

**A follow-up study of implementation of a positive approach of discipline at school and classroom levels**

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**Abstract.**

*There is a continuous preoccupation on developing efficient, scientifically and pragmatic-based strategies and techniques in order to improve the educational and therapeutic practices in educational and therapeutic/remedial contexts, The helping and caring professionals are constantly involved in their continuous specialization, by participating in training and courses.*

*There are insights, there are enthusiasm and optimism, there are motivations, and assuming of personal changes and improvement, there are pledges of improving owns professional practices, for the benefit of those carried out!*

*But the newly learned methods should be introduced and exercise in the life spaces of the trainee. And then begin the battle between new and familiar, between not yet fully mastered and quite automatized actions/reactions, between commodity of conformity and the efforts and risks of innovation.*

*In this paper, we want to investigate the factors who promote the change and those who explain the inertia and the resistance to change. Identifying the mechanisms which enhance the acquisition and the implementation of new methods grants efficient professional and institutional evolution and improvement*

*For this purpose, we will present the assessment of two initiatives of introducing and promoting changes in educational context and in intervention strategies. The follow-up techniques (scales and focus group) reveal the factors that promote the change, and, also, the factors that favor the inertia and the resistance to change.*

*We assessed the impact of a training on positive discipline and LSCI methods to the teaching and discipline strategies, in a follow-up study of 40 trainees, primary and secondary teachers, from mainstream and special schools.*

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## Introduction

The school is one key-institution in socializing children. As a social institution, school values are strongly regulated and embedded in social norms and values. A growing number of students have difficulties in adjusting to social and schools' requirements, and these difficulties are expressed in forms of inappropriate behaviors and conflicts. Society and schools are approaching these discipline problems mostly reactively and with punished-based techniques. This practice proved to have no long-term beneficial effects on behavioral modification and on pro-social abilities development (Predescu, M.; Dârjan I.; Tomiță, M., 2014). Even more, this punished-based practice might worsen the situation, generating a keen sense of inadequacy and maladjustment. The main negative side-effects of punishments are resentment, revenge, rebellion, and/or retreat (Nelsen, J., 2010; Nelsen, J. L., & S., G., 2000; Dârjan, I., 2017; Dârjan, I.&Tomiță, M. 2014).

In order to improve schools' climate and procedures for promoting students' academic success and social abilities development, a bunch of innovative, creative and promising new strategies and methods are delivered to the schools and to the teachers through continuous professionalization programs (Seligman, 2009; Fecser, F., 2009; Long, N.J.; Wood, M. M.; Fecser, F.A., 2001)

Despite to scientifically and empirical evidence of the efficacy of these new methods, sometimes the initial enthusiasm and determination (during training) fade away into the comfort and automaticity of traditional, familiar, and well-known old strategies and habits.

One of the main objectives of programs of continuous professionalization should be the development of trainees' devotion and fidelity for the newly acquired knowledge and skills, and the nurture of theirs motivation and strengths to implement them in daily practices.

This is why it is very important to identify the main factors who promote changes and innovation, at individual and organizational levels, and, also, the factors that favor inertia and the resistance to change.

## Change in school – motivations and obstacles

The need for change in the organization and on individual level express the need to continuously develop and refine your strategies and actions, in order to be efficient, fulfilled, and not to become obsolete. The aims and reasons for these adjustments and growth could be diverse, such as acquiring new roles and tasks; material and financial restraints or opportunities, acquisition of new strategies or technology, assuming new missions, shifting the vision or goals; extending the area of interests and influence, etcetera. Changes create ambiguous feelings and might generate oppositional behavioral tendencies. Changes are both opportunities and threats.

In educational institutes, the forces who might request and impose the change are diverse, from governmental decisions to social changes and society's values, the pressure of newly developed technologies, and administrative and personal needs and processes (Yılmaz, D.; Kılıçoğlu, G., 2013).

The most important motives educators become resistant are the sudden and unannounced character of requested change, the excessive grade of uncertainty generated by the change, the sensation of losing control, the discomfort of losing familiar routines and habits, the distrust in the permanent character of the change, the feelings of being told that their previous strategies were wrong, the fear of proving incompetent to learn the new competencies, the ripple (butterfly) effect of disrupting in one domain which will affect all the others, the work overload, the fear of being in the losers' group at the end of the changing process (Rosabeth Moss Kanter, apud. Scott McLeod, 2011; Yılmaz, D.; Kılıçoğlu, G., 2013). Also, the changing process might be negatively affected by insufficient funding and the fatigues that accompany the efforts to change (Scott McLeod, 2011).

