



Research article

THE PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' PERSONAL AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

In a world that is constantly changing, marked by technological, social, and cultural transformations, the ability to make autonomous decisions, to reflect critically, and to act responsibly becomes a priority objective of educational processes, including in the field of physical education and sport. In education, personal autonomy denotes the pupil's capacity to organize their learning, to make decisions regarding their own goals and action strategies, and to evaluate their results through critical reflection. It involves a continuous process of self-regulation, accountability, and the construction of the personal meaning of learning. The aim of this article is to determine a pedagogical model for developing autonomy in students within the context of physical education, which will contribute to the development of their personal qualities, professionally important and part of the competency system required for entry into the labor market. In this context, the orientation toward new objectives of competence-based education requires a change in the forms and methods of organizing the specialized educational process. Modernization of pedagogical technologies must be centered on integrative methods, self-education, and scientific research.

Keywords: model, students, curriculum, skills.



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1. Introduction

According to the view expressed by Sorin Cristea (2019), “Autonomy and responsibility in education constitute an operational pedagogical concept derived from the fundamental pedagogical concepts that define the pedagogical normativity and the goals of the educational system and process. At this level, the dual meaning of the concept must be highlighted, as it epistemologically and operationally establishes its sphere of reference:

a) normative – autonomy implies responsibility in education, which axiologically concentrates a set of categorical imperatives (the axioms and laws of education) and hypothetical ones (the principles of education/instruction);

b) teleological – autonomy is involved in defining the ideal of education – the autonomous and innovative personality – one that is made responsible in the long term, globally, socially, and psychologically.”

At the normative level, autonomy in education represents “the right to freely oversee the pedagogical organization” of specific activities and actions carried out within the educational process (primary, secondary, higher education).

In terms of the philosophy of education, autonomy implies responsibility in education, which concentrates, both axiologically and praxiologically, a set of imperatives (Kolb, 1984; Santiago, 2005):



a) categorical, reflected in the axioms and laws of education;

b) conditional, reflected in the general principles (for designing education/instruction), the specific principles (for organizing, planning, implementation—development), and the operational (didactic) principles involved in structuring activities at the level of the entire educational process.

At the teleological level, autonomy in education represents the psychological dimension of the educational goals that anticipate—axiologically and prospectively—the competence of students “to oversee in a responsible manner—individually and communally—their learning-oriented activities,” effective throughout life. These activities are conceived according to the educational ideal, currently legitimized as a model of an autonomous and creative personality, adaptable to the changing conditions characteristic of the information society. This involves valuing higher creative resources (inventive, innovative, emergent/synergistic), exercised autonomously and responsibly within the educational process, in both formal and nonformal contexts, in accordance with school and extracurricular programs, curriculum-designed and focused on general and specific objectives defined in terms (Albu, 2007a; Albu, 2007b):

a) psychological, competence-based;

b) social, related to basic content: theoretical and applied knowledge, supported by values and attitudes.

The author noted that “in secondary education, in colleges (lower secondary schools) and high schools,” the autonomy of students at the psychological stage of pre-adolescence and adolescence develops in accordance with the objectives mentioned above, and is especially strengthened “through reference to citizens’ information and responsibility.” To acquire behavior appropriate to their adaptation needs, the human being has two pathways: learning through autonomy and personal experience, and learning through experience inherited from others, or social experience.

From the philosophical, moral, and psychological perspectives, personal autonomy represents a fundamental concept referring to an individual’s ability to self-govern, to live according to one’s own principles, values, and decisions, without unwanted external interference or excessive constraints. Through personal autonomy and experience, new knowledge and behaviors are acquired, while previous ones are modified according to the needs and changes occurring in the natural and social environment in which the individual lives, including shifts in internal motivation.

In the strategic educational policies of the Republic of Moldova, emphasis is placed on developing life competencies among the younger generation. In accordance with the National Development Strategy “European Moldova 2030” and the Development Strategy “Education 2030,” opportunities are provided for all people to develop, from an early age and throughout their lives, the skills, knowledge, abilities, and competencies necessary to fully realize their potential, both in personal and professional life.

Quality education from an early age is associated with a series of non-economic benefits, such as improved health, civic and social engagement, a better climate of security and social well-being, environmental protection, and intolerance toward corruption—all of which contribute significantly to the productivity growth of the national economy. The quality of the educational process and the competencies developed by the school—not only qualifications and certificates—will enable people to be better prepared for their professional and private lives, more resilient, and more adaptable to the changes around them.

