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HAPPY CHILDREN IN A SECURE ENVIRONMENT: PSYCHOLOGICALLY PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Researchers have extensively explored the conditions determining happiness and the quality of life of children in the educational setting since the educational system does not meet the needs of a contemporary child. The purpose of this study is to reflect on the view of happiness of a child by various stakeholders. This qualitative study explores the following indicators of happiness: Belonging, Aspiration, Safety, Identity, Success. The current research comprises 167 teachers (n=167), 296 parents (n=296) who took part in this research and the understanding of happiness as evaluated by pupils themselves. The main research question asked if children feel happy in their educational setting. The majority of parents concluded that the basics of happiness is security and achievements, followed by the sense of belonging. Pupils pointed to belonging as a bases of happiness and self-esteem. They commented that achievements are meaningful only when parents and teachers are satisfied with their achievement. Pupils admitted that bases of their happiness is belonging to a group. It was concluded that teachers believe that the essential condition for happiness is achievement gained at work, followed by such aspects as belonging, safety, and ability to evaluate oneself. Different groups of respondents have different notions about happiness. Parents and teachers create an environment where children compete, gain success and pretend to be happy.

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1. Introduction

Happiness is a widely used term and has been conceptualized in a number of ways and was used interchangeably with other terms. Since happiness is a broad concept there is no consensus or a single answer defining it. The most common understanding of happiness relates to the feeling of pleasure. According to Aristotle, living and doing well or living according with a virtue or doing what is fine and noble relates to the notion of happiness. Today we refer to happiness as both, a sustainable and worthy way of living. One chooses this way of life because it is good in itself and also because it contributes to one's wellbeing, or "living well and doing well" (in Michalos, 2007).

2. Research questions

What is the perception of happiness of children by multiple stakeholders, namely, parents, practicing teachers, and pupils themselves? How do those understanding differ?

3. Problem statement

All stakeholders involved - parents, teachers, administrators of school want their children to be happy, and all children are entitled to be happy and to enjoy their life in school through positive learning environments, positive teacher students' relationships and a sense of belonging. Schooling experience is particularly influential in shaping one's course of life. However, the reality indicates that most often school is not a place of experiencing happiness and well being.

4. Defining Happiness

Happiness is conceptualized as one of the indicators of well-being by psychologists. The indicators of happiness are either hedonic or eudemonic (based on human needs). Hedonic aspects of happiness relate to pleasant emotions, but eudaimonic indicators relate more to such aspects as a purpose of life and autonomy as viewed mostly from humanistic perspective (Henricksen & Stephens, 2013). In a number of studies happiness is related to health, relationships, and performance (Lybomirsky et al. 2005). Lybomirsky related happiness to sociability, likeability, positive self-esteem and positive perception of others. He proposes long term happiness model that includes a genetic aspect as one of the determinants of happiness and describes one's state of being and feeling during a particular period of life. This model includes intentional activity, namely, thoughts and actions that people engage over a long period of one's life. Numerous studies point to the necessity of a human– nature relationships as an indicator for the happiness enhancing. People deprived from regularly being in nature may been unhappy (Nisbit, Zelenski & Murphy, 2010).

According to Csiksentmihaji (Csikszetnmihalyi,1999), person feels the best when he or she is in a state of optimal experience. This is a state of being when a person is immersed in some kind of activity and is focused on gaining success (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Such an experience can be reached by considering such features of a state of mind as: concentration on a selected stimulus, clearly set aims, reflectivity, complete

emersion in an activity, complete control over an activity, and overcoming a time frame. By taking into account Cksentmihai's statement, this state of mind can not be reached. The only thing one can do is to overcome barriers to come close to such state of mind.

All stakeholders involved - parents, teachers, administrators of school want their children to be happy, and all children are entitled to be happy and to enjoy their life in school through positive learning environments, positive teacher students' relationships and a sense of belonging. Schooling experience is particularly influential in shaping one's course of life where happiness is connected with pupils' satisfaction with school's culture, relationships with teachers and peers, and developing an intrinsic motivation (UNESCO, 2016). Education is seen as a life enhancing activity leading students to achieve self-fulfillment and discovering their potential.

If asked, what makes their children happy, the most frequent response of parents is: "happiness" and "health." When one explores what schools teach, one finds the following: "thinking skills," "achievement," "literacy," and "mathematics" that does not bring much joy and happiness. Several research (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher (2004) emphasize that a positive atmosphere at school fosters creative thinking, but negative mood facilitates only critical and analytic thinking. Both modes of thinking are essential, but since young people spend 35 hours per week at school they need to experience happiness and a sense of satisfaction as well. Research proved that people in a good mood are more likely to enter novel situations, interact with other people, and pursue new goals (Carver, 2003) rather than being depressed. A safe and comfortable environment allows one to broaden one's intellectual, social, and physical capabilities. Having those previously acquired resources people experience success more often. Happy and successful people constantly experience positive emotions. The examples of positive emotions include joy, satisfaction, enthusiasm, and interest leading to well being.

