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Do we need Positive Psychology in Croatian kindergartens? The implementation possibilities evaluated by preschool teachers

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Constant changes in a modern world and scientific knowledge from the growing field of Positive Psychology appear to make a previously unheeded contribution to preschool teacher competences. The aim of this study was to explore preschool teachers' opinions concerning the need for positive psychology knowledge and its implementation. A nine-item pool was used on a sample of 49 preschool teachers (mean age 33) enrolled in a graduate programme of early and preschool care and education in Rijeka. Overall, preschool teachers liked this subject very much and thought it was needed very much for their profession at all work levels. Also, they viewed the positive psychology findings as very useful and applicable in their work, and especially in their work with children. Finally, they saw lots of implementation possibilities in Croatian kindergartens.

Keywords: positive psychology; Croatian kindergartens; preschool teachers; implementation

Introduction

Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach what we are. (Hamachek 1999, 209)

In Seligman's paper on Positive Psychology (2002), he tells a story about his daughter's reaction to his yelling. While he was working in the garden, his playful five-year-old daughter Nikki was throwing weeds into the air and dancing around. Being a very goal-oriented and time-urgent type of person, he yelled at her. She walked away, came back, and said to him that she wanted to talk to him. She said:

Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From the time I was three to the time I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. When I turned five, I decided not to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I've ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch. (Seligman 2002, 3–4)

Seligman stated that this reaction was one of the moments of his life from which he learned a lot. He realized that raising his daughter was not about correcting her whining, because Nikki did that herself. Rather he realized that raising children was about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they owned and were

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best at, and about helping them find niches in which they can best live out these positive qualities (Seligman 2002). This beautiful story of a world-famous positive psychologist leads us to the essence of this paper: Is not Seligman's conclusion something that we want for all our children? Are there in the world any parents who do not want their child's strongest qualities to be recognized and nurtured in kindergarten? To give appropriate answers to these questions, the knowledge, skills, competences and academic course programmes of Croatian preschool teachers will be analysed and discussed.

The context of a new study programme: the new roles of preschool teachers

There is no practical situation in the work of a modern preschool teacher that does not rest on well-designed and validated scientific evidence. On the other hand, scientific theory without verification and confirmation in practical life situations has little purpose and meaning. The university education of preschool teachers constitutes the beginning of a process of defining and developing quality indicators for professional work (<http://www.ufri.uniri.hr/data/RipO-eng.pdf>), because educating for a profession is a dynamic, open and permanent process (Krstović and Čepić 2005; Čepić and Krstović 2008). This process is characterized by the need for continuing professional development and professional specialization. At the same time, this need is also an obligation that derives from professional ethics, and is the responsibility of everyone who has chosen to become a preschool teacher. It is crucial that the dynamics of change within academic education follow societal changes and the changes relating to the role of preschool teachers (Petrović-Sočo, Slunjski, and Šagud 2005; Vujičić 2008), so that acquired competences can be applied in the preschool institutional context. To be a preschool teacher requires more than following methodical instructions to achieve a programme's goals. Changes within preschool teacher education must be made because: 'the new generations of children will know more than preschool teachers themselves' (Vujičić 2011). One of the aims of this paper is to emphasize the relevance of the preschool educator as a professional, as a representative and as a key predictor of the quality of educational experiences. Therefore, educational activities in early childhood require a competent approach based on a high level of professional responsibility.

A new graduate university course on Early Childhood and Preschool Education at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka, Croatia, presents the response to a much-needed modification of the preschool teacher's role within modern institutional contexts such as kindergartens. Following the idea of a new professionalism as a qualitative breakthrough in the contemporary perception of preschool teachers, we strive towards achieving an educational profession which we define as a complex profession that demands reflective thinking, continuing professional development, autonomy, responsibility, creative research and informed personal judgement (Vujičić, Čepić, and Pejić Papak 2010). Among other skill and knowledge requirements, constant changes in a modern world and scientific knowledge from the growing field of Positive Psychology appear to make a previously unheeded contribution towards the required preschool teacher competences (Seligman 1996). Looking at these competences in the light of Positive Psychology is a further aim of this paper. Therefore, this study could have relevance for other preschool education professionals around the world, since – to our knowledge – there are no study programmes with this particular focus.

