

## MANAGING A POSITIVE AND LIFE-SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULA: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

**Dr. Lindita Durmishi, Assoc. Prof.,  
Dr. Ardian Durmishi**

*“Aleksander Xhuvani” University*

**Prof. Milena Filipova**

*South-West University “Neofit Rilski”*

**Dr. Silva Ibrahim**

*Albanian University*

**Abstract.** The current paper aims to give a comprehensive exploration of the Life Skills resources and sustainable development and the effectiveness of programs in the general development and positive identity of students in the Albanian educational system. The method used for this study is qualitative with a focus on literature review. Qualitative results revealed that increasing a positive development profile for students in schools impacts decision-making, effective development of interpersonal relations, self-awareness, and emotional management in a life-long education process. The current literature review analysis made us reflect that social support, social competencies, positive identity, and empowerment are the assets with the most specific weight and the highest clinical significance as a form of students' positive development profile to be considered in future school curricula.

*Keywords:* positive development; positive identity; developmental profile; students; sustainable education

### Introduction

The perception of the human being in an integrated and holistic form has put in the focus of empirical studies the models of positive psychology as the scientific analysis of high-risk behaviors of adolescents (violent behavior, substance abuse, mental health problems, etc.) and risk situations are at the center of scientific research involving adolescents (Miconi et al. 2023; Góngora & Vázquez 2016; Moore, et al. 2004; Benson & Saito 2000). This paper aims to give some literature highlights on the

positive development of students including Life Skills used in adaptation and overcoming life problems. Positive development is one of the main agents of promoting school performance in adolescents in the educational process (Dervishi et al. 2022). It can also be viewed as a method that allows students to promote self-knowledge, grow in social relationships, develop positively, and improve in all those dimensions in which they encounter difficulties. Promoting positive development requires a balance so that one can see between right and wrong and create a positive or reflective effect on life (Miconi et al. 2023; Dervishi et al. 2022). Positive development encourages adolescents to develop a self-awareness process, to be able to understand themselves, to understand the environment and its impact on their daily decisions, to develop self-confidence, to increase self-esteem, to manage their future, and develop an awareness that allows them to avoid the threats that may arise from social relationships and to which the support of educational and family institutions is sought. The study will also explore how the Life-Skills development resources affect psychological well-being, self-efficacy, competency enhancement, self-esteem, and social skills. It also aims to promote Life Skills in the Albanian educational curricula for sustainable school development.

### **Life Skills Education**

Life Skills is used to denote skills that allow individuals to challenge the needs and changes of daily life. The World Health Organization (WHO, 1993) suggested that psychosocial skills that may be considered essential for promoting health and well-being in children and adolescents include:

- a. *Decision-making*, the ability to actively decide and evaluate the possible alternatives and the consequences of each of them;
- b. *Problem-solving*, the ability to face and constructively solve the problems of everyday life;
- c. *Encouraging critical thinking*, through the ability to objectively analyze information and situations by critically evaluating various influencing factors;
- d. *Encouraging creative thinking* through the ability to find original solutions and respond appropriately and flexibly to everyday life situations;
- e. *Promoting effective communication* through the ability to express oneself well towards situations and interlocutors both verbally and non-verbally;
- f. *Encouraging the development of interpersonal relationships* through the ability to create and maintain positive relationships in the family environment and beyond and to receive emotional support;
- g. *Self-awareness* through the ability to know oneself, one's personality, and one's strengths and weaknesses;
- h. *Empathy* through the ability to feel and understand someone else's life, needs and feelings;

i. *Emotional management* through the ability to recognize the emotions of oneself and others and to respond to them appropriately;

j. *Stress management* through the ability to identify tension mood and understand the effects it creates to consistently adjust.

To these skills were added the skills of influence, social persuasion, and advocacy skills, which are very useful in health education and psychoeducation programs (WHO 2003). A distinction should be made here between Life Skills and Everyday Life Skills which include the skills, resources, and opportunities needed to achieve individual objectives such as household management, technical and professional skills, job search skills, business skills, and money management. Life Skills programs do not include the teaching of daily life skills. The World Health Organization (2003) grouped Life Skills into three categories of basic skills: social, cognitive, and emotional management, which are taught in an integrated manner with the psychosocial development of children and adolescents.

