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**PhD THESIS ABSTRACT**

***EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING***  
***STUDENTS' BEHAVIOR***

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## **Table of Contents**

### **INTRODUCTION**

### **CHAPTER I. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENTS' MISBEHAVIOR. BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT MODELS**

#### I.1. Students' misbehavior. General presentation

##### I.1.1. Definitions and characteristics of students' misbehavior

##### I.1.2. Theoretical perspectives regarding the causes of students' misbehavior

#### I.2. Approaches and students' behavior models

##### I.2.1. Terminology

##### I.2.2. The concept of model and types of models

###### I.2.3. Intervening models

###### I.2.4. Interacting models

###### I.2.5. Guiding models

### **CHAPTER II. STUDENT' BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

#### II.1. Categories of students' behavior management strategies

#### II.2. Positive strategies

##### II.2.1. Positive reinforcement

##### II.2.2. Prompting

##### II.2.3. Behavioral contracts

##### II.2.4. Self-management

##### II.2.5. Selecting appropriate independent work

##### II.2.6. Counseling based strategies

#### II.3. Restrictive strategies

##### II.3.1. Planned ignoring

II.3.2. Proximity control

II.3.3. Giving student choices

II.3.4. Verbal reprimand

II.3.5. Loss of privileges

II.3.6. Time-out

II.3.7. Holding the student in the classroom

II.3.8. Parents contact

II.3.9. Referring student to the principal

II.4. Results of researches regarding effectiveness of behavior management strategies

### **CHAPTER III. TEACHER' CONTROL BELIEFS AND STUDENT BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT**

III.1. Definitions of beliefs

III.2. Beliefs – knowledge rapport

III.3. Characteristics of teaching beliefs and the importance of studying teachers' beliefs

IV.4. The continuum of teachers' control beliefs

IV.5. Teachers' controlling behavior and teacher - student relationship

### **CHAPTER IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

IV.1. Research problem and key concepts

IV.2. Instruments

IV.2.1. Classroom Management Intervention Strategies Scale - CMIS

IV.2.2. Pupil Control Ideology Scale - PCI

IV.2.3. Results regarding the reliability of the instruments

IV.3. Study 1 – Research regarding the relationship between behavior management strategies and teacher' control beliefs

IV.3.1. Research objective

IV.3.2. Research hypothesis

IV.3.3. Study design

IV.3.4. Participants

IV.3.5. Results

IV.3.6. Investigation of teachers' typology depending on behavior management strategies - clusters analysis

IV.4. Study 2 – Comparative research of behavior management strategies related to participants' level of teaching experience

IV.4.1. Research objective

IV.4.2. Research hypothesis

IV.4.3. Study design

IV.4.4. Participants

IV.4.5. Results

IV.5. Study 3 – Comparative research of control beliefs related to participants' level of teaching experience

IV.5.1. Research objective

IV.5.2. Research hypothesis

IV.5.3. Study design

IV.5.4. Participants

IV.5.5. Results

IV.6. Study 4 – Experimental manipulation aimed to improving behavior management strategies used by teachers

IV.6.1. Research objective

IV.6.2. Research hypotheses

IV.6.3. Study design

IV.6.4. Variables

IV.6.5. Participants

IV.6.7. Results

## **CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS**

IV.1. General considerations regarding the research

VI.2. Limitations of research

VI.3. Suggestions for future research

## **REFERENCES**

## **APPENDICES**

## **LIST OF TABELS**

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

## ***ABSTRACT OF PhD THESIS TITLED***

### ***Educational Strategies for Improving Students' Behavior***

**Key words:** behavior management, behavior management strategies, discipline, classroom management, behavior management, beliefs, control beliefs