Seligman and his colleagues (2005, 410) stated that: ‘Positive Psychology is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions.’ The field of Positive Psychology includes: well-being, contentment, satisfaction, hope, optimism, flow and happiness (at the subjective level); positive individual traits (at the individual level); and civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship (at the group level) (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Positive psychologists have enhanced our understanding of why, how and under what circumstances positive states, positive emotions and positive traits flourish, along with the institutions which enable them (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon 2001; Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn 2003; Easterbrook 2003; Murray 2003; Haslam, Bain, and Neal 2004). Finally, the most important aspect of this study is the fact that the combination of theoretical models and empirical findings in Positive Psychology has undergone a real-life application (Linley and Joseph 2004). Sheldon and his colleagues (2000), in the Positive Psychology Manifesto, emphasized possible applications of Positive Psychology: to enhance childhood education using intrinsic motivation, positive emotions and creativity in schools; to enhance psychotherapy by developing approaches which stimulate hope, meaning and self-help; to enhance family life through a better understanding of the dynamics of love, generosity and loyalty; to enhance pleasure at work through an understanding of authentic involvement, intense flow and genuine contribution; to enhance institutions and society by creating conditions which stimulate confidence, communication and altruism; and to enhance the moral character of society by understanding and stimulating spiritual impulses.

The preventive strength of Positive Psychology

However, what foregrounds the approach of Positive Psychology is the issue of prevention (Gillham 2002; Seligman 2002). Besides the many other advantages of Positive Psychology, its adherents mainly emphasize its impact in the field of prevention, particularly in relation to socio-emotional development and child well-being. Unfortunately, there is no or very little work about implementing Positive Psychology findings within preschool institutions, although some researchers have focused on implementation in schools (Terjesen et al. 2004; Rijavec, Miljković, and Brdar 2007; Seligman et al. 2009; Rijavec and Miljković 2010). Until now, the Positive Psychology lens has mainly been used by researchers to discuss early interventions undertaken from this perspective (Park and C. Peterson. 2003). In their commentary on the Nelson, Westhues, and MacLeod (2003) meta-analyses of early interventions for children, Park and Peterson concluded that social-emotional interventions are as important as cognitive interventions, and that future programme evaluations should explicitly measure positive outcomes, not only negative outcomes.

The period of early childhood, from birth to age five, is a critical time for children to develop the physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills that provide the foundation for lifelong healthy development (Vasta, Haith, and Miller 1999). Studies on brain development suggest that variously enriched experiences during early childhood can have positive effects that help children to develop their full potential (Rajović 2009; 2010). The prevailing perspective on early intervention programmes for young children focuses mainly on how to prevent or contain problems at an early age. For example, how to deal with an aggressive child, rather than on how to promote positive development – building good, happy and healthy lives

for *all* children that go beyond the mere absence of disease or ill-health (Park and Peterson 2003). The main aim of Positive Psychology is directed towards building strength and well-being rather than remedying weakness and pathology, as is the case in a great number of existing prevention programmes or therapies. Therefore, Positive Psychology in fact provides a broad perspective for understanding how early childhood programmes might promote optimal development (Park 2003).