### **Youth universal prevention and empowerment programs: DPJ-PYD Positive Youth Development”**

In addition to the well-known traditional approaches to development, there are theoretical perspectives where individuals are seen as active promoters of their development, like the positive approach (Dervishi et al. 2022; Rosa 2012). During the 1990s, Seligman and colleagues, studied strengths and positive attributes, giving voice to what is now known as „*positive psychology*“ as a significant product that connects science and human consciousness with the possibility of quality of life growth (Diener & Chan 2011). Seligman defined this approach as the scientific study of positive experiences, positive individual traits, and auxiliary programs to improve the quality of life of individuals and entities that facilitate this type of development (Seligman 2002).

The researchers concluded that despite the increasing issues in adolescence in some contexts, there are some „*personalities*“ who can overcome problems using positive psychological models (Lerner 2005); who always see the opportunity to overcome problems and promote in form positive youth development. Therefore, there is a high potential for systematic change in human behavior throughout life called plasticity, which changes the person-environment relationship to increase the possibility that all young people, regardless of individual characteristics or circumstances, can succeed in life (Lerner et al. 2008). The integration of these theoretical ideas with the plasticity of youth development and the practical conclusions on the multiple paths of development from childhood to adolescence created the “*Positive Youth Development*” (PYD); a development line that sees young people as resources for their development rather than issues to be managed (Dervishi et al. 2022; Damon, 2004). This approach relies on the optimistic development of the human being, and on nurturing healthy sources of adolescent

social interaction and prosocial behaviors (Miconi et al. 2023; Lerner 2005; Jenson, et al. 2013). Eccles and Gootman (2002) subsequently created the “5-C” model for healthy development that includes: competence, character, social connections, trust, and care.

*Competence* relates to maintaining a positive view of oneself in various social, academic, cognitive, professional, and health domains. Competence allows the individual to achieve what he has set as a goal to do without damaging or prejudicing the integrity of others (Dervishi et al. 2022; Lopez et al. 2015). *Character* is related to respect for social and cultural norms and their pursuit of integrity.

*Social connections* refer to relationships with persons or social institutions with which two-way interactions occur with adults but also with young peers.

– *Trust* is the confidence an individual requires to act effectively, i.e. an inner sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem to cope with challenging situations.

– *Care and kindness* suggest that a person use these attributes for egocentric and altruistic effect (Dervishi et al. 2022; Pittman et al. 2002). Lerner (2005) argued that when the adolescent shows the assets of 5 Cs, he may also display the “sixth C”, i.e. the contribution he will make to himself, his family, community, and society. For this study and based on a review of these deficiencies, we have summarized the positive development of adolescents as “the process through which the adolescent acquires and puts into practice skills, strengths and positive competencies that allow him to achieve his goals, well-being, and enjoyment of life” (Dervishi et al. 2022; Anyon & Jenson 2014; Gallagher 2009; Keyes & Waterman 2003; Diener 2000). There fore, well-being means the satisfaction of emotions of joy and satisfaction with their lives. This approach functions as describing and explaining developmental changes throughout life in the spectrum of cognition, social functions, emotions, personality, biological aspects, motivation, behavior, and interaction with the environment (Dervishi et al. 2022; Eagle & Dowd-Eagle 2009; Hamilton et al. 2004). The change opportunity systems from the argument that just as adolescents have their internal resources to overcome difficulties, so do their life contexts (Benson et al. 2011). These resources can be used to foster positive adolescent development and can be found in the family, school, organization, or community (Dervishi et al. 2022; Lerner 2005). The Minneapolis Institute, which studied this new development trajectory through internal resources, identified 40 key typologies to help young people grow up positively and healthily and become responsible adults capable of coping with difficult situations. These resources described rely on positive qualities that affect development and were divided into two categories: 20 external sources and 20 internal sources.