2. Material and method

The purpose of the research is to determine the pedagogical model for developing students’ personal autonomy in the context of the physical education lesson.

The methods used in the research: The methods used in the research included: the case study (which involved a detailed analysis of a group of students attending physical education lessons in a theoretical high school in Chişinău, monitoring their interaction, participation in activities, and the development of their personal autonomy skills); the sociological questionnaire (administered to evaluate students’ perceptions regarding the development of personal autonomy in the context of the physical education and sports lesson); semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and parents (used to gain a deeper understanding of experiences and perceptions related to



personal autonomy within the context of physical education); direct observation (applied to observe physical education lessons and analyze how teachers integrate activities that promote students' personal autonomy).

The methods also included group interviews (4 sessions), individual interviews (with 12 students and teachers), document analysis (lesson plans, curriculum), and teachers' portfolios, in their capacity as researchers.

3. Findings

The development and implementation of the pedagogical model are based on a series of stable motives and needs of physical education teachers, reflected through a consolidated attitude toward their professional preparation, oriented toward the holistic development of competencies and their integration into the referential profile of the field, as well as toward the creative use of physical education in fostering students' personal autonomy.

The objectives of the pedagogical model for developing students' personal autonomy in the context of the physical education lesson are:

increasing students' motivation to participate and engage in physical education and sports lessons;

evaluating and self-evaluating the professional performance of specialized teaching staff in this regard;

developing the creative and innovative capacities of specialists through practical activities and scientific research in the direction of forming students' personal autonomy (a transformative competence in the knowledge society).

The systemic approach to the pedagogical model involves focusing on its principles: unity of objectives, integrativeness, continuity and practical applicability, creativity, innovation, and research, in accordance with its final purpose (teaching, educating, developing, and shaping competencies). Thus, within the pedagogical process, special attention is given to the existence of a close connection between the didactic and methodological system, which encompasses students' educational activities and the professional development of scientific–didactic staff.

In Figure 1, we present several examples of personal autonomy: decision-making, self-expression, goal pursuit, and identity development. Therefore, we may state that personal autonomy provides teachers with control over their work, is motivating, and leads to increased professional satisfaction, higher levels of professional engagement, and a stronger sense of self-efficacy (Anderson, 2003). At the same time, only a teacher—including the physical education teacher—with a high level of personal autonomy can cultivate this ability in their students.



Fig. 1. Examples of Personal Autonomy in Students

The research was conducted in a theoretical high school in Chişinău, an educational institution with a tradition of over 50 years, offering primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education to students aged 7–18. The school is equipped with modern facilities for conducting physical education classes, including a gymnasium, football fields, and designated spaces for interactive games. Students are assigned to classes with an average of 30–35 children, with an approximate balance between girls and boys. In terms of developmental level, most students possess age-appropriate motor skills; however, there are significant differences regarding their interest in sports and their attitude toward physical education.

Most students come from urban areas, although there is also a small contingent from rural areas, which to some extent influences their level of involvement in curricular and extracurricular sports activities. Moreover, it is noted that student motivation is variable: some are highly engaged and passionate about sports, while others display



a reluctant attitude, often caused by previous negative experiences or a lack of confidence in their physical abilities.

The study identified a frequent issue in physical education classes: a decline in students' motivation and engagement, particularly in high school grades (IX–XII). Many students perceive physical education lessons as monotonous, consisting of repetitive exercises or traditional games that no longer stimulate their interest. There is also a tendency to avoid active participation, either due to low confidence in their physical abilities or because the activities are perceived as lacking relevance.

The process of forming and developing personal autonomy requires specialized training for teachers in order to create the conditions for student independence and to provide opportunities for educational initiative, allowing students to assume responsibility for their actions and justify them.

The physical education teacher, in their role as a facilitator of students' autonomy, represents in fact a benchmark of the modern educator, as they measure success not only through winning games or passing tests, but especially through students' outcomes reflected in the following aspects: how well students know their own bodies and limits; how empowered they feel to manage their own physical health; how confident they are in trying new things and recovering after failure.

Through this approach, the physical education lesson becomes a microcosm of life, where students practice, in a controlled environment, meaningful life skills such as decision-making, managing failure, self-awareness, and perseverance.