Leading a Sustainable and 'a Happy School'

A significant attempt was made to transform the educational system during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014 (UNESCO, 2005) pursue the goal: "to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This educational effort encouraged changes in behaviour leading to create a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2005, p. 6) and to foster a well-being and happiness of all children.

Numerous research has been carried out on leadership of a sustainable and happy schools (Iliško & Badjanova, 2015; Davidova, & Kokina, 2009). Leadership of a sustainable and happy schools involves a holistic approach, sustainable pedagogies and strategies that support sustainable development and innovations. This involves a teacher's involvement in a creative process of designing a learning process for their students. This cannot be achieved without continuous and systematic professional development and perfection. 'Happy schools' are characterized by a sustainable vision, rich and empowering learning environment, providing the tasks that are meaningful for the students (Guseva, Dombroovskis, Iliško, 2009).

Pupils prefer teachers who are inspiring, and creative, and innovative. The old way of arrangement of learning by steps and stages and sequencing learning into one best way, the use of traditional and scientific approaches, the curriculum divided into subjects that does not fascinate the student anymore and does not make much sense. There are structural changes that are taking place in the society, bringing along new ways how to view knowledge, new patterns of interaction, new meanings and definitions. It is obvious that schools need to adapt gradually to those changes otherwise children become rebellious to rigid structured and fragmented curriculum. Therefore, educators need to look for a creative and open ways to approach a contemporary student (Badjanova, Iliško & Drelinga, 2014).

The UNESCO (2016) report on the study carried out in Asia-Pacific research discovered 22 indicators of a happy school, summarized as the interrelatedness of three main determinants: place (warm and welcoming learning environment, good health, school's vision and leadership), people (relationships, respect for diversity, positive and collaborative values, teacher working conditions, teacher skills and competencies in a school community), and the process (a teamwork and collaborative spirit, learner's freedom and creativity, extracurricular activities, learning as a team between students and teachers, engaging learning content).

5. Research Method

For the purpose of this study one hundred sixty-seven practicing teachers (n= 167) as well as two hundred ninety-six (n =296) parents who took part in a questionnaire. The study comprises the quantitative and qualitative analyses of a questionnaire data. The focus of the research is to compare a perception on the conditions of happiness of children by all stakeholders involved, teachers, parents, and by children themselves.

6. Research Findings

Based on Argail (2003) a view of happiness as a satisfaction of life, general and reflective evaluation of one's past and present and a number of positive emotions, the authors of the article chose to explore the following indicators of happiness with respect to a group of respondents of the current study, such as: *belonging,* positive feelings from the significant people, particularly close relationships in the family and positive relationships with peers; se*lf evaluation* (identity); achievements *(success), recognized by the significant others; aspiration to reach and pursue one's goals, as well as a sense of a security* (safety), that is of a particular importance for a contemporary person. The choice of those factors of study is related Seligman's (Seligman, 2002) formula of happiness, stating that happiness consists of a combination of individual's frame of mind and other conditions, as well as a will of power where individual's view is related with a genetically determined level of happiness. The other conditions are related to the existence of such factors as family, friends and everyday actions. A will of power relates to purposeful actions performed as a result of will of power.

As a result of this analyses, the authors identified the following key categories describing happiness in the educational setting.

6.1 Achievements

Achievements help one to reflect on one's strength and weakness. By regular reinforcement of students' achievements, one can foster students' understanding that their achievements dependent on themselves and that they can regulate in their life. Such an understanding fosters pupils' positive emotions and helps them to overcome the syndrome of a failure. Every achievement leads to one's willingness to reach higher achievement.

There are some differences as found in the responses of teachers, students and parents. Achievements parents relate mostly to "good grades," "creativity, "and "a day lived without troubles."

Teachers relate pupils' achievement to acquisition of new skills, "homework," and "good grades." Pupils claim happiness as related to happiness of teachers and parents. They claim that they feel happy when teacher is happy, "if mother is happy with their achievements," "and that they "do well in tests." Achievements as an indicator of happiness is evaluated highly by parents (37%), less by teachers (28%) and the least by pupils (25%). The other category identified in the questionnaire was belonging.

6.2 Belonging

A sense of belonging for pupils means to belong to a group of significant people. Pupils need to be respected by others, particularly in the relationships which are important for them. They feel acknowledged and evaluated. This is particularly significant that they experience trust and self-expression.

Parents expressed the opinion that pupils experience a sense of belonging if they can participate in "interesting out of school activities," "when they are trusted to do something," "when the classmates are friendly." Teachers point out that pupils feel happy when "there are good relationships in the family," when they "receive help from their parents, teachers and classmates," "when there are friends whom they can trust." Similarly, pupils point to the role of the family. They experience happiness when both parents are at home," when "one is surrounded by friends," "when people celebrate something together," and "when the teacher is joyful." They don't mind teachers making mistakes. Pupils' evaluation of a sense of belonging was the highest (29%), less (24%) was marked by teachers and the least evaluation was provided the parents (18%). The other category identified was a sense of self-evaluation.

