Journal of Education and Practice
ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper) ISSN 2222-288X (Online)
Vol.4, No.28, 2013

Preschool Future Educators' Life Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate life satisfaction among future preschool educators and its relationship to a number of health factors. Many future educators reported stress levels and psychosomatic symptoms above average as well as some lack of satisfaction with their health. All these factors were found to be negatively associated with life satisfaction. Findings suggest that life satisfaction of prospective teachers is affected by certain aspects of their psychosomatic health and calls for special emphasis to teachers' health education and promotion, as teachers serve as powerful models for children.
Keywords: preschool educator, life satisfaction, psychosomatic health

1. Introduction

Subjective well-being is a person's affective and cognitive evaluations of her or his life (Diener, Lucas & Oishi (2002). It includes the dimensions of positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction judgments (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Diener, 1984). The third dimension of subjective well-being represents a cognitive, evaluative judgment of one's life which may be indirectly influenced by affect but is not a measure of emotion (Diener, 1984). Previous research indicated that life satisfaction (LS) is positively related to many health related themes, such as self rated health (Palmore & Luikart, 1972), stress management (Deniz, Avşaroğlu, Deniz, & Bek, 2010) physical activity (Baştuğ & Duman, 2010) weight control (Pikó , 2006), and sexual function (Ornat et al., 2013). In respect to health problems, LS have been found to be lower in cancer survivors compared matched controls (Bjordal, Mastekaasa, & Kaasa, 1995), in complicated recoveries from surgical procedures (Kopp et al., 2003) in students with high anxiety scores (Paschali & Tsitsas, 2010) as well as in older adults suffering from depression (Lue, Chen, & Wu, 2010). Pertaining to substance use and abuse, LS have been found to be negatively related to alcohol consumption in a general population (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2012), to cigarette smoking, as well as to marijuana and cocaine use (Zullig, Valois, Huebner, Oeltmann, & Drane, 2001). Additionally, LS has been found to be negatively related to psychosomatic symptoms (Pikó, 2006) as well as to the problematic internet use among adolescents (Cao, Sun, Wan, Hao, & Tao, 2011).

People with high levels of LS feel good about themselves and their lives tend to be happier and treat others better (Toker, 2012). The teacher has been emerged as a critical factor in classrooms, especially in preschool settings (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000), and should be a good role model (Feeney, Moravcik, Nolte, & Christensen, 2010). The educator should be a guide, able to obtain happiness by experiencing satisfaction and self-realization while teaching (Shim, 2008). Usually, a good early childhood teacher is the strong determinant of a deep appreciation for children and childhood (Feeney, Moravcik, Nolte, & Christensen, 2010). Therefore, we need to know how these important models for preschool children evaluate their LS. The aim of the present study was to detect the crucial factors which relate to future educators' LS and to profile the model they represent for the future generations. We investigated a number of factors related to LS, as indicated in previous research and, specifically, the role of stress, psychosomatic symptoms, self-perceived health and certain health behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, exercising, and weight control indicators. Furthermore, the role of self-assessed socioeconomic status in LS was examined.

2. Methods

The data presented in this paper are derived from a more extended research project which explored future educators' several attitudes, beliefs and evaluations related to health attitudes and behaviors. The focus in this paper is on their personal LS evaluation and the factors possibly related to it. Participants were 228 future educators 18 to 37 years (M= 20, 64, SD = 2,571).

The vast majority of the sample (98, 2%) were women and 85, 4% of the participants aged between 19-21 years.

Half of the participants stated that their mothers' education level was not over the obligatory one for Greece (9 years of education) and almost half of them stated the same for their fathers' education. As far as their socio-economic level is concerned, 85, 5% stated a middle one, 6, 1% a low one and 8, 3% a high one. All were students of the Department of Education Sciences in Early Childhood of the University of Thrace, in Greece. The study was conducted at their University Campus, in 2011 and participation was voluntary. Potential respondents were verbally informed about the general aims of the research and the time required completing an anonymous questionnaire. Finally they were welcomed to communicate with the researchers about the findings of the study.

The questionnaire included scales for LS and Perceived Stress. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) is a 7-point Likert type scale to measure global life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). It consists of five statements such as 'In most ways my life is close to my ideal' and 'the conditions of my life are excellent' and the Cronbach's alpha was .819. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a 5-point Likert type scale to measure the degree to which situations of life are appraised as stressful (Cohen Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). It is a 14-item instrument and it consists of questions such as 'In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly' and the Cronbach's alpha was .831. The self-reported psychosomatic symptoms scale included 7 symptoms like backaches, sleeping problems, tension headache, chronic fatigue, stomach or intestine problems, and cardiologic issues which were rated at a 4-point Likert type scale. The reliability of the instrument was Cronbach's alpha= .737. It was adopted, with a few necessary changes, from Pikó and her colleagues' relative tool (Pikó, Barabás, & Boda, 1997) as well as the question about self-perceived health status was. All of the above adopted instruments' equivalent meaning for the Greek adaptations was ensured by back translation. The questionnaire also included questions about the maintenance of smoking habit and the frequency of consuming alcohol and exercising. Additionally, the subjects were asked to estimate the level of the balance on their diet as well as their weight as normal, above normal or below normal. Finally, socio-demographic data included information for their age, gender, parents' education and socio-economic level.

3. Results

The distribution of LF scores was negatively skewed, with a median of 4.8 which corresponds to 'rather satisfied' (see Figure 1). The majority of future educators (63%) reported satisfaction with their life (scores>4.5) and few were dissatisfied (10.5% with scores <3.5).

