usefulness of their efforts to learn new things.

The availability for social engagement provides the satisfaction generated by the social utility of one's efforts and by the belief that one has helped solving a problem of common interest. The recognition of personal merit and value is conditioned by the impact it has on the life of others. This requires the engagement in projects of public interest or the ability to make its own abilities relevant to the other's people social, personal and professional lives. Living in the "ivory tower" of individual pursuits, far removed from the problems of other people cannot provide the recognition of personal value, nor the satisfaction of social integration. From an educational point of view, the availability for social engagement requires two complementary way of action, with a double function in the life of individual in society.

The first direction is *socialization*. Socialization is the process by which a person becomes a human being, by assuming gradually the behaviors, attitudes, values of the society in which he or she lives. In this process the individual creates a social identity ("a social self") and integrates in the society and further propagates it. The socialization include individual's efforts to "keep it up" with others, to internalize the social conscience of his time, to adapt his behavior to the norms and standards adopted by the others. This is the *integrative function* of social development through which the *individual connects to society*, through his interpersonal relations and responsibilities assumed.

The second educational strategy is to stimulate the *personalization* of the human being, the *assertion of its unique social identify and personality*. This strategy involves the development individual's capabilities of self-awareness as well as the understanding of social role and social status conferred by them. This is the *differentiating function* of social development, as this is the way by which the individual reaches an understanding of his *uniqueness versus others*, of his own *unique characteristics* and, as a result, of finding a place for himself in the society. Through the *integrating* function of social development the individual can benefit from all the *advantages* conferred by social *relations* with other people or institutions; through the *differentiating* function he acquires social status and *self – awareness*.

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