The role of the teacher is not limited to technical instruction but extends toward facilitating personal development. By offering open-ended tasks, encouraging reflection, and providing constructive feedback, the teacher becomes a catalyst in the process of fostering autonomy. Effective educational practices include: stimulating self-assessment and post-activity reflection; promoting individual decision-making during lessons; and creating an educational climate based on trust and cooperation. The teacher is, therefore, a trainer of responsibility, supporting students in developing their capacity for self-regulation and informed decision-making.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that physical education represents an ideal environment for forming and developing students' autonomy, as it is a unique field for the following reasons:

- it is inherently personal (each student feels their own body, fatigue, progress, and limitations more directly than in any other subject);
- it involves risk and controlled failure (falling during a rotation or failing to catch a ball are “safe” failures with minimal consequences, which teach resilience);
- it is visible and immediate (feedback is instantaneous—when the student practices, they observe their own progress, which in turn builds confidence in a tangible way).

To conduct the study and compare the effectiveness of teachers' strategies for developing students' personal autonomy, three groups of students of different age categories were formed (7–10 years, 11–14 years, 15–18 years). To evaluate students' intrinsic/extrinsic motivation and identify reasons for their involvement in sports activities, the committee administered a sociological questionnaire consisting of 10 questions. Direct observation was used to interpret the data collected through the questionnaire responses. Physical fitness tests were applied to measure students' progress in the monitored areas of the research.

The specially designed and analyzed physical education (PE) program (for different age groups), implemented by physical education teachers during PE classes, explores the factors that increase satisfaction, motivation, and involvement in sports activities, using the socio-ecological model (McLeroy et al., 1993) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The study lasted one semester and involved 106 students and three physical education and sports teachers.

The analysis also included the application of emerging student-centered themes with the generic titles: *“Sense of Belonging,” “Building Confidence and Skills to Stimulate Motivation,”* and *“Lessons Learned in Physical Education and Sport.”* The emphasis was placed on a supportive environment with structured yet student-centered routines that maximize active time (30 minutes of daily instruction, high participation).

In response to the question: *“Do you believe that introducing modern games and sports, such as sports dance, pilates sessions, or even yoga, could increase your interest in greater participation in sports activities?”*—Figure 2 shows that most students would like modern games and sports to be included in the curricular content of



physical education and sport lesson

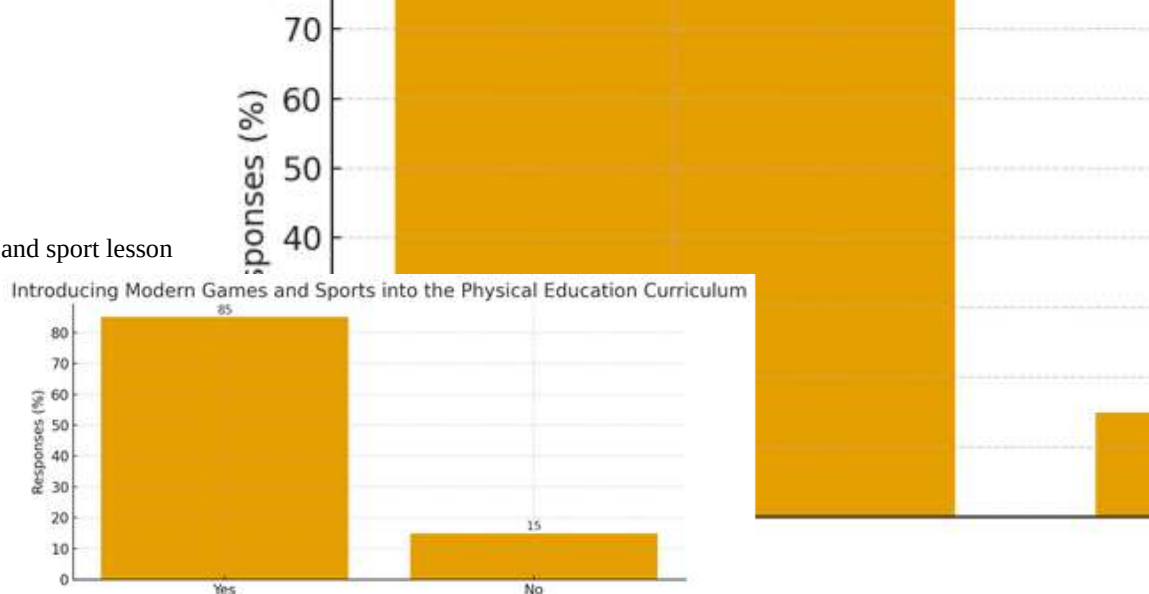


Fig. 2. Students' responses regarding the introduction of modern games and sports into the curricular content of physical education and sport lessons

The responses collected for this question demonstrate that a well-structured curricular content, with an emphasis on inclusion and relationships, and incorporating modern games and sports, can significantly increase students' motivation and engagement, offering transferable lessons for similar schools.