6.3 Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is seen as one' s ability to understand one's role in relationships and perceive oneself as a unique individual by evaluating one' s strength and weaknesses, as well as one' values. This is important

to recognize one's value. At the same time pupils have inner resistance that makes them to doubt their abilities. Pupils who develop an optimal self-esteem are more resistant to stress and can work more productively.

Parents view children's happiness when they can "go for sport, music and do things that are of their interest." They work in a creative way, participate in diverse events, they are not afraid to make mistakes. Teachers think that when pupils feel that they are good people, they participate in competitions and build their self-esteem. Pupils feel happy when they can express their ideas, when they participate in out of school activities and are involved in doing sports and music. They participate in music classes (n=42), math (n=7), they study languages (n=5). The highest evaluation of a self-esteem as an indicator of happiness was expressed by pupils (24%), less by teachers (17%) and the least by parents (13%). The other category identified was security.

6.4 Security

Security is understood when there are certain rules determining a safe learning environment, these are clearly stated duties and responsibilities. Clarity and order foster a sense of a security. Every student feels secure and comfortably in a group when one knows rules and responsibilities. Only the one who feels secure can take a risk, can experiment and make mistakes. Security also involves trust.

Parents admit that children feel happy when there are no conflicts in the family, the day routine is known during their time at school. Pupils feel happy when teachers provide positive feedback. Most of the parents relate happiness to a satisfaction of basic needs of children and a sufficient nutrition. Teachers think that pupils are happy when there is a secure environment in the family, when parents are friendly, when pupils do not feel lonely. One needs having good friends to feel happy.

Pupils assert that the bases of happiness is than there is somebody to help you in need. Parents' evaluation of a security as an indicator of happiness in the highest (19%). It has got lower evaluation by the teachers and the least evaluation is pupils (15%). The other indicator was 'efforts.'

6.5 Efforts

Pupils need to know their learning aim, but teachers need to clarify this aim so there is a space to reach it. A lack of efforts leads to a passivity and mistrust to one's strength, but efforts leads to a self-motivated activity.

Parents consider efforts as the important indicator of their children's happiness. This involves a day spent at school that gives positive emotions and satisfactions. Teachers think that the efforts made may lead to good test achievements. Pupils consider that they are happy when they learn all they have planned to learn

when they come to school, then they 'perform well at school'. Motivated students' activity during the classes are highly evaluated by the teachers (37%), less by parents (13%) and the least by children (7%).
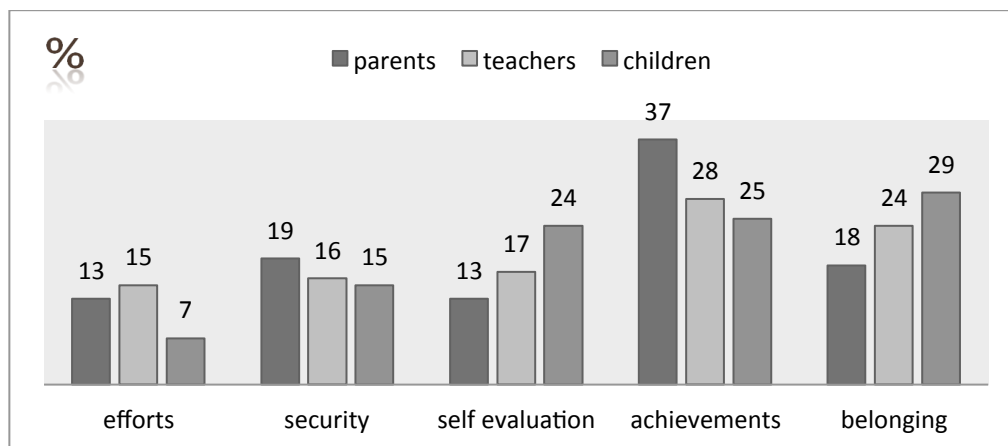

Figure 01. Indicators of happiness by multiple stakeholders.

7. Conclusions

There is no single definition of happiness. Due to numerous interpretations of happiness, there is no clear answer what are the tools to measure happiness (Argyle, 2003). Research on happiness is based on subjective feelings of happiness in its diversity and variety of expressions.

By keeping in mind that happiness relates to a subjective well-being seen as a complex socio-psychological notion that includes in itself emotional, cognitive and conative components, develops as a result of socio-psychological activity by demonstrating real attitudes towards objects of a surrounding world. It is clear that parents and teachers play a significant role in a development of a person and their sense of happiness and its descriptors, such as behavioral strategies, values, and attitudes.

Based on the empirical research data gained in this survey, one can conclude that all stakeholders involved need to develop to learn to make an independent decision: to be happy at this very moment by experiencing happiness and changing one's habits and attitudes. For the pupils to experience happiness they need to perceive themselves as a valuable.

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