It seems that the resistance, due to most of the above motives, is greater from staff part, while the managers' orientation toward change is more optimistic (van Wyk, A.; van der Westhuizen, Ph.C.; van Vuuren, H., 2017). Yet, it is easier to change and to sustain the changes when you are in charge and in control. That is the way the teacher could apply the changes to their classrooms, strategies, and curriculums, but need the management of the school's collaboration in order to change the environment and procedures outside the classroom.

The resistance to change could take different forms: aggressive resistance, passive-aggressive resistance, and passive resistance (Long, J.E.; Long, N.J., Whitson, S., 2009; Janas, M., 1998).

Kotter & Schlesinger (1979, apud. Yılmaz, D.; Kılıçoğlu, G., 2013) consider six methods that can overcome resistance to change in school: education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, negotiation and agreement, manipulation and co-optation, explicit and implicit coercion.

### Aim and method

The aim of this follow-up study is to assess the perception of positive approach implementation on both classroom and school levels. The follow-up is made in schools that invested in training their staff (professors and managers) in Life Space Crisis Intervention and Positive Behavioral Intervention in Schools. We used a Likert type scales in order to measure the perceived positive approach at classroom and school levels.

The participants are 25 teachers from normal (2) and special schools (2) that are spread across levels and specializations. All participants were trained in positive educational approaches of behavioral intervention (LSCI and PBIS). Also, we conducted one focus groups with managers (trained in LSCI and PBIS).

For the purpose of assessment, we built a scale of 22 items, 12 assessing the positive approach at the classroom level, and 10 items assessing the positive approach at the school level. All items were developed based on the existing literature and theoretical concepts used in positive education.

### Results

The strategy of research is to assess both the perception of positive approach at the classroom and school level and to compare them. Based on the hierarchy of items we conducted focus groups to see what are the main obstacles and favoring factors of implementing the efficient positive philosophy and approaches at the classroom and school level. The items of the scale were assessed on a seven point scale, with 1 meaning not at all and 7 meaning always.

The list of items at the classroom level and the ascending means are presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Perceived positive approach at classroom level - Hierarchy of statements (Alpha Cronbach = .929):**

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
There are clear systems of collecting, storing, and interpretation of the behaviors manifested in the classroom.	3.60	1.190
Physical and spatial organization of the classroom allow the teacher to offer appropriate answers to all students' needs.	3.80	1.225
Between three to five positive behavioral expectations are posted, defined, and taught explicitly.	3.92	.997
In teacher-student exchanges, there are approximately 6-7 positive interactions to 1 negative interaction ratio.	4.12	.881
The reactions to inappropriate behaviors in the classroom are adequate and systematic.	4.16	.850
The active management and supervision of students' behaviors are used proactively and preventively.	4.20	.913
Pre-correction and rules reaffirmation are frequently used prior to the manifestation of the inappropriate behavior.	4.20	.816
Students feel safe, listened, understood, and respected.	4.32	.852
Classroom' routine and rules are developed with students participation and are predictable for them.	4.36	.757
Specific rewards and strategies are used to acknowledge and outline students' appropriate behaviors.	4.40	.707
Classroom relations (student-student, student-teacher) are cooperative and supportive.	4.44	.712
The teacher uses frequently the opportunities to teach and enhance positive behaviors.	4.48	.770

The analysis of hierarchy of items shows that the most highly rated items are about the actual interaction between social actors as well as routines and rewarding system. The least scored items are about the environmental factors and establishing expectations and formalizing values and norms. This is one of the traits of Romanian authoritarian system of education where teachers usually establish herself the rules of conduct and expectations.

In order to group the statements, we performed a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation. The result was a dual factorial structure that explains 73,13% of the variance (factor 1 - 42.29% of variance, factor 2 - 30.85% of variance).

The rotated component matrix and loadings of the items are presented in table 2.

**Tabel 2. Rotated component matrix after three iterations (Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalisation)**

Statements	Component	
	1	2
Responses /reactions to inappropriate behaviors in the classroom are adequate and consistent.	<b>.866</b>	.334
In teacher-student exchanges, there are approximatively 6-7 positive interactions to 1 negative interaction ratio.	<b>.842</b>	.245
The active management and supervision of students' behaviors are used proactively and preventively.	<b>.827</b>	.359
There are clear systems of collecting, storing, and interpretation of the behaviors manifested in the classroom.	<b>.791</b>	-.034
Between three to five positive behavioral expectations are posted, defined, and taught explicitly.	<b>.684</b>	.357
Classroom' routine and rules are developed with students participation and are predictable for them.	<b>.664</b>	.524
Pre-correction and rules reaffirmation are frequently used prior to the manifestation of the inappropriate behavior.	<b>.636</b>	.542
Specific rewards and strategies are used to acknowledge and outline students' appropriate behaviors.	<b>.616</b>	.568
Classroom relations (student-student, student-teacher) are cooperative and supportive.	.403	<b>.799</b>
The teacher uses frequently the opportunities to teach and enhance positive behaviors.	.526	<b>.779</b>
Students feel safe, listened, understood, and respected.	.412	<b>.759</b>
Physical and spatial organization of the classroom allow the teacher to offer appropriate answers to all students' needs.	-.076	<b>.749</b>

The second component is easier to label as *arelationship*, based on the fact that all the statements are referring not to concrete actions and reactions, but to a general state of relationships. The first component is about the structure and concrete actions of behavioral intervention. If we relate the hierarchy of statements and the component distribution, we could consider that the main barriers are not relational, but technical, based on improper ways to address disruptive behaviors.