Aim of the study and hypothesis

Taken together, it was felt that adding a new course in Positive Psychology as an elective subject within the graduate programme at the University of Rijeka would have nothing but positive effects. Within the Positive Psychology syllabus (Tatalović Vorkapić 2010), students are introduced to the basics of Positive Psychology. This includes: historical development, definition and its place within psychology; theoretical background; and empirical findings concerning positive states (positive emotions, well-being and flow), positive thinking, positive traits, positive motivation, positive lifelong learning, positive relationships and positive institutions. All the subject areas are discussed with the students from two main perspectives: from the perspective of the preschool teacher and from the perspective of the preschool child, both of them within the institutional context of the kindergarten. The emphasis is on the possibility of developing positive states, thinking, motivation and relationships in children and grown-ups. The course consists of lectures, seminars and exercises undertaken as homework or within workshops. Students were additionally required to submit written assignments and take the mid-term examination. (Within the Bologna process and ECTS programme, students must achieve a certain level of points in order to be able to take the final examination.)

Since this subject was being offered for the first time, besides evaluating the new specialism it seemed appropriate to ask the enrolled preschool teachers for their views on the opportunities to implement their new knowledge from the Positive Psychology field within the context of Croatian kindergartens. Therefore, the aim of the study was to explore the preschool teachers' opinions about the possibilities of implementing a Positive Psychology approach in Croatian kindergartens. Considering that aim, it was expected that preschool teachers would have positive experiences from this course and that they would identify many ways to implement the Positive Psychology findings in the preschool context.

Method

Subjects

Forty-nine preschool teachers participated in this study, all females with a mean age of 32.57 years ($SD = 7.59$), ranging from 23 to 50. The mean of their working experience was nine years ($SD = 8.59$), ranging from one to 31 years of working within preschool care and education. At the time of this study, 46 were employed and three were not. Eleven preschool teachers were living and working in Rijeka, and the other 38 were from other parts of Croatia. All subjects were enrolled in the fourth year of the new graduate programme described earlier. The sample was appropriate because all the students were preschool teachers with at least some working experience. This suggested that they were well placed to give their opinions on the matter at hand.

Instrument

The nine-item pool that was used in this study was created specially for the purposes of this research. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of general questions concerning age, working experience, employment status and setting. The second part consisted of nine questions concerning the respondents' impressions of Positive Psychology and of how Positive Psychology knowledge could be implemented in kindergartens. The questions from the second part of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Besides these questions, an item asking them to rank working aspects according to their level of importance was included, as shown in Table 2.

Procedure

At the end of the first semester, students ($n = 49$) completed the questionnaire at the end of the Positive Psychology class. They were told that the aim of this study was to explore their opinions on ways of implementing Positive Psychology in Croatian kindergartens. Since only half of them had already encountered Positive Psychology in class, the other half were informed about the definition and main characteristics of Positive Psychology. Also, it was explained that students who did not want to participate in the study had no obligation to complete the questionnaire. Administering the questionnaire took 10 minutes and after that the students were promised that they would be informed of the results. The statistical package SPSS was used to perform the necessary statistical procedures, i.e. descriptive and correlation analyses.

Results and discussion

The statistical analyses showed (see Table 1) that 55% of the study programme participants (27) had chosen to take the course in Positive Psychology (26 of them within the course in Early Childhood and Preschool Education in Rijeka, and one of them on a previous occasion). Since there were no differences in the answers between the group of students who had taken this subject and those who had not, the whole sample has been used in all further analyses.

Almost all the preschool teachers who had taken this course agreed that they liked Positive Psychology and thought it was very necessary for their profession at all working levels. Only one student totally disagreed and one student could not give her opinion because she took the subject in another course. Regardless of the small sample size we found this result very encouraging and supportive, considering the fact that the course programme Early Childhood and Preschool Education is the first such one in Croatia, and that it was the first time that preschool teachers had a chance to study Positive Psychology. Nevertheless, this finding is not so surprising, since all students come to class expecting the professors to provide them with information that is useful and important to their lives, both private and professional. That being so, the study of human behaviour is inherently relevant, interesting and important. If a course focuses only on the deficit model of human behaviour, the other, healthy aspects of life would be excluded. By incorporating Positive Psychology into study programmes either as a stand-alone unit or by infusing it throughout the course, the course tutors have a chance to share their beliefs about achieving a 'good life', and achieve their goals as educators (Ernst and Fineburg 2004). So,