The research adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach based on the socio-ecological model and self-determination theory, focusing on an experimental physical education program (PEF) specifically designed and implemented by physical education teachers. The study did not involve manipulating variables or comparing distinct groups; instead, it analyzed in depth the experiences and perceptions of students within this program (106 participants across three age groups). Through the implementation of this program, teachers—acting as researchers—aimed to identify the factors that contribute to increased satisfaction, motivation, and student engagement in sports activities, with special attention to barriers specific to female students (self-consciousness, boys' dominance, lack of perceived competence), as well as to the development of students' personal autonomy.

The groups were mixed (boys and girls), ensuring an approximately equal participation rate (50 girls and 56 boys). Female students were intentionally selected to reflect diversity in experience (interest levels, physical abilities, participation in compulsory vs. optional courses). No experimental groups were created; instead, the entire cohort involved in the program was examined. The study focused on observations collected during classes and extracurricular activities, on student-teacher interactions, group dynamics, types of activities, and behaviors indicating motivation/engagement.

The implemented physical education program (PEF) included varied activities (Zumba, dance, modified games, fitness tests such as 12-minute runs or strength circuits). Evaluation was based on effort and individual progress rather than comparative performance. Documents were analyzed for alignment with curricular objectives and national/EU pedagogical practices. The results highlighted key themes (belonging, competence, value) and underlined the effectiveness of strategies such as student-centered activities, a supportive environment, and strong teacher-student relationships.

4. Discussions

The physical education program (PEF) represents an exemplary model recognized by the high school community involved in the study, particularly for promoting a concept that includes motivation, competence, confidence, and the knowledge required for lifelong physical activity (Stanciu, 2016). It aligns with the European curriculum, which emphasizes at least 30 minutes of daily physical activity. The program addresses students in grades 1–12 (ages 7–18), offering both mixed classes (boys and girls) and girls-only classes to counteract barriers specific to female students, such as boys' dominance or social judgment.

Importantly, the PEF adopts a humanistic, student-centered approach, with structured yet flexible routines that maximize active engagement time. A typical lesson lasts 45 minutes and includes:



- free warm-up (10–15 minutes): students choose individual or small-group activities such as light jogging, agility exercises, stretching, or simple games, promoting autonomy and reducing anxiety;
- main activities (20 minutes): varied and adapted activities focused on enjoyment and non-competition to increase intrinsic motivation;
- closure and reflection (10 minutes): group discussions, personal journals, or motivational rituals (e.g., group photos).

The program also integrates a diverse range of activities adapted to students' skill levels and preferences, with modifications to ensure inclusion (fitness, recreational, and dance activities; team games and sports; lessons on nutrition, stress management, the mental benefits of sport, fair play; discussions on gratitude, kindness, and tolerance; weekly plans with sports activities); plans for extracurricular events (such as community charity runs); and partnerships with external coaches or local facilities (including visits to modernized fitness centers).

This program was grounded in the socio-ecological model (McLeroy et al., 1993) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which provided a holistic perspective by examining interactions across multiple levels of influence: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy. The themes addressed focused on qualitative analyses of students' sense of belonging, confidence and skills, as well as their perceived value of physical education.

The physical education program (PEF), developed and piloted with the students of the high school included in the research, represents an exemplary model recognized by the entire school community. In Table 1, we present the set of PEF exercises designed to promote enjoyment and positive mood during physical education and sport lessons.