One of the major problems that the today's educational systems face all over the world is that of students' misbehavior. A large body of researches shows that the same situation is true for Romania. Thus, the impact study of curriculum reform in compulsory educational system, *Școala la răscruce. Schimbare și continuitate în curriculumul învățământului obligatoriu* (2002), presents significant data regarding the issues of discipline in school setting in our country. Students' misbehavior has been identified as one of the factors with significant impact on good schooling. Many teachers consider that dealing with misbehavior takes a great amount of time. More specifically, from the total of 5778 primary and middle schools teachers who participated in this research, those appreciating that establishing order in the classroom represents a problem (spend too much time to deal with misbehavior) were: 14,1% in a very large extend, 25,3% in a large extend, 30,7% in a small extend and only 24% in a very low extend.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the strategies for improving students' behavior and teachers' control beliefs. Specifically, my intention in this research was to explore the possible association between students' behavior management strategies and teachers' control beliefs, which strategies are uses by the middle school teachers to manage students' behavior in the classroom and the differences depending on teachers' level of teaching experience, which are the middle school teachers and preservice teachers' control beliefs and the differences depending on their level of teaching experiences, and what are the effects of a program of professional development in behavior management on teachers' behavior management strategies and their control beliefs.

The results can provide important landmarks in building initial and continuing educational programs for teachers in the area of student's behavior management.

The PhD thesis titled *Educational strategies for improving students' behavior* contains five chapters. The first three present the theoretical background of the investigated issues and the last two present the research methodology, results and conclusions.

**Chapter I**, *Theoretical perspectives on students' misbehavior. Behavior management models*, presents definitions of students' misbehavior and different terms used to name this category of behaviors by different authors in accordance with their approaches or/and their intention to underline a particular feature of these behaviors within a specific context of analysis (problem behavior, defiant behavior etc.). Misbehavior includes behavior that interferes with teaching, interferes with the rights of others to learn, have a negative impact on student' school adjustment. Also, this chapter presents a series of observable features of these behaviors that can allow teachers to identify and establish their degree of severity (i.e., these behaviors *keep the student for participating in curricular activities, have negative effects on educational process and student's educational performances, are not adequate to student's age or development level* etc.).

Based on the assumption that every behavioral intervention must be preceded by the identification of potential causes that led to the problems' occurrence, and that a good problem conceptualization and a theoretical approach facilitate both the identification and the explanations of the factors that lead to the incidence, initiation, maintenance and precipitation of misbehavior (Mih, 2010b), a number of theoretical approaches are presented within this chapter in order to offer specific understanding perspectives of students' misbehavior etiology: behavioral, constructivist, systemic, psihodinamic approach.

Holding a specific conceptualization and perspective upon misbehaviors—a specific understanding of their etiology, specific views of child development and educational philosophies etc., different authors have elaborated different models of students behavior management or discipline. A model of students' behavior management is a set of cohesive approaches to deal with establishing, maintaining, and restoring order in the classroom that represent a certain philosophical perspective on a continuum of low

to high teacher control (Burden, 2006). Burden classifies the models of students' behavior management in three categories: intervening (or high teacher' control), interacting (or medium teacher' control) and guiding (low teacher' control) models. The intervening models are based on philosophical beliefs that students' growth and development are the result of external conditions. The student' behavior is modeled and shaped by influences from the environment. Therefore, the teachers must select the desired student behaviors, reinforce appropriate behaviors, and act to extinguish inappropriate behaviors. Our paper presents two such models: L. Canter and M. Canter' assertive discipline model and F. Jones' positive discipline model. The interacting models are based on the philosophical belief that development emerges from a combination of innate and outer forces. Therefore, the teacher promotes individual student control over behavior whenever possible, but places the needs of the group as a whole over the needs of individual students. Our paper presents the following interacting models: R. Dreikurs' social discipline / logical consequences model, W. Glasser' noncoercive discipline model and R. Curwin and A. Mendler' discipline with dignity model. The guiding models are based on the philosophical beliefs that students have primary responsibility for controlling their own behavior and that they have the capability to make their decisions. The teacher has the responsibility for structuring the classroom environment to facilitate the students' control over their own behavior. Our paper also presents the following guiding models: H. Ginott' congruent communication model, T. Gordon' discipline as self-control / teacher effectiveness training model and A. Khon' from discipline to community model.

Each of these models represents specific strategies for preventing and correcting misbehavior and can be regarded as useful tools for teachers in building their own students' behavior management systems.

