

Preservice Preschool Teachers' Perspectives on the Psychological Well-Being of Preschoolers

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ABSTRACT

The school has a vital role to play in developing well-being and it should be a major goal of education. The aim of the present study was to generate knowledge about how psychological well-being of children in preschool education is understood by pre-service preschool teachers. It explores their views on the importance of cultivating psychological well-being in preschool age, the significance of several skills and competencies for developing preschoolers' psychological well-being, the obstacles to promoting it, as well as the characteristics and skills that preschool educators should have in order to be able to promote the psychological well-being of preschool children. The research sample consisted of 135 pre-service preschool teachers. A questionnaire based on the relevant literature review was used as a data collection tool. The results indicate that pre-service teachers suggest that the perception of emotions, constructive emotion expression and cooperation skills are very important skills that should be cultivated for developing psychological well-being. Emotional intelligence, empathy and communications skills are among the competencies that preschool educators should possess according to pre-service preschool teachers' perceptions for promoting children's well-being. The absence of teachers' training in mental health issues and emotional literacy skills, the pressure for achieving learning goals and the absence of teacher emotional well-being are among the main obstacles that hinder the promotion of children's psychological well-being. Research findings may be utilized to the design of preschool education curricula that should prioritize preschoolers' well-being.

keywords: psychological well-being, pre-service teachers, school

1. Introduction

Early childhood education places a disproportionate emphasis on the cognitive aspects of educational goals, while neglecting the social and emotional aspects. In the field of education, well-being is approached as a result of the process that facilitates children's learning and the achievement of developmental goals. The study of well-being in preschool education is in its infancy and has significant gaps. The present study aims to explore pre-service preschool teachers' perspectives on the factors that contribute to the development of psychological well-being in preschool education, the barriers to enhancing well-being and the necessary skills that teachers need to acquire in order to be able to implement well-being curricula. Promoting well-being will empower students and teachers and mitigate the consequences of mental health problems.

2. Defining Well-Being

Ryff (1989) links psychological well-being to the following dimensions: self-acceptance, autonomy, positive relationships with others, personal growth, and purpose in life. While it is widely accepted that well-being is a multidimensional concept, there is no consensus among researchers regarding its definition, components, and variables with which it is correlated.

Seligman (2011) states that the conditions that foster well-being in children and adults are positive emotions, participation, positive relationships, meaning, and achievement. The dimension associated with positive emotions is related to feelings of happiness, pleasure and entertainment. Positive relationships are associated with support from others along with feelings of connectedness and security. Positive relationships with family, friends, and peers are fundamental to social-emotional development. The achievement dimension is associated with the fulfillment of personal goals (PERMA Model). This model is based on Positive Psychology which studies the skills and strengths that lead humans to optimal functioning. All individuals have the potential to flourish and thrive within an appropriate social context (Ciarrochi, Atkins, Hayes, & Sahdra, 2016).

Simultaneously, well-being is associated with secure attachment. When children experience safety in the relationship with key people in life, they develop the confidence to explore the environment. The quality of relationships lays the foundation for growth. Positive interactions characterized by positive recognition are important in all aspects of learning. Toddlers who have developed secure attachment have the confidence to begin interacting with peers. Social-emotional well-being is associated with the ability to control emotions (Marbina, Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler, 2015).

Promoting positive mental health and well-being is an important part of improving health in general. Positive mental health is fundamental to good health and an asset because it enables people to successfully manage their lives and therefore contribute to the healthy functioning of individuals, families, communities and society. Positive mental health includes subjective emotional well-being and positive psychological and social functioning. The absence of mental illness does not equate to mental health (Barry, 2013).

Positive mental health includes aspects of emotional well-being (emotions), psychological (functioning), and spiritual (sense of purpose and meaning in life). Indicators of positive mental health are resilience, self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, sense of control, meaning in life, and social integration (Barry, 2013).

There is agreement on the characteristics and qualities associated with the development of well-being in preschool age, which include attachment, emotion regulation, resilience and persistence, adaptability, self-confidence, relationships among peers and prosocial skills (Leavers, 2005). Well-being and social-emotional competence depend on a set of complex skills which should be developed.

