MINDFULNESS AND EMOTIONAL CONTROL SKILLS – PREMISES FOR SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL PATH IN SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The research aims to provide a psycho-social perspective on the results of including personal development disciplines in the curriculum of secondary school students in Romania. Youngsters between 17 and 21 years old, from various secondary schools in the country, filled-in between February and June' 2020 the Mindfulness Attention Scale and Emotion Control Questionnaire 2. Descriptive and exploratory analysis methods were used. The general hypothesis of the research assumed that there are significant differences between the socio-professional achievements of participants who attended personal development trainings and those who did not. The hypothesis was confirmed.*

Key words: *personal development, life skills, adolescence, career.*

1. Introduction

In Romania, innovative concepts such as *personal development* are embraced by adults looking for experiences, rather than by students for educational purposes. The institutions that paved the way for the introduction of specific disciplines in children's education were non-governmental organizations, through a series of projects. The following initiatives can be considered such examples, mostly successful: Grow Romania; Junior Achievement Romania; Estuar Foundation; Foundation for the Development of Civil Society

In 1997, in Geneva, the World Health Organization defined life skills as: "skills of adaptive and positive behaviour, which allow individuals to effectively address the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO, 1997). The publication regarding

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mental health stated the life skills to be developed for children/ adolescents in school: Decision making; Problem solving; Creative thinking; Critical thinking; Assertive communication; Interpersonal skills; Self-awareness; Empathy; Coping with emotions; Coping with stress. The multitude of United Nations initiatives, issued by UNESCO's "Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014", have published documents addressing personal development by learning of the following skills: critical thinking; clarify own values; imagine a more positive and viable future; think systemically; respond to problems through applied learning; dialectically think about the relationship between tradition and innovation. Also "allowing communities to design sustainable solutions at the local level, necessary especially where the population faces problems of poverty and vulnerability" was included in the list (F.D.S.C., 2011, 2014).

"Life skills are a set of abilities, attitudes and socio-emotional competencies that enable individuals to learn, make informed decisions and exercise rights to lead a healthy and productive life and subsequently become agents of change." (UNICEF, n.d.).

Increased stress levels in adolescence lead to increased stress in later life, therefore: interventions based on conscious attention at present, focused on lowering stress levels may be helpful in adolescents (Rawlett, 2017). Regarding the practice of mindfulness in schools, Tan (2015) found only one study in 2015, but he concluded about adolescents: "those who took a mindfulness course experienced the benefits and positive results. So far, the positive results have included modest reductions in anxiety/ rumination and increases in quality of life in adolescents with depression, increases in self-control and well-being, improved self-esteem and psychological distress, but also improvements in ADHD control" (Tan, 2015). Based on the content analysis carried out on a high number of studies, Kostova and colleagues (2019) established that most studies reported: easy acceptance by adolescents of interventions based on mindfulness and a more than reasonable participation rate of 80-90%. Qualitative data revealed high levels of satisfaction, a decrease in anxiety, increase in relaxation, better management of emotions and stressful situations. Other statements regarding the benefits, made by adolescence, were: "increasing the level of self-awareness and the present moment, increased ability to detach from ruminating, improving sleep and mood" (Kostova et al., 2019). One trend to note was that adolescents tended to use conscious attention practices today as techniques in need, not as part of regular practice (Van Vliet et al., 2017). A qualitative study of 23 African-American adolescents recruited from high-risk areas (low-income family, single-parent, unfavourable school experiences etc.) found that the response to the test prior to the mindfulness program was made with expressions like: happy, ill-tempered, ANGRY (in capital letters) and furious, while after implementing the program, used words were: happiness, emotion, relaxation (Rawlett, 2017). Some of the girls said they felt smart, caring, loving, funny or hopeful, after intervention.

A successful career is only a part of the successful life of the individual, but a consistent part that influences all the other aspects. In 2019, the deputy rector of the University of Malaysia proposed a curriculum structure for a distinct subject to be included for students, emphasizing the role of life skills in achieving success.

