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Enjoyment of learning in upper secondary education. An exploratory research

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Abstract

The paper aims at presenting the results of an exploratory research conducted on students in upper secondary education. The goal of the research was to investigate students' enjoyment experiences of being at school and taking part of learning activities in order to enhance teaching practice and learning management strategies. To conduct the study a hybrid methodology blending qualitative and quantitative techniques was preferred. Quantitative data were collected by using the Enjoy Questionnaire, a research tool translated and adapted on Romanian students. The enjoyment of learning was operationalized through a hierarchical four-level model. The study reveals pessimistic students, with negative attitudes on school and learning. In addition, their perspective on school and learning affects the enjoyment of life. Most of the respondents argue that school is a bad period in their lives, an obstacle to do things that are more interesting. Other negative emotions complete the perceptions on learning and school: anxiety, anger, frustration and boredom.

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1. Introduction

A high density of emergent emotions characterizes educational and academic environments: the enjoyment of learning (EL), hope, pride, anxiety, boredom or despair (Goetz, Hall, Frenzel, & Pekrun, 2006). These emotions are intrinsically linked with student motivation for learning, with learning process and school performance, with the development of the self-identity or with the wellbeing in school.

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Recent studies geographically located in the British or American space suggest that the lack of the enjoyment of learning is one of the major facts affecting the achievement of educational goals (Goetz, Hall, Frenzel & Pekrun, 2006). Relevant experiences of other countries confirmed the relevance and importance of this concept by including the enjoyment of learning in public policy documents with a double status: as a right of pupils and as a goal of the formal educational system.

This paper focuses on research undertaken in Romania, in high schools from three counties, including the capital city. It considers how emotions and especially the enjoyment of learning can be conceptualized and the evidence to date that enjoyment is linked to learning and to achievement. The research explores the nature of enjoyment and proposes a descriptive profile of pupils' emotions related to school and learning contexts.

The goal of this study is to emphasize the need to understand the pupils' spectrum of school-related emotions and to specifically address it through positive learning activities.

2. The enjoyment of learning. Theoretical foundations and related literature

The enjoyment of learning has a strong self-explanatory conceptual structure. The history of the concept makes clear the dominance of the omnibus definitions to explain it. There can be identified synonymous associations with the concept of satisfaction or even fun, but this epistemological approach becomes impractical when designing a research project. Hartley (2006) argues the emotional nature of the enjoyment of learning. The concept designates what a subject feels, not what he/she thoughts. Kuppens (2008, p.1053) suggests that referring two dimensions can define the force vectors of emotional experiences: the dimension of pleasure (or valence) and the dimension of arousal (or activation).

A concept that can be useful and used to describe the balance in-between the two dimensions is the state of flow, the concept proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1977, p. 72). Shernoff and his colleagues (2003) state there is a relation between the flow state and the process of solving a task that is perceived to have intrinsic feature of pleasure. In addition, the pleasure of learning may be associated with a context in which the subject finds that can deal with a situation (of learning) which until that point had produced anxiety.

Another approach conceptualizing the enjoyment of learning stresses the indirect nature of this emotion. Compared to the approaches described above, where the enjoyment of learning is the resultant *hic et nunc* of the social context of learning, the current one defines EL as a result of the gap analysis between expectations and results. In this context, we can identify a synonymous relationship between EL and satisfaction (Kremer-Tailgate and Goldstein, 1990). The enjoyment of learning, as a positive experience, can be defined and in relation to social relations. Goodenow (1992) argues that the feeling of belonging is associated with a state of satisfaction. Goetz et al. (2006) distinguish between enjoyment to learn as and EL as a trait. The first understanding of the concept designates a present experience, an immediate response, related to a context or a learning situation. In the second case, the enjoyment of learning has a conclusive, cumulative, and retrospective character, referring to a series of learning experiences.

Summarizing, the related literature, we are able to distinguish between four directions of the conceptual approach of EL: i) a loss/reduction of self-consciousness in a state of absorption; ii) a state of psychic physical and social control; iii) a condition in which the subject responds to challenges; iv) accumulation of forms of social capital and quasi-economical capital.

The study of emotions is generally characterized by approaches that posit either one-dimensional or bipolar nature of emotions (Goetz, Hall, Frenzel, & Pekrun, 2006). To investigate the enjoyment of learning Goetz et al. (2006) suggest a hierarchical model which explains that emotional experiences can be differentiated in relation to such a level of generality. The hierarchical construction (Fig. 1) proposes a comprehensive modelling of theoretical and empirical experiences, by integrating conceptualizations of positive psychology on the wellbeing and quality of life in relation to academic and extracurricular contexts (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, *apud* Goetz et al., 2006).

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