3. Previous Research

According to Cefai & Askeff-Williams (2017), teachers defined well-being and health in a variety of ways. They included holistic development, health promotion, child protection, classroom management, relationships, social justice, social sustainability, equality, diversity, resilience and social-emotional learning. The most frequent conceptual approaches to mental health and well-being were linked to social justice, diversity and relationships. Mental health promotion was seen as a caring relationship that permeated every aspect of classroom and school life rather than a curriculum or list of skills. It included the capacity for empathy,

compassion, respect and a sense of belonging. It also included involvement of the whole school community in promoting mental health and well-being, which should be a common goal.

According to their views, well-being and mental health are linked to learning and positive behaviour, working with all staff to implement programs at classroom and school level. Educational staff are held responsible for universal interventions that have a holistic approach to promoting mental health and well-being, while therapeutic services are provided by mental health professionals. In addition, they argue that parents should be empowered to actively participate in the promotion of psychological well-being and mental health. They believe that children need to feel safe, and develop resilience skills, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and emotional literacy, such as expressing and managing emotions. Developing healthy and cooperative relationships is also essential. Teachers indicate that challenging behavior undermines their professional well-being.

Bertagno (2016) asserts that teachers value children's well-being which they consider to be a necessary condition for learning. They argued that supporting their students' emotional needs is part of their role. They relied on their intuition and individual background for enhancing well-being. They conceptualised well-being as a subjective emotional state such as happiness and a sense of security. The promotion of well-being was associated with the ability to identify children's emotional needs. They were also concerned with the signs of internalising problems such as withdrawal. This research pointed out teachers' lack of training and knowledge about well-being promotion. In addition, Bertagno stressed the importance of parent involvement in the implementation of preventive programs.

Graham, Powell, & Truscott (2016) explored teachers' perspectives on students' well-being. They associated well-being with the relationships with parents, teachers and the peer group. Relationships were considered integral to students' well-being at school. A genuine concern and care for students was evident in teachers' responses. It is associated with school connectedness and authenticity in relationships. Teachers need to receive professional development and pre-service training for relationship building. The provision of support and guidance could enhance teachers' capacity for establishing genuine relationships.

4. The Promotion of Well-Being in Preschool Education

Seligman et al. (2009) put emphasis on positive education which is associated with both academic and well-being skills that are a prerequisite for academic achievement. Positive education aims to cultivate the psychological well-being of students. It is associated with the application of positive psychology principles in education. This requires the commitment of all teaching staff and leadership who can play an important role in developing collective capacity (Frydenberg, Deans, & Liang, 2019). Positive psychology interventions include the promotion of resilience, positive emotions and social connectedness. They also put emphasis on deriving meaning. Maytiv Preschool Program is an intervention which aims to promote well-being in schools (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). It is an application of positive psychology in education.

This program was implemented in Israel by preschool teachers after training. The program was based on the four elements of Seligman's PERMA program with activities to enhance positive emotions, participation, positive relationships, and achievement. The topics that referred to the enhancement of positive emotions included emotion expression, emotion regulation, positive thinking, and empathy. The intervention included activities of identifying personal sources of happiness, exercises for expressing gratitude, describing memories of happy moments and free expression of emotions. The second topic, which referred to participation, aimed at cultivating interest and enjoyment of activities based on experiences that have meaning for each child.

The third module aimed at fostering positive social relationships and was based on the ability to communicate positively with peers and adults. It also supported children whenever they cooperated, encouraged kindness and empathy. Exemplary activities included games that emphasized persistence in challenging situations, games intended to develop a sense of competence, as well as support for persistence despite failure. They also encouraged the exploration of topics that piqued their interest. The research investigated the effects of a well-being promotion program in early childhood education based on positive psychology. The findings showed an increase in the subjective well-being of children who took part in the intervention and positive learning behaviors.