**The chapter II, *Students' behavior management strategies***, presents different types of behavior management strategies grouped in two categories: positive and restrictive strategies. Positive strategies were defined as teacher behaviors that involve aspects of reward, positive reinforcement, and encouragement. Restrictive strategies were defined as teacher behaviors that include aspects of punishment, negative reinforcement, and chastisement. Among the positive strategies presented into the paper are: positive



reinforcement; contingency contracting; self-management etc. Among the restrictive strategies presented are: reprimand; loss of privileges; time-out etc.

Also, this chapter presents the research results regarding the effectiveness of different types of strategies. For example, Stage and Quiroz (1997) and R. Marzano, J. Marzano and Pickering (2003) meta-analysis show positive effects of different types of management strategies in decreasing students' misbehavior in the classroom (e.g. positive reinforcement – ex. teacher approval, tangible recognition and mild forms of punishments – ex. loss of privileges, group contingency).

**Chapter III, *Teacher' control beliefs and students' behavior management***, analyzes the teachers' beliefs. A solid body of analyses of in-service and future teachers training programmes supports the importance of teachers' beliefs in their taking on and performance of educational practices.

The importance of analyzing this type of cognitions in teachers resides in their characteristics, especially stability, resistance to change and their influence on teachers' behaviors and actions during their teaching practice.

Mih (2010) argues that: “An educational analysis which doesn't consider the beliefs and intentions underlying the teacher's behavior makes for a severely limited understanding of the teaching and learning activities” (p 198). The same is supported by Smylie's (1994) observation that teachers, in their effort towards performing teaching and educational tasks, construct their own solutions based on individual understandings of contexts, which in turn is influenced by their own beliefs systems (apud. Decker & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008).

The analysis of current and future teachers' views and beliefs regarding the control of students' behaviors hasn't been a major concern in Romanian educational research. The emphasis on preventing disruptive behaviors by means of instructional design allowed for a view of the subject matter as a activity tangent to the instructional activities, which do not require reflectivity and planning, and in which the teacher may use discretionary his status within the schooling system (construed as a means of attaining conformity by methods lacking consensual normativity, such as coercion, manipulation, etc.) in order to block any behavior interfering with teaching and learning.

Students' behavioral control may only be supported by its educational value. The empirical evidences show that lack of control and over-control lead not to positive learning outcomes but, rather, they are a major source for disciplinary problems escalation. The subjectivity of interpretations, strongly grounded in the teachers' beliefs or their implicit theories, only serves to enhance the sensibility of the issue of finding the line between educational, formative control and the repressive control, on the one hand, and the educational or formative control and the lack of control, on the other hand.

Pajares (1992) isolated most of the teachers' educational beliefs:

- they develop early and have a tendency to self-perpetuate, even when disputed by reason, time, experience or training;
- the earlier a belief is assimilated within the teacher's cognitive structures, the more difficult to shape it is;
- they play a crucial role in structuring the teacher's knowledge and information ; on their bases, the teacher interprets, plans, makes decisions, designs tasks and selects his or her strategies;
- they are decisive factors for teachers' behaviors; have a significant impact on the way teachers interact with students and how they structure the learning contexts. With respect to the formation of teachers' beliefs, Richardson (2003) identifies three main sources: teaching experience, experience as a student (during school years), and professional and educational competencies formed throughout teachers' training programmes.

Conceptualized by Willower, Eidell, and Hoy (1973), students' control orientation / ideology is a psychological construct that defines teachers' beliefs towards students and classroom discipline along a continuum from humanistic at one extreme (trustful view of students and an optimistic perspective towards student self-responsibility and cooperation, students are seen as reasonable people needing sympathetic understanding and permissive regulation) to custodial at the other (beliefs that emphasize the maintenance of order, distrust of students, and a moralistic stance towards deviant behavior students are seen to be irresponsible untrustworthy, lacking in respect).

**Chapter IV** presents the issue and the key concepts, the research objectives, instrumentation used within the research, the methodology and the results of the four studies.

The research has three components. The first is orientated towards the degree in which two groups of middle school teachers, having 2 years teaching experience and 6 years teaching experience, use certain categories of management strategies. The second component of the research explores three groups of participants control beliefs: pre-service teachers (students-teachers) and two groups of in-service teachers, middle school teachers with 2 years teaching experience and middle school teachers with 6 years teaching experience. The third component is aimed to investigate the effects on a professional development program in behavior management on management strategies used by participants and their control beliefs.