Table 1. Questions used for the purposes of this study.

| No. | Questions | Possible answers | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|---|---|-----------|------------|
| 1. | Within my education I have listed the subject Positive Psychology | YES | 27 | 55% |
| | | NO | 22 | 45% |
| 2. | I liked the subject and I think it is valuable for preschool teachers | I did not have this subject | 23 | 47% |
| | | I totally agree | 19 | 39% |
| | | I agree | 6 | 12% |
| | | I totally disagree | 1 | 2% |
| 3. | I have read some expert and scientific papers/books in the field of Positive Psychology | Almost nothing | 5 | 10% |
| | | A little | 7 | 15% |
| | | Moderate | 5 | 10% |
| | | Something more | 27 | 55% |
| | | A great number of texts | 5 | 10% |
| 4. | How much do you know about Positive Psychology regardless of your formal education? | Almost nothing | 0 | 0% |
| | | A little | 10 | 20% |
| | | Moderate | 16 | 33% |
| | | Something more | 18 | 37% |
| | | Great knowledge | 5 | 10% |
| 5. | How much could Positive Psychology knowledge be useful in the work of preschool teachers? | Almost nothing | 0 | 0% |
| | | A little | 0 | 0% |
| | | Moderate | 2 | 4% |
| | | Something more | 33 | 67% |
| | | Of great use | 14 | 29% |
| 6. | At which working level within preschool education would Positive Psychology knowledge be most useful? | Working with children | 27 | 55% |
| | | Working with parents | 2 | 4% |
| | | Working in the field of personal growth | 5 | 10% |
| | | Working in the field of professional growth | 4 | 8% |
| | | Working with children and parents | 11 | 23% |
| | | No possibility | 0 | 0% |
| 7. | Please estimate the concrete implementation possibilities of the basic principles of Positive Psychology in the existing preschool curriculum | A little possibility | 2 | 4% |
| | | Moderate possibility | 10 | 21% |
| | | Lots of possibilities | 30 | 61% |
| | | Numerous possibilities | 7 | 14% |
| | | Through projects | 6 | 12% |
| 8. | Which method would you prefer using in kindergarten, so that the implementation of Positive Psychology would be carried out the best? | By education of preschool teachers | 8 | 16% |
| | | By education of child psychologists | 0 | 0% |
| | | By education of kindergarten directors | 0 | 0% |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

| No. Questions | Possible answers | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------|--------------------------|-----------|------------|
| | Something else | 1 | 2% |
| | Combination of 2 answers | 15 | 31% |
| | Combination of 3 answers | 15 | 31% |
| | Combination of 4 answers | 4 | 8% |

even though Positive Psychology experts predicted that the new approach would prove to be useful in all areas of work involving human interaction, especially in the education field (Seligman et al. 2009), it was very valuable to confirm this finding from participants. At the same time, this result confirmed our hypothesis on the inclusion of Positive Psychology as part of a new programme to promote modern preschool teacher competences.

Analysing the average answers to the third item, 'I have read some expert and scientific papers/books in the field of Positive Psychology' (see Table 1), it could be seen that 55% of all students were more than moderately informed in the field of Positive Psychology. However, only 37% of them believed they had more than moderate knowledge of this field. Answers on the fourth item, 'How much do you know about Positive Psychology regardless of your formal education?', showed that 10% of respondents believed they had read a great many texts and had good knowledge of Positive Psychology. Finally 10% of participants estimated they had read a moderate amount, and 33% of them believed they had a moderate knowledge of Positive Psychology. Overall, it could be concluded that approximately similar percentages of participants estimated their information level and their knowledge level in the field of Positive Psychology similarly. Those estimates signified the quality of the course, which appeared to be rather high, since only 25% of all participants felt they had almost no information about Positive Psychology and only 20% of them a little knowledge of the field. That is a smaller percentage (20–25%) than the percentage of respondents (55%) who chose to take this elective course subject. In other words, the students who had not attended the course reported that they were very interested in the field, had read some Positive Psychology papers, had a moderate knowledge, and agreed that Positive Psychology