In addition, interventions based on social-emotional learning can promote the well-being of students. Social-emotional learning refers to a set of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that include the ability to understand and express emotions appropriately, to demonstrate empathy, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2013). Research in young children has shown that social-emotional skills have important implications for well-being, as they promote problem-solving and pro-social behaviors and are considered key elements for peer acceptance and positive teacher-student relationships (Ștefan, Dănilă, & Cristescu, 2022).

Zippy’s friends is an example of these interventions. It is a universal intervention for children from 5 to 8. The program was designed with the aim of promoting children's mental health and emotional well-being. Modules focus on emotions, communication, relationship building, conflict resolution, dealing with loss. The program has a positive effect on emotional literacy skills, social skills, externalizing behaviours, fewer difficulties related to mental health problems, improvement in school climate, and lower rates of bullying. It is a program that promotes social-emotional well-being which has been implemented internationally in the school environment. School plays an important role in fulfilling the goals of a wider agenda related to enhancing socio-emotional well-being (Clarke, Bunting, & Barry, 2014).

5. Methodology

The aim of the research was to explore pre-service teachers’ perspectives on the obstacles to the development of psychological well-being of preschoolers. The sample consisted of 135 students. 91 % of the sample were women and 9 % were men. 64,2 % of the sample were between 18- to 24-year-old, 17,9 % were 35- to 44-year-old, 9 % between 25 and 34 years and 9 % between 45 and 54 year old. 29,9 % were at the first year of their studies, 33,6 % at the fourth year, 11,9 % at the third, 4,5 % at the second and 20,1 % at the fifth year of their studies. A survey instrument was developed which included questions related to the demographic characteristics of the respondents and questions related to the participants perspectives using a five-point Likert scale. The following research questions were explored: Pre-service teachers’ perspectives on the skills that are essential for cultivating psychological well-being in preschool age, their perspectives on the factors that constitute barriers to preschoolers’ psychological well-being, as well as their perspectives regarding the contributing factors for promoting psychological well-being.

6. Results-Discussion

The majority of pre-service preschool teachers believe that “emotion perception” is an essential skill for the development of psychological well-being of preschoolers “to a very great extent” (57,8 %) and 31,1 % “to a great extent”. 89,6% of the respondents consider that “constructive emotion expression” is “to a very great extent “ and “to a great extent” a significant skill for the cultivation of well-being. Regarding “Emotion control”, 85,9 % of the sample regard that it is a significant skill for the development of well-being, as well as cooperation skills and

enhancing self-esteem that are among the skills that gather the highest percentages. All the above aspects are considered significant competences for cultivating psychological well-being according to the pre-service preschool teachers' responses. Table 1 presents the distributions of preschool student teachers' responses to each of the statements referring to the skills that are considered essential for the development of psychological well-being. The percentages are to a large extent on the scale from "to a moderate extent" to "to a very great extent".

Table 1.

Distribution of the answers regarding the essential skills for developing well-being

To what extent do you believe that the following skills are essential to the psychological well-being of preschool children ?	Not at all	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent
	%	%	%	%	%
	1. Emotion perception	1,5	2,2	7,4	31,1
2. Constructive emotion expression	1,5	1,5	7,4	36,3	53,3
3. Emotion control	0,7	0,7	12,6	41,5	44,4
4. Cooperation ability	0,7	1,5	10,4	41,8	45,5
5. Self-esteem	0,7	2,2	8,1	33,3	55,6
6. Compliance with the rules	1,5	3	22,2	40,7	32,6
7. Problem solving ability	0,7	1,5	19,3	44,4	34,1

Table 2 presents the distributions of pre-service teachers' responses to each of the statements pertaining to the factors that represent obstacles to the development of children's psychological well-being.

Table 2.