Among the most important objectives of the research are:

- to identify a possible association between management strategies of students' behavior and teachers' control beliefs;
- to compare the management strategies of students' behavior used by teachers-participants with 2 years teaching experience and teachers with 3 years teaching experience;
- to identify a possible topology of teachers depending on management strategies used in the classroom and their control beliefs;
- to compare control beliefs of three groups of participants: students-teachers, middle school teachers with 2 years teaching experience and 6 years teaching experience;
- to explore the effects that a professional development program in behavior management, based on systematic and positive approach, have on management strategies used by teacher participants and their control beliefs.

The instruments used within the research were: *Classroom Management Intervention Strategies Scale* – CMIS (Gordon, 2002) and *Pupil Control Ideology - PCI* (Willower, Eidell, & Hoy 1973).

**Study 1** explored the association between behavior management strategies and teachers' control beliefs. For this reason a correlation study was achieved. The measurements used were: 1) the scores on subscales of CMIS (positive strategies, negative consequences and severe punishments), and 2) the scores on PCI. We have used a sample of 383 participants, middle school teachers with 2 and 6 years teaching experience.

The correlation study shows a significant negative correlation between the scores on PCI and the scores on positive strategies subscale of CMIS ( $\rho = -0,159$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and a significant positive correlation between the scores on PCI and those on severe punishment subs of CMIS ( $\rho = 0,187$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There was no significant correlation between the scores on PCI and those on negative consequences subscale of CMIS.

An additional objective of this study was to identify possible topology of teachers depending on scores on CMIS subscales. In this regard, a quick cluster analysis was achieved and 3 groups of teachers were identified. For identifying the possible differences in control beliefs between the three groups an analysis of variance was achieved (one way ANOVA).

The post hoc procedures showed significant differences between cluster 1 and 3 and cluster 1 and 2 regarding scores on PCI. Thus, the participants from cluster 3 held stronger humanistic control beliefs as compared to the participants from cluster 1 and 2. The control beliefs of participants from clusters 2 and 3 do not differ significantly.

**Cluster 1** ( $N = 161$ ) had 35,4% teachers with 2 years teaching experience and 64,5% teachers with 6 years teaching experience. The participants from this cluster use to the lowest level positive strategies and negative consequences. As concerns the severe punishments they use them at lower level as compared to the participants from cluster 2 and at a larger extend as compared to the participants of cluster 3.

**Cluster 2** ( $N = 87$ ) has 28,7% teachers with 2 years teaching experience and 71,26% teachers with 6 years teaching experience. The participants from cluster 2 use all the categories of strategies at a higher extend as compared to participants from cluster 1. Compared to participants from cluster 3, participants from cluster 2 use at lower extend

the positive strategies, but they at a higher extend the negative consequences and severe punishments.

**Cluster 3** (N = 87) has 8,1% teachers with 2 years teaching experience and 91,8% teachers with 6 years teaching experience. They use at the highest extend the positive strategies and at the lowest extend the severe punishments

Within **Study 2**, the results from two groups of middle school teachers (93 teachers with 2 years teaching experience and 290 teachers with 6 years teaching experience), regarding the students' behavior management strategies measured on CMIS scale, were compared. For each subscale of CMIS scale (positive strategies, negative consequences and severe punishments) descriptive statistics were achieved (percentage means, standard deviations etc.). In order to determine the possible differences between the two groups of teachers as concerns the using of positive strategies, negative consequences and severe punishments a one way ANOVA was used.

The F value allowed the conclusion that there are significant differences between the means of scores for each subscale:  $F(1, 381) = 31,282, p < .001, r = 0,27$  – positive strategies,  $F(1, 381) = 4,251, p < .05, r = 0,1$  – negative consequences,  $F(1, 381) = 13,566, p < .001, r = 0,18$  – severe punishments).

The middle school teachers with 6 years teaching experience use the positive strategies and negative consequences at a significantly higher extend as compared to middle school teachers with 2 years teaching experience. The teachers with 2 years teaching experience use at a significant higher extend the severe punishments as compared to the teachers with 6 years teaching experience.