External sources relate to behaviors and social relationships in institutional contexts such as school, family, and community. Individual or internal resources were described by researchers as a set of skills, competencies, and values of young people and were grouped into four categories: access to learning, positive values,

social competencies, and positive identity (Dervishi et al. 2022; Benson et al. 2011), assets which have also been the focus of the current paper. Values as an essential aspect of developing a positive personality influence the actions of individuals (Dervishi et al. 2022; Damon 2004); values such as responsibility, integrity, honesty, prosocial behavior, social compromise, and non-discrimination allow for a healthy and positive transition into adulthood (Dervishi et al. 2022; Antolín et al. 2011). By improving these values, a good social identity, a consolidated thought structure, and maturity in social relations with peers and adults will be built (Dervishi et al. 2022). In this line, care, support, and teaching are a significant resource that influences the development of a positive human identity (Brooker & Woodhead 2008). Studies have also been focused on the effects that Life-skills development teaching has on the positive development of organizing and promoting healthy internal and external resources (Catalano et al. 2004; Libbey 2004). Scholars found that young people who cultivate a positive identity after overcoming difficulties in adolescence are more peaceful in their growth, even if they face an impactful crisis (Miconi et al. 2023; Dervishi et al. 2022; Tsang, et. al. 2012).

Another aspect where positive internal resources affect the identity of young people is related to self-esteem, i.e. the perception we have of the progress of the physical, emotional, social, cultural, academic, and work aspects (O'Connor et al. 2015; Backhouse 2009). The importance of positive self-esteem as an indicator of a subjective state of well-being can be considered as one of the most powerful elements of psychological development in adolescence and adulthood (Dervishi et al. 2022; Oliva et al. 2011; Parra et al. 2004). Researchers have also argued that the development of adolescents' internal and external resources strongly impacts their efforts for success in school and prosocial behaviors, stimulates interest in other cultures, and increases caring for their own body and health, avoiding risks (Oliva et al. 2008). García-Alandete (2014) showed that there is a relationship between psychological and subjective well-being with positive emotions, optimism, and meaning about life and its quality. The data of their studies also showed that there is a positive relationship between well-being and happiness that affects psychological and physical health and prevents violent and dangerous behaviors throughout life.

A summary of the external developmental assets for education is given in the following table:

**Table 1.** Framework of Developmental Assets: External Assets

Category	Asset	Definition
Support	1. Family Support 2. Positive Family Communication 3. Other adult relationships 4. Caring/neighborhood 5. Caring School Climate 6. Parent involvement in schooling	1. Family life provides high levels of love and support. 2. The young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and the young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents. 3. A young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults. 4. Young people experience caring for neighbors. 5. School provides a caring, encouraging environment. 6. Parent(s) is actively involved in helping young person succeed in school
Empowerment	7. Community values youth 8. Youth as resources 9. Service to others 10. Safety	7. Young person perceives that adult in the community value youth 8. Young people are given useful roles in the community. 9. A young person serves in the community for 1 hour or more per week 10. Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood
Boundaries and expectations	11. Family Boundaries 12. School Boundaries 13. Neighborhood boundaries 14. Adult role models 15. Positive peer influence 16. High expectations	11. Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts. 12. School provides clear rules and consequences. 13. Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior. 14. Parent(s) and other adults' model positive, responsible behavior 15. A young person's best friend models responsible behavior. 16. Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well
Constructive use of time	17. Creative activities 18. Youth programs 19. Religious community 20. Time at home	17. A young person spends 3 or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts. 18. A young person spends 3 or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community. 19. A young person spends 1 or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution. 20. Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" 2 or fewer nights per week

Source: Adopted by Benson (2006)

Table 2 presents a summary of the characteristics of Internal Assets as adopted by Benson.