Life skills for success (Nair & Fahimirad, 2019)   Table 1

IE dial	Personal competences	Curriculum content	Delivery	Assessment
Self - awareness	Self-understanding (purpose/ reflections of a person)	Mindfulness Reflection	Meditate on you Completing the diary Reflective writing	Intermediate essay Final essay
Self-management	Communication acknowledged in present	Discursive heritage Non-violent communication	Presentation Activities in pair	Presentation
Awareness and self-management	Internal motivation	Affirmation of the main purpose; Affirming the vision of the career Setting SMART goals	Presentation of the personal development plan	Portfolio
Self-management	Stress management	Emotional intelligence	Meditation; IE Games (racing of the table, tests, etc.)	Free

The general aim of the study was to investigate the effects that a school program on life skills development may have. The main specific objectives of the study were: 1. Assessment of self-image (self-acceptance, body image) of adolescents and young graduates; 2. Assessment of emotional control / self-control capacity of the young people; 3. Assessment of mindfulness of the respondents; 4. Screening the level of self-control over the personal career path decision making; 5. Identifying the differences between adolescents who have taken personal development/ life skills development courses and those who did not. All objectives were addressed by correlations between variables (for example, for objective 4, the specific variables were actual occupation status in graduates and future career planes in high school pupils) and the duration of the life skills development module. For all objectives, comparison between still pupils' group and already graduates group was also used.

First hypothesis assumed that there is a significant correlation between the duration of personal development training and the self-awareness level reported by a young person. The second hypothesis assumed that students and graduates who have taken life skills / personal development classes during high school have a clearer picture and show more self-control over their immediate career path than those who have not.

2. Methods and Procedures

The sample consisted in 174 participants: 134 students over the age of 17 and 40 high school graduates up to the age of 21, from 14 secondary school units, 6 Romanian counties. The age of the participants was between 17 and 21 years old, to allow the response of a large volume of participants, and to ensure the possibility of completing such a training. Most research participants were over the age of 18 (the age of full legal responsibility in Romania) even though they still had student status.

An instrument was compiled for quantitative assessment of psychological factors considered successful in professional development, out of four standardized instruments and a series of socio-demographic items, used only for the purpose of this

study. The Mindfulness Attention Scale measures the individual differences in self-awareness states over time (Miller, 2019). The scale contains 15 items, on a Likert scale (from 1 to 6). It assesses dispositional conscious attention, reaching awareness about self-regulation and various aspects of well-being. Deep self-awareness reveals that some individuals can more easily enter such a state than others (Miller, 2019; Ciarrochi & Bilich, 2006). The instrument was chosen due to good internal consistency (α = 0.82- in students samples, α = 0.87 in adults sample) and demonstrated validity of significant correlations with parallel measurements (Ciarrochi & Bilich, 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003). As an item example*: I forget the name of a person almost immediately after I use it for the first time.*

Emotional Self-control was assessed with Emotion Control Questionnaire 2 - ECQ2 (Roger & Najarian, 1989). Psychological flexibility was measured with Action-Acceptance Questionnaire - AAQ2 (Wolgast, 2014; Tyndall et al., 2018; Bond, 2011), and body self-image with The Body Image Acceptance and Action Questionnaire BI-AAQ (Ciarrochi & Bilich, 2006; Basarkod et al., 2017; Sandoz et al., 2013). As an item example: *Often, I do or say things I regret afterwards.*

The comparative analysis on the data was performed according to several criteria as: duration of the module, dominant occupational status at the time of the research. Two categories of occupational status were considered, relative to the completion of high school: student and graduate. Data collection was performed by non-discriminatory social principles, based on the voluntary cooperation of several teachers and voluntary participation of respondents. There were no restrictive ways of inviting participation and no forms of remuneration or reward for both collaborating teachers and participants. Data was collected on the Google Forms platform, between February 10 and June 15, 2020, most of the additions were made in April and May.