Table 2. Questions on ranking the working aspects, frequencies and percentages used for the purposes of this study.

| Question | Working levels | Mean | Rank |
|---|---|------|------|
| Please rank your working levels according to their importance level (rank 1 = the greatest importance to rank 5 = the least importance) | Working with children | 1.69 | 1 |
| | Working with parents | 3.41 | 4 |
| | Working in the field of personal growth | 3.24 | 3 |
| | Working in the field of professional growth | 3.47 | 5 |
| | Working with children and parents | 3.18 | 2 |

should become a compulsory subject within the formal graduate study of preschool teachers. This finding is in agreement with previous research (Gillham 2002; Ernst and Fineburg 2004; Rijavec, Miljković, and Brdar 2008), which emphasized the need for Positive Psychology in the personal and professional life of different occupations, especially education.

Furthermore, analysing the answers to the fifth item: ‘How much could Positive Psychology knowledge be useful in the work of preschool teachers?’ (see Table 1) it could be seen that 4% of preschool teachers estimated that such knowledge would be moderately useful, 67% that it would be *more* than moderately useful, and 29% that it would be of great use within the context of institutional preschool education and kindergartens. The preschool teachers’ estimation clearly justified the inclusion of this subject within the graduate programme. Also, they viewed the Positive Psychology findings as useful and applicable in their work, especially in their work with children. This finding is significant, since it showed participants’ interest in implementing Positive Psychology in the regular preschool curriculum, and not only through short-term prevention programmes such as the PATHS programme (Gillham 2002).

Analysing their answers to the sixth question: ‘In which working level within preschool education would Positive Psychology knowledge be most useful?’, 55% of the participants thought that it would be most useful in work with children; 23% thought that it would be most useful working with both children and parents; and 4% of them thought it would be most useful with parents. Finally 18% of preschool teachers thought that Positive Psychology would support their own development: 10% gave most emphasis to their personal growth, and 8% of them gave greater emphasis to their professional growth. The majority of preschool teachers therefore thought that Positive Psychology findings would be most useful for working with children, or with both parents and children. This finding represents the high-point of this study since the hypothesis has been confirmed. It is clearly seen that Croatian preschool teachers have understood the core of Positive Psychology and that they have recognized the opportunities for applying it, especially in the field of working with children. In that context, they primarily saw the benefits of Positive Psychology as an early intervention and prevention tool, considering early child development within the early learning environment – as was found by Park (2003) and Park and Peterson (2003). This finding could be partially explained by the changing traditional role of preschool teachers in the educational process, conditioned by a new paradigm – the learning community. The main assumptions of this paradigm are that knowledge is primarily social, and that the child builds on, co-constructs and revises in collaboration with other children and the preschool teacher. So, the previous didactic role of the preschool teacher has been slowly changed to a much more varied, subtle, democratic and humane role (Petrović-Sočo, Slunjski, and Šagud 2005). This new role requires preschool teachers to develop strength of character and positive attitudes so that they are competent to develop the same in their work with children.

Table 2 shows the ranking by importance of the working aspects of preschool teachers. The preschool teachers ranked working with children as the most important aspect; they placed working with children and parents second, working in the field of personal growth third, working with parents fourth, and working in the field of professional growth is placed last. These findings match their answers to the sixth question.

Finally, the preschool teachers saw many opportunities for implementing a Positive Psychology approach in Croatian kindergartens. In answer to the seventh question: 'Please estimate the practical opportunities to implement the basic principles of Positive Psychology in the existing preschool curriculum', the majority of participants (61%) answered that they saw many possibilities (see Table 1). Some 14% of respondents felt there were numerous possibilities, 21% a moderate number of possibilities, and 4% of them little possibility for implementing Positive Psychology. On a five-point scale, no one thought that there were no such possibilities. This presents another justification for including this course subject in the programme described. Not only do preschool teachers like the course subject and find it interesting, but they can see many ways to implement it in their institutions.