When we analyzed the perception of positive approach at school level we found the following hierarchy of statements.

**Table 3: Perceived positive approach at school level -Hierarchy of statements (Alpha = .976):**

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Systematic selected information is used to periodic reassessment and modification of personalized behavioral plans.	3.52	1.418
There is a unitary system of collecting and registering data on students' behaviors.	3.56	1.158
Active staff supervision and preventing measures for inappropriate behaviors are more frequently used then punishing and reactive ones.	3.64	1.221
The socio-affective environment of the school improved.	3.68	1.030
There are consistent and unitary procedures of educating and reinforcement of desirable behaviors, and of discouraging the undesirable behaviors.	3.76	1.200
There are a unitary understanding and definition of inappropriate behaviors between staff and managers.	3.76	1.165
There is asimilar preoccupation for sustaining the academic progress and the development of social and self-management abilities of the students.	3.80	1.155
Teachers-students relationships are based on mutual respect, cooperation, and behavioral support actively modeled by the adults.	3.80	1.155
Students feel cared for, protected, and happy in the school environment.	3.84	1.106
There have been developed positive contacts with families, favorable to active implication and participation of families in educating and disciplining the student.	3.84	1.143

Again, the technical aspects of implementing a positive approach to discipline at school level are more difficult than establishing a positive environment.

When we compared the classroom and school approaches, teachers found more easy to implement a positive approach at classroom level that at school level ( $t(24)=2.69, p=.013$ ).

When asked to reflect on that, the managers agreed that implementing a school wide approach to discipline is harder, due to the fact that there is a great variety of understanding of the issue among teachers. Also, it is difficult to implement standardized models of intervention.

On the other hand, the managers agreed that reflecting on discipline at organization level is useful and that a common understanding would be a practical way to introduce a new approach to the organizational culture.

## Discussions

The results of this research suggest that the main changes, in terms of attitudes, reaction, and strategies are at the classroom level, compared with those manifested at the entire school level. The obvious explanation of this fact is that the teachers trained in positive psychology principles, and LSCI Method are more comfortable to design and sustain changes in the range of their own control, which is their classroom, their students, and, of course, their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The teacher has more autonomy and control over his/her own classroom, students, and didactical and disciplinary strategies.

At the school level, the change depends on many instances and needs more time to become a reality. The changes of beliefs, attitudes, and strategies at whole school level request either a critical mass of people which sustain them (bottom-up pressure) or the implication and the decision of the school manager or a higher instance (ex., governmental decision/state law, etc.) (top-down pressure).

## Conclusions

The changes in schools could go big, earth quaking-like. Usually, these type of changes is generated by top-down decisions. Even though these changes are compulsory, they may prove inefficient, as they raise more and stronger resistances.

But, sometimes, especially in educational contexts, little changes could build-up into a revolutionary movement, if they reach a critical mass or a significant point.

By critical mass we mean the situation in which the vast majority of a school, educational institution agree, and adhere to the same principles of educating and disciplining students, share the same concepts about students, education, and interventions, and use a unitary interventional procedure (Sugai, .2002).

A critical point could be represented by positive results, data that prove the efficiency of these modified approaches. This is the role of action research/research in



action (RIT) (Marzano, R. J., 2003; O'Donoghue, T., Punch, K. (Eds.), 2003; Epstein, J. L & co., 2002; Stringer, E. T., 2008).

For sure, in order to become a rule, the bottom-up changes in beliefs, attitudes, and approaches have to be accepted, sustained and reinforced by the higher stances, or they will be forced to conform to the formally accepted philosophies and strategies. In the case of relevant data that sustain the efficiency, and, hence, the necessity of these changes, they have to generate similar modifications in top-down policies.

The powerful, positive effects of proactive and preventive discipline should represent the main argument in sustaining the necessity of changing the disciplinary strategies to policy-makers, administrators, teachers, and parents.

The efforts in developing children resilience should take into account the professional training of educators, as agents of social development of the children (Dârjan, I.; Luștrea, A.; Predescu, M., 2016).

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