3. Results

For the item that measured participation in a personal development and life skills module, 28.2% of the participants never completed such a module or course during high school, 19.4% received only one semester of such training, 37.6% attended for one school year a subject of personal development and life skills, and 14.7% attended such subjects for two years in high school.

Regarding the item measuring the career intentions after graduation, there were two categories of responses: a. mostly indecision, which undertook the following answer options: *I do not know* and *Some college*; and b. tendency towards firmness in decision, which undertook all the specific specializations respondents chose from the answer options (specialization in the human sciences, specialization in the technical field, specialization in the field of army and order) and the option *I will find a job*.
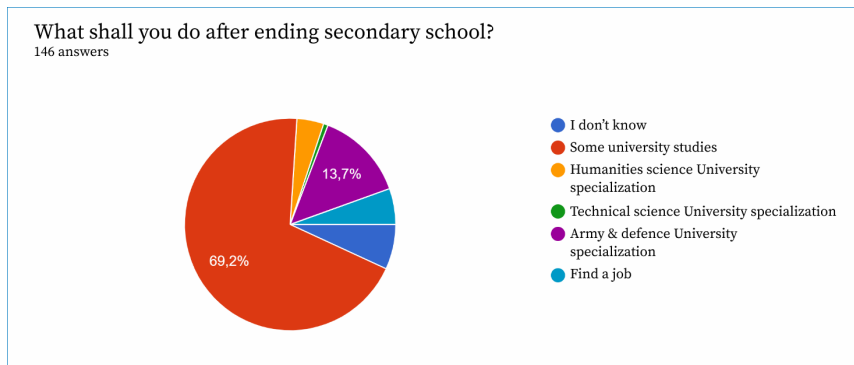
Fig. 1. *Distribution of school and career options for secondary school students*

Based on the occupation of high school graduates, we group respondents into two categories:

- respondents tending towards control of their own educational and professional path – here we included answers like: *I study in the field of my choice* (34.1% of participants); *I work* (9.1%); *I make money* (9.1%);

- respondents tending to avoid decisions related to educational and professional path (47.8% of participants), including the answers: *I don't know exactly* (20.5%), *I study what my parents / teachers recommended to me* (11.4%); *I am preparing for admission in college* (15.9%).

We named these categories: *self-control* and *avoid decisions* referring only to the restricted variable measured and not to the scientifical concept of self-control, nor to a wider personality trait.
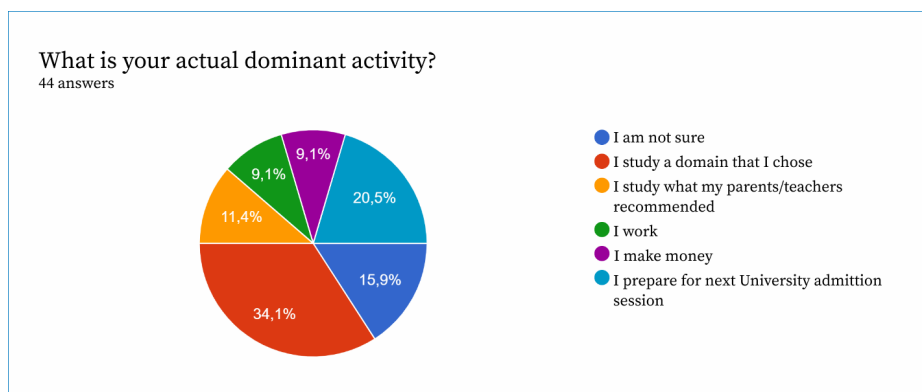