Table 1. "Sports Are Fun!" Exercise Complex for Grades 1–12

School Level	Main Theme	Exercise Name	Description	Benefits	Recommended Duration
Grades 1–4	Exploration & Imagination	Jungle Journey	Animal imitation: walking like a bear, jumping like a frog, crawling like a snake	Coordination, balance, muscular strength, imagination	10–15 minutes
Grades 1–4	Exploration & Imagination	Body Orchestra	Associating movements with sounds: "hop" for jumps, "clap" for lunges	Hand-foot coordination, rhythmic sense, listening skills	8–10 minutes
Grades 1–4	Exploration & Imagination	Sun and Rain	Simple storytelling yoga poses: tree, dog, butterfly	Flexibility, body awareness, calming	10 minutes
Grades 5–8	Socializing & Energy	Indiana Jones Race	Obstacle course: crawling under obstacles, cone slalom, line balancing	Agility, speed, endurance, tactical thinking	15–20 minutes
Grades 5–8	Socializing & Energy	Strict-Rules Sport	Basketball/football with variations: left hand only, spins before passing	Sports skills, adaptability, cooperation	20–25 minutes
Grades 5–8	Socializing & Energy	Superhero Circuit	45-second stations: lateral jumps, modified push-ups, ladder drills	Muscular and cardiovascular endurance	15 minutes
Grades 9–12	Autonomy & Performance	"Do as Many as You Can" Challenge	Intensive circuit: 10 push-ups, 15 squats, 20 jumps — as many rounds as possible in limited time	Physical fitness, personal challenge, calorie burn	10–15 minutes
Grades 9–12	Autonomy & Performance	Find Your Match	Pair training, switching exercises at a signal	Teamwork, peer learning, variety	20 minutes
Grades 9–12	Autonomy & Performance	Mental Reset	Yoga: Sun Salutation, relaxation poses, 4-count breathing	Stress reduction, improved posture, concentration	15–20 minutes



The research also focused on developing the Pedagogical Model for Forming Students' Personal Autonomy in the context of the physical education lesson, which allowed us to approach its conceptual foundation from an integrative perspective centered on the development of students' reflective, motivational, and action-oriented competencies. This model is based on the principle that autonomy cannot be "taught," but must be progressively constructed through active, self-regulated, and transformative learning experiences (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009).

The structure of the proposed model has a process-oriented character, being conceived as a system of interdependent stages (Table 2 reflects the transition from educational dependence to self-direction and personal responsibility). The five fundamental stages are:

- ❖ Awareness;
- ❖ Guided action;
- ❖ Directed reflection;
- ❖ Internal transformation;
- ❖ Sustainable self-regulation.

Table 2. Stages of the Pedagogical Model

Stage	Objectives	Activities / Strategies	Teacher's Role	Products/Outcomes
1. Awareness	Discovering the personal value of physical activities; identifying one's own motivations.	Thematic discussions about health, balance, and performance; self-assessment questionnaires; setting personal goals.	Facilitator; creates a climate of trust and introspection.	Individual reflection sheets; motivational self-assessment.
2.Guided Action	Developing the capacity to make decisions and act responsibly.	Team exercises involving decision-making; sports games with autonomous roles (captain, referee, coordinator); motor-skills projects.	Mediator and observer; provides guiding feedback.	Increased engagement and ownership of personal decisions.
3.Directed Reflection	Analyzing experiences and identifying lessons learned.	Reflective journals, post-activity discussions, group self-evaluation; formulating personal conclusions.	Reflection guide; offers open-ended questions rather than answers.	Increased awareness and self-regulation.
4.Internal Transformation	Reconfiguring attitudes and values about effort and responsibility.	Individual goal-setting exercises; integrating reflection into personal development plans; debates about an active lifestyle.	Mentor; supports the internalization of values.	Adoption of autonomous and responsible behaviors.
5.Sustainable Self-Regulation	Strengthening habits of self-organization and self-improvement.	Personal training plans; periodic self-evaluations; peer mentoring activities.	Discreet supervisor; provides validation and encouragement.	Autonomous, reflective student capable of continuous learning.

Stage I – Awareness (Initiating the Autonomy Process):

This stage involves awakening self-awareness and identifying one's own needs, values, and potential. The student becomes aware of the importance of personal responsibility in the learning and development process. The specific objectives of this stage are:

- discovering intrinsic motivations for participating in activities;
- identifying personal learning and training styles;



- clarifying values and attitudes toward physical education and sport.

Recommended methods: guided discussions, self-assessment questionnaires, individual reflection exercises.

The teacher's role is that of a guide and facilitator, creating educational contexts that stimulate introspection and the assumption of personal responsibility.

Stage II – Guided Action (Developing Practical and Decision-Making Competencies)

In this stage, the focus shifts from awareness to active involvement. Students apply their own decisions in concrete situations, experiencing both the freedom to choose and the responsibility for their outcomes. Characteristics of this stage include:

- participation in varied motor activities adapted to individual levels;
- making tactical and strategic decisions in team-based tasks;
- autonomous management of effort and personal resources.

The teacher becomes a mediator of learning through action, encouraging initiative, collaboration, and realistic evaluation of performance. Feedback is constructive and oriented toward progress rather than control.

Stage III – Directed Reflection (Analyzing Experience and Creating Personal Meaning)

This stage plays a major role in the development of autonomy, as it transforms raw experience into meaningful personal knowledge.

After each activity, students are encouraged to answer reflective questions such as:

- What did I learn from this experience?
- What could I do differently next time?
- How does this experience relate to my personal goals?