**Table 2.** The Framework of Developmental Assets: Internal Assets

<b>Category</b>	<b>Asset</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Commitment to learning	1. Achievement motivation	1. A young person is motivated to do well in school.
	2. School engagement	2. Young person is actively engaged in learning.
	3. Homework	3. Young person reports doing at least 1 hour of homework every school day.
	4. Bending to school	4. Young person cares about her or his school
	5. Reading for pleasure	5. Young person reads for pleasure 3 or more hours per week
	6. Caring	6. Young person places a high value on helping other people.
	7. Equality and Social Justice	7. Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
	8. Integrity	8. A young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
	9. Honesty	9. A young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.
	10. Responsibility	10. Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
	11. Restraint	11. Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs
Social competencies	12. Planning and decision making	12. A young person knows how to plan and make choices.
	13. Interpersonal competence	13. A young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
	14. Cultural competence	14. Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
	15. Resistance skills	15. Young people can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
	16. Peaceful conflict resolution	16. Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently

Positive Identity	17. Personal power	17. A young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”
	18. Self-esteem	18. A young person reports having high self-esteem.
	19. Sense of purpose	19. A young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
	20. Positive view of personal future	20. A young person is optimistic about her or his future

Source: Adapted by Benson (2006)

### Effectiveness of prevention and empowerment programs for the youth in school

The main objective of the school is to educate students to be open to knowledge, responsible, social, and active citizens. School interventions for universal prevention and development of youth welfare support the objective of the program to complement didactic and curricular activities. Preparing students in classes can come from the teacher’s interaction in social situations to foster skills and respect, foster positive and safe behaviors, and build a responsible relationship with peers, in the family, school, community, and build labor and social relationships (Jackson & Davis 2000; Osher et al. 2002). To achieve these objectives, first, preventive school interventions must be interactive at both the personal, social, and school environment degrees (Eccles & Appleton 2002; Weisberg & Greenberg 1998), and second, they must take formative action and be coordinated in the social, affective, and learning areas at all levels of students’ school careers (Greenberg et al. 2003). In an analysis of the elements of discrepancies caused by the interplay of the school’s image as an institution of teaching and learning, the Fetzer Institute researchers in 1994 first used the term “*Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)*” to summarize in one-line conceptual needs of adolescents and the response that school can provide to them (Elias et al. 1997). SEL-type programs, specific to each stage of student development and culture, aim to increase student involvement in school activities and to develop students’ core psychosocial skills so that they can recognize and manage their emotions, value the perspective of others, set positive goals, make responsible decisions, and deal effectively with interpersonal relationships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning 2003; Lemerise & Arsenio 2000; McNeeley et al. 2002; Osterman 2000). The development of these competencies is included within a welfare and health promotion that, in an integrated and coordinated manner, aims to reduce risk factors, and support protective factors (Mrazek & Haggerty 1994; Perry 1999; Weissberg & Greenberg 1998).

Numerous studies have evaluated over the years this typology of interventions in school and have researched their effectiveness in the treatment of children and

adolescents. Greenberg et al. (2003) analyzed several meta-analyzes and article syntheses for school-developed programs, focusing on their effects on positive youth development, psychological well-being, substance abuse, antisocial behaviors, and school success. To balance experiences and outcomes, the authors set out three typologies of interventions: the first promotes change in the social context; the second focuses on students' personal development; and the third integrates different approaches and behaviors. Treatment experiences aimed at changing behavior in the school context were developed in the areas of school planning and organizational development (Cook et al. 1999), collaborative learning and the school classroom climate (Solomon et al. 2000), updating of teacher didactic methodologies in parental school involvement (Hawkins et al. 1999; Reynolds et al. 2001) and the creation of integrated working groups of teachers, students and families to achieve a climate of trust and cooperation between different figures in school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Effective SEL programs targeting students' personal development related to socio-emotional competencies (Elias et al. 1991; Greenberg & Kuschè 1998), health promotion (Errecart et al. 1991), substance abuse (Botvin et al. 1995), violent behaviors (Grossman et al. 1997) and unwanted pregnancies (Allen et al. 1997). While other programs implemented between school, family, and community have yielded positive results for improving health, behavioral disorders, substance abuse, and school achievement (Pentz et al. 1989; Perry 1999). All the meta-analytical results performed by these researchers showed that school prevention interventions set goals for changing antisocial behavior, dropping out of school, and substance use should be combined in different strategies and be implemented in pilot- schools intended for such interventions (Wilson et al. 2001).