Fig. 2. *Distribution of graduates' answers regarding current occupation*

The first hypothesis assumed that there is a significant correlation between the personal development/life skills courses duration that participants attended and self-awareness level. The hypothesis was tested using the scores at The Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). The correlation was significant ($r = .25$; $p = .02$) as can be found in the table. The scores showed that the duration of the personal

development/life skills programs positively correlates with the level of students' awareness. Figure 3 shows differences in awareness levels for respondents who attended such programs and those who didn't.
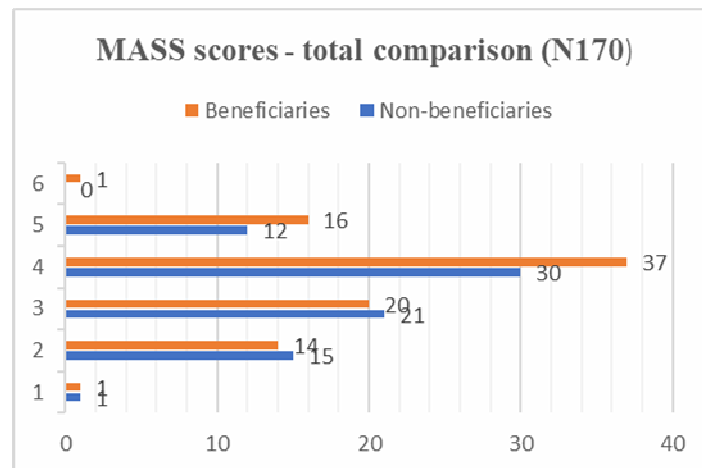

Fig. 3. *Distribution of scores for "Daily Experiences Awareness Scale" (MAAS)*

Distribution of scores shows that respondents who participated during high school in courses on life skills development for at least one school year reported higher level of self-awareness, while those who participated less than one semester obtained lower scores. Mindfulness is a capacity that through development offers not only self-awareness, calm, and acceptance of all external events, but also it builds the framework for evaluating imaginative products, keeps the relationship between imagination and reality in optimal parameters, creating the premises for individual and community evolution.

The second hypothesis assumed that the students and graduates who attended life skills/ personal development courses during secondary school have a clearer picture and show more control regarding their career paths than those who did not attend such courses. The hypothesis was verified by analysing the control manifested in the choice of the current occupation in graduates and by examining the projection of the educational and professional path in students. Each of the two categories of participants answered a specific question. Regarding self-control manifested by students on their own educational and professional path, the hypothesis was not sustained. Descriptive statistics for graduates and students, comparative for those who attended such modules and those who didn't, are presented in Table 2. Non-beneficiary students chose to a greater extent answers that show a tendency towards determination and self-determination than beneficiaries. However, the results of the t test for independent samples did not reveal statistically significant differences. It can therefore be considered that attendance to life skills programs does not significantly introduces differences in students' and graduates' abilities to manifest autonomy on their own educational and professional path. A differentiated analysis based on the contents of the curriculum applied to different life skills programs could highlight different results.