In answer to the eighth question: 'Which method would you prefer to use in kindergarten, in order to implement Positive Psychology in the best way?', participants had the option of choosing one, or more than one answer. The majority of preschool teachers emphasized a combination of two (31%) or three (31%) answers. Within the combination of two answers, they thought that the implementation of Positive Psychology findings in kindergarten would be best achieved through project work and through the education of preschool teachers. Within the combination of three answers they thought that such implementation would be best achieved through projects and through the education of both preschool teachers and kindergarten directors, so that the preschool curriculum could be changed. The combination of three answers is very similar to the combination of two answers since the majority of kindergarten directors are also preschool teachers. Some responders chose only one option: 12% of them thought that the best opportunity for implementation was through projects, while 16% thought that the best way would be to educate the preschool teachers, and one respondent suggested action research within the kindergarten.

The use of project work or action research as a methodological tool in preschool institutional contexts is common in Croatian kindergartens, offering scientific grounds for implementing changes at all levels: working methods with children, place and time organization in the kindergarten, communication with parents, promoting child development and early learning, developing preschool teachers as reflective practitioners, etc. (Slunjski 2008; Vujičić 2011). This finding agrees with the conclusions of Slunjski (2011) who stated that qualitative research and action research presented the best tools for conducting a study in the institutional preschool environment, with the aim of following the paradigm changes in research and their implications for the construction of preschool curriculum.

The education of future preschool teachers at the University of Rijeka is based on a conception of the future preschool teacher as at the same time a creator of integrative approaches within her work with preschool children, and a researcher of real processes of learning and knowledge-creation in the institutional context. At the present time, the obligatory preschool curriculum does not include any kind of prevention programmes or any kind of programme that promotes and nourishes the socio-emotional development of the preschool child. Child development is understood as holistic, and this approach determines the working methods within Croatian kindergartens. Therefore, the approach presented in this paper aims to sensitize professionals to the impact of Positive Psychology on children's socio-

emotional development, in order that it might become part of everyday curricular activities in pre-school settings.

It is clear from the opinions of the preschool teachers who responded, with experience ranging from one to 31 years, that they can see many opportunities to implement Positive Psychology findings in Croatian kindergartens, and that they believe the best way to do this is through a combination of project work in classrooms, and the education of preschool teachers. The second method has already begun, so the other aspect should be promoted in kindergartens. This result presents the ground for preparing and commencing the project of implementation of Positive Psychology findings in Croatian kindergartens, so future work should be directed in that way.

Conclusion

As expected, the preschool teachers reported that they were interested in the Positive Psychology course that was introduced in the Early Childhood and Preschool Education programme at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka, Croatia. Beyond this, they thought that there were many opportunities to implement Positive Psychology in Croatian kindergartens. Thus, the expert and scientific value of this research paper can be identified as follows:

- (a) The discussions and conclusions of a small number of previous studies (Gillham 2002; Park and Peterson 2003; Ernst and Fineburg 2004) have been confirmed by these findings.
- (b) Croatian preschool teachers have been open to the topic of Positive Psychology, and found the course subject interesting and useful in their institutional context.
- (c) The preschool teachers saw many implementation possibilities of Positive Psychology, especially within their work with children.
- (d) The most suggested methods for implementation were: projects and preschool teachers' education in Positive Psychology (within the formal or informal educational systems).
- (e) These results have represented a first study in Croatia and very valuable grounds for future directions in implementing Positive Psychology in Croatian kindergartens.

By moving our preschool teachers and kindergarten children away from a preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life, and towards building on positive qualities, the socio-emotional development of children would be enriched through preventive approaches. So we argue that it would be more than useful to implement the basics of Positive Psychology, which:

... is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about civic virtues and the institutions that move toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 6)

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