### **Discussion and practical implications**

The theoretical framework of the present paper relates to two essential aspects of student development such as positive well-being and health in terms of the biopsychosocial approach and positive psychology. These concepts also include the exploration of factors, mutual influences, biological level interdependencies, and environmental and social levels.

The studies cited in the paper have explored some of these factors, to understand and promote the health and psychological well-being of students as an individual subject and community partner. As studies have addressed, personal and contextual factors promote positive assets of adolescent development and profile. The effectiveness of school-based programs in promoting positive assets and teaching Life Skills as reported in the study has been shown in some lines of prevention and promotion of well-being (Miconi et al. 2023; Dervishi et al. 2022). Studies on the effectiveness of developing positive assets and life skills have been shown to reduce criminal behavior (Elias 1991), violent behavior (Tolan et al. 1994), and episodes of crime among young people (Englander-Golden & Satir 1989); in the early onset and

use of alcohol, tobacco, and substances (Botvin et al. 1984; Botvin et al. 1980; Caplan et al. 1992; Errecart et al. 1991); in reducing risky sexual behaviors (Kirby, 1997; Schinke et al. 1981; WHO 1994); in preventing peer refusal (Mize & Ladd, 1990) and bullying (Olewus 1990); in controlling anger and rage (Deffenbacher et al. 1996; Feindler et al. 1986); in promoting good adaptability and efficiency in school (Elias, et al. 1991) in reducing affective issues (McConaughy et al. 1998); supporting self-esteem (Young et al. 1997), etc. Benson et al. (2011) showed in their studies on positive assets, that young people need to have access to contexts that facilitate their development through experiences, environments, and positive people but that also provide opportunities to perfect their daily life skills, in social support, prosocial behaviors, feelings of empowerment and the sense of self-efficacy. Other authors such as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued about the importance of creating places that promote the well-being of individuals, avoid a positive social climate, and raise awareness of the issues of others (Oliva et al. 2011; Hamilton et al. 2004). All supportive studies have shown that people who have a high degree of positive development are more satisfied with life exhibit fewer behavioral issues (Sun & Shek 2012), and have a stronger well-being and success in the future (Eccles & Gootman 2002). Albania has not adopted nor provided any sustainable and positive development approach in schools. The authors propose that it should be significant in this sense to propose a school-based curriculum that integrates the teaching of life skills and students' positive development to the teaching staff and school directories for a sustainable school.

### **Conclusion**

In the present paper, we explored the evolution of a new perspective on the aspect of positive development and the psychological assets in students and schools. Viewing development in the context of internal and external resources of coping is a new perspective in the models of new-development curricula in the Albanian educational system, empowering the system as a macro-organism and its stakeholders (teachers, students, families) as a micro-organism. The overall results of the study are in line with the model rationale of scholars (Miconi et al. 2023; Dervishi et al. 2022; Oliva et al. 2010) according to which the empowerment of students through dedicated school psychological programs that promote their Life Skills and assets of personal, cognitive, moral, emotional and social competencies determine the sustainable, healthy and positive development of the educating system and social community through the course of life.

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✉ **Dr. Lindita Durmishi, Assoc. Prof.**

ORCID iD: 0009-0009-4927-8082

Department of Psychology and Lecturer of Psychology

“Aleksander Xhuvani” University

Elbasan, Albania

E-mail: lindita75@yahoo.com

✉ **Prof. Dr. Milena Filipova**

WoS Researcher ID: AAJ-7401-2020

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-5003-006X

Faculty of Economics

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

E-mail: mfilipova@swu.bg

✉ **Dr. Ardian Durmishi**

ORCID iD: 0009-0003-8238-3593

Faculty of Economics

“A.Xhuvani University”,

Elbasan, Albania

e-mail: ardiandurmishi@yahoo.com

✉ **Dr. Silva Ibrahim**

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-3233-1157

Department of Psychology

Albanian University

Tirana, Albania

E-mail: silva.ibrahimi@yahoo.it