Descriptive statistics   Table 2

Graduates									
	No module					With module			
	N	Min.	Max.	Av.	Std. Dev.	N	Min.	Max.	Av.	Std. Dev
AAQ2score	**26**	**24.00**	**51.00**	**33.58**	**10,31**	**12**	**15.00**	**50.00**	**31.26**	**6,95**
BIAAQscore	**26**	**5.00**	**23.00**	**9.08**	**6,73**	**12**	**5.00**	**28.00**	**10.88**	**4,83**
MAASscore	26	2.47	5.33	3.81	1,01	12	1.80	5.53	4.09	,91
*ECQ2RUM**	26	-5.00	6.00	1.08	3,24	12	-5.00	7.00	1.00	3,39
*ECQ2INHIB***	26	-5.00	3.00	-1.41	2,20	12	-5.00	4.00	-.84	2,80
*ECQ2BENCTR****	26	-4.00	5.00	-.41	2,42	12	-5.00	4.00	.0769	2,96
ECQ2AGRCTR**	**26**	**-9.00**	**1.00**	**-2.41**	**2,32**	**12**	**-6.00**	**3.00**	**-1.269**	**3,36**
Students									
	No development module (<1 semester)					Development module (min. 1 year)				
	N	Min.	Max.	Av.	Std. Dev.	N	Min.	Max.	Av.	Std. Dev.
EPG – students	71	0	1	.34	8,19	76	0	1	.18	8,19
AAQ2score	**79**	**11.00**	**51.00**	**32.97**	**6,27**	**89**	**15.00**	**53.00**	**32.03**	**6,27**
BIAAQscore	**79**	**5.00**	**30.00**	**11.32**	**6,03**	**88**	**5.00**	**30.00**	**10.35**	**6,03**
MAASscore	79	1.00	5.33	3.47	0,99	89	1.00	5.53	3.68	0,99
*ECQ2RUM**	79	-5.00	8.00	1.68	2,74	89	-5.00	8.00	1.78	2,74
ECQ2INHIB*	**79**	**-5.00**	**5.00**	**.50**	**2,36**	**89**	**-5.00**	**6.00**	**-.269**	**2,36**
*ECQ2BENCTR****	79	-6.00	5.00	-.78	2,40	89	-6.00	4.00	-.966	2,40
*ECQ2AGRCTR*****	79	-9.00	4.00	-2.10	2,45	89	-8.00	3.00	-2.22	2,45

*ECQ2RUM = Rumination, **ECQ2INHIB = Emotion Inhibition, ***ECQ2BENCTR = Benign Control, ****ECQ2AGRCTR = Aggression Control

The correlation between personal development/life skills programs duration and emotional control, show a significant negative corelation with the emotional inhibition dimension (r = -.16, p = .03), meaning that the lengths of participation in such program is associated with lower levels of emotional inhibition.

Another significant correlation that we obtained was between the duration of the module for participants attending personal development/life skills programs and the scores for the Body Image Acceptance and Action Questionnaire. The correlation was significant at r = .35, p = .009, showing that students who attended more than one year of such programs significantly reported higher levels of body image acceptance.

4. Conclusions and Discussions

Among the limitations of the current study, we should mention the variable number of participants from each institution, therefore we couldn't analyse differences between groups of participants coming from different schools. Still, when comparing only students and graduates from one high school - „Ion Cantacuzino" Theoretical Highschool, who benefited from the same life skills development curriculum with those

who did not benefit at all, we identified a tendency for deeper level of mindfulness and control over professional path in respondents that attended at least one year of personal development classes. The obtained differences could be explained by the fact that the personal development/life skills curricula contain specific activities for self-awareness and decision making in the field of profession and career. The results of such programs could be improved by adding psychological assessment and professional guidance.

There is a strong possibility that the results were vitiated by participants' psychological disposition given that data collection was performed immediately after the declaration of emergency state due to the pandemic. The small number of respondents who were graduates limit the power of the research.

Another limit of the study is that respondents' institution affiliation did not cover all country regions of Romania and convenience sampling was used. Therefore, the sample cannot be considered representative for the entire population of Romanian high-school pupils or high-school graduates.

Even so, the results of the study relevant in making educational decisions regarding the development of a national curriculum on life-skills for high school. The results and conclusions of the research are useful for educational experts and educational decision makers at local and national level but can also be a starting point for comparison among different educational policies implemented in different states. Further research addressing specific life skills proposed to be developed in the curricula could offer a deeper view and help in designing a national program.

In conclusion, the introduction in the last years of secondary education/ high school of a specific curriculum focused on the fit between personality and educational path, rather than on the fit with labor market needs, could lead to better career decisions, more balanced professional communities, and, ultimately, to happier individuals. At the same time, stronger and happier personality structures can insure healthier decisions and actions for the community also. The curricula on personal development should also ensure flexibility to respond to the different needs of students, maybe through non-formal educational approach or a very diverse content.

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