**Study 3** was aimed to compare the three groups of participants control beliefs with different levels of teaching experience: students – teachers (pre-service teachers) – participants with level of experience 1 (N = 308), middle school teachers with 2 years teaching experience – participants with level of experience 2 (N = 93) and teachers with 6 years teaching experience – participants with level of experience 3 (N = 290). The control beliefs were measured on PCI scale. For each group of scores descriptive statistics were achieved (percentage means, standard deviations etc.). In order to determine the possible

differences between the three groups of teachers as concerns of control beliefs, one way ANOVA and post hoc procedures were used.

The F value showed that there are significant differences between the means of three groups of scores  $F(2, 688) = 9,209, p < .01$ . The post hoc procedures showed that there are significant differences between the following groups' scores:

- the scores obtained by the group of participants with level of experience 1 ( $m = 3,02; SD = 0,34$ ) and those of the group of participants with level of experience 3 ( $m = 2,92; SD = 0,37$ ) (Tukey  $t = 3, p = 0,005, r = 0,03$ );
- the scores obtained by the group of participants with level of experience 2 ( $m = 3,09; SD = 0,37$ ) and those of the group of participants with level of experience 3 ( $m = 2,92; SD = 0,37$ ) (Tukey  $t = 4, p = 0,000, r = 0,05$ );

The teachers with 6 years teaching experience show humanistic control beliefs significant stronger as compared to those of students/teachers and teachers with 2 years teaching experience.

**Study 4** aimed at the identification of the effects of a professional development program in behavior management on students' behavior management strategies used by the teachers in the classroom and their control beliefs. For this purpose, an experimental manipulation was achieved using two groups: the experimental group ( $N = 47$ ) and the control group ( $N = 50$ ) (post-test-only control group design). The degree at which teachers used the different categories of behavior management strategies was measured on CMIS and the control beliefs on PCI after four months from completing the experimental program. For each group of scores descriptive statistics were achieved (percentage means, standard deviations etc.). One way ANOVA was used to determine the possible differences between the experimental group and control group with regard to students' behavior management strategies (subscale of CMIS) and control beliefs.

The objectives of the experimental program were:

- to identify the alternative perspectives of teacher's understanding of the causes of students' misbehavior;

- to identify positive strategies used by teachers for establish discipline in the classroom and efficient manners for implementing these strategies
- to identify the possibilities to articulate the strategies destined to improve the students' behavior in a coherent management system;
- to identify the possibilities to build up a positive student/teacher relationship and its influence on instructional activity and on students' personal development;
- to identify the role of the control beliefs in the teachers' selection of students' behavior management strategies.

The results of ANOVA allowed the conclusion that there are significant differences between the means of scores obtained by the two groups on two subscale of CMIS scale: positive strategies,  $F(1,95) = 24,474$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0,20$  and severe punishments,  $F(1,95) = 36,362$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0,29$ . Also, there were significant differences between the means of the scores obtained by the two groups of participants as concerns the control beliefs,  $F(1,95) = 47,868$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0,33$ .

The experimental program led to significant changes in both students' behavior management strategies (the experimental group used at a higher extend positive strategies and at a lower extend severe punishments as compared to control group) and control beliefs (participants from experimental group showed stronger humanistic control beliefs as compared to participants from control group).

**Chapter V** presents general aspects concerning the research and a synthesis of the conclusions, the limits of the research and suggestions for future researches. Thus, the positive strategies used by the teachers correlate negative with custodial control beliefs and the strategies based on negative punishments correlate positive with custodial control beliefs. The teachers with 6 years teaching experience use in a significant higher extend positive strategies and negative consequences in order to manage the students' misbehavior as compared to those with 2 years teaching experience. The teachers with 6 years teaching experience display stronger humanistic control beliefs than those with 2 years teaching experiences and preservice teachers. There isn't a significant difference with respect to control beliefs between teachers with 2 years teaching experience and preservice teachers. Neither of the participants groups displayed very strong humanistic

or very strong custodial control beliefs. Most participants in the three groups under analysis display views placed at the middle of the control continuum. The training program focused on a systematic and positive approach of student behavior management that led to changes in the student behavior management strategies employed by the participants and their control beliefs.



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