Reflection may be carried out individually (progress journals, self-assessment sheets) or in groups (guided discussions, collective feedback). This stage contributes to the development of metacognition and the ability to critically evaluate one's own performance—essential conditions for authentic autonomy.

Stage IV – Internal Transformation (Integrating Experiences and Reconfiguring Perspectives)

In this phase, the individual begins to reinterpret personal beliefs, behaviors, and values in light of accumulated experiences. The transformative learning process described by Mezirow (1991) involves moving from simple behavioral adjustments to profound changes in one's frame of reference. In physical education, this process manifests through:

- recognizing the connection between physical activity, psychological balance, and a healthy lifestyle;
- adopting a proactive attitude toward personal development;
- strengthening self-efficacy and confidence in one's own decisions.

Internal transformation marks the point at which the student no longer acts out of external obligation but out of personal conviction and internal self-regulation.

Stage V – Sustainable Self-Regulation (Stabilizing Personal Autonomy)

The final stage aims to consolidate autonomy as a stable personality trait, not merely a situational reaction. The individual becomes capable of planning activities, setting realistic goals, and continuously monitoring personal progress.

Concrete manifestations of sustainable self-regulation include:

- continuous self-improvement in physical activities;
- adaptation to change and maintenance of emotional balance;
- conscious involvement in personal and social projects.

At this stage, the teacher's role becomes discreet, that of a mentor who offers symbolic support and validation, allowing the student to assume full control over their own development.

The pedagogical relationship within this model is characterized by an educational partnership in which the teacher becomes a guide, mentor, and co-learner. The focus shifts from transmitting content to building autonomous competencies through exploration, reflection, and self-assessment. Thus, the educational climate fosters trust, cooperation, and openness, creating the conditions for authentic and transformative learning.

The structure of the pedagogical model for developing personal autonomy highlights the dynamic and self-reflective nature of the educational process. By progressing through the stages of awareness, action, reflection,

transformation, and self-regulation, the individual develops the competencies necessary for balanced and sustainable growth. This model can be successfully implemented in physical education lessons, university training programs, and extracurricular activities, offering a coherent framework for developing transformative competencies and consolidating personal autonomy as a major educational goal.

Theoretical Foundations of the Model

The model is grounded in:

- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) – autonomy as a fundamental psychological need;
- Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984) – learning through action and reflection;
- Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991) – modifying frames of reference through critical experience;
- Principles of Modern Pedagogy – learner-centeredness, active participation, reflective feedback, and formative assessment.

The pedagogical model for developing personal autonomy among students practicing physical education and sport has a dynamic, constructive, and transformative character. It proposes a gradual transition from educational dependence to conscious self-determination through a process based on reflection, decision-making, and responsible action. Through the application of this model, physical education becomes not only a means of physical development but also a complex instrument for shaping an autonomous and well-balanced personality (Beyers et al., 2003). In Figure 3, we present the pedagogical model for developing students' personal autonomy.



Fig. 3. The Pedagogical Model for Developing Students' Personal Autonomy

The proposed model starts from the premise that bodily experience, emotional engagement, and reflective thinking are interdependent dimensions of human development. Thus, physical education programs can become transformative environments when they are designed and implemented according to the logic of personal autonomy (Sopa, 2021).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can affirm that educational modeling is centered on an individualized design that ensures support in the development and implementation of the applied educational technology, as well as in the use of the entire set of conditions necessary for the preparation and professional development of specialists in the field. Therefore, the development and implementation of the pedagogical model will have a significant impact on the formation and development of students' personal autonomy (a transformative competence in modern society), as well as on the overall development of their personality.

The results obtained through the application of the pedagogical model for developing personal autonomy confirm that physical education and sport can become major formative domains, contributing significantly to the development of transformative competencies and forward-looking abilities. Based on these findings, a reconfiguration of the aims of physical education is required—moving beyond physical performance toward the integral development of the individual: physical, cognitive, affective, and social.

Personal autonomy should not be viewed solely as an outcome of the educational process but also as a means of learning—a transversal competence that supports the individual's continuous evolution. In this context, the development directions and recommendations formulated hereafter address both the strategic level of educational policy and the operational level of pedagogical practice.



6. Author contributions

Author 1 conceptualized the research problem, developed the theoretical framework related to personal autonomy in education, and formulated the pedagogical model presented in the article. Author 2 conducted the literature review on competency-based education, modern pedagogical technologies, and the role of autonomy in physical education.

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