Distribution of the answers to the question regarding the obstacles to the development of psychological well-being

To what extent do you believe that the following factors represent obstacles to the development of psychological well-being :	Not at all	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent
	%	%	%	%	%
	1. Lack of collaboration between school and family	0,7	3	22,2	37,8
2. Lack of collaboration between school and community	0,7	3,7	28,1	39,3	28,1
3. Lack of training in mental health issues and emotional literacy	1,5	5,2	17,8	36,3	39,3
4. Pressure for achieving learning goals	0,7	4,4	15,6	44,4	34,8
5. Absence of support to teachers	1,5	3	28,1	42,2	25,2
6. Lack of teachers' emotional well-being	0,7	2,2	19,3	39,3	38,5
7. Teachers' expectations for their role	0,7	5,9	37,8	36,3	19,3

Table 2 shows that all factors represent barriers for the development of children's psychological well-being to a very significant degree. As far as the statement concerning the "the pressure for achieving learning goals", the categories "to a very great extent" and "to a great extent" gather in total 79,2 % of the answers of the pre-service teachers. The statement regarding "the lack of teachers' emotional well-being" also gathers the largest percentage of answers in the categories

"to a very great extent" and "to a great extent", that is in total the percentage is the 77,8 % of the sample.

A high percentage of the sample argues that cooperation with parents can contribute most to the development of psychological well-being of the preschoolers (88,1%). 86,7 % of the respondents regard that positive relations with the peer group are among the factors that contribute to the development of psychological well-being to a very great extent and to a great extent. Positive relations with teachers and safety at school are identified as important contributing factors (85,2 %).

Table 3.

Distribution of the answers regarding the essential skills for developing well-being

To what extent the following factors can contribute to the development of psychological well-being of the preschoolers	Not at all	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent
	%	%	%	%	%
1. Psychological climate of classroom	0,7	0	12,6	4,0	46,7
2. Teachers’ support	0,7	1,5	14,1	43,7	40
3. Positive relations with the peer group	0,7	0,7	11,9	31,9	54,8
4. Positive relations with teachers	0,7	0	14,1	43	42,2
5. Teachers’ cooperation with community mental health services	0,7	1,5	23,7	38,5	35,6
6. Safety at school	0,7	1,5	12,6	43,7	41,5
7. Cooperation with parents	0,7	0	11,1	37	51,1
8. Cooperation among teachers	0,7	3	19,3	40	37

The above findings advocate the need of reimagining an education system that prioritizes students’ well-being. Well-being is linked to the quality of the relationships within the context of school community. The importance of supportive relationships is highlighted. A safe school environment and a positive climate will yield positive outcomes for children. All the aforementioned factors are associated with the promotion of students’ psychological resilience (Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017; Nikolaou, 2021; Nikolaou et al., 2021). It is also noted that collaborative partnerships with parents are crucial to well-being and psychosocial adaptation (Stamatis & Nikolaou, 2016; Stamatis & Nikolaou, 2018; Stamatis & Nikolaou, 2020). A school culture which nurtures the feeling of relatedness and school connectedness will empower students. Curriculum-led interventions which foster socio-emotional learning, and the related skills could enhance students’ flourishing and mental health as well as reducing the barriers to well-being.

7. Conclusions

The results indicate that pre-service teachers suggest that the perception of emotions, constructive emotion expression and cooperation skills are very important skills that should be cultivated for developing psychological well-being. The absence of teachers’ training in mental health issues and emotional literacy skills, the pressure for achieving learning goals and the absence of teacher emotional well-being are among the main obstacles that hinder the promotion of children’s psychological well-being. Research findings may be utilized to the design of preschool education curricula that should prioritize preschoolers’ well-being.

Research findings could also contribute to nurturing well-being in preschool education and informing educational policy. Well-being aspects should be explicitly articulated in educational curricula and be taught. Teachers need to articulate their needs and develop their well-being literacy. The growing emphasis on positive psychology and education is essential to be expanded and adopted by the Greek educational system. Preschool children should be taught how to develop meaningful relationships and socio-emotional skills. Teachers who are equipped with knowledge on these issues will be able to encompass the whole-child and promote whole-school well-being. In addition, they will be able to respond to the growing mental health needs of students. Teacher-led well-being curricula need trained teachers who will be able to deliver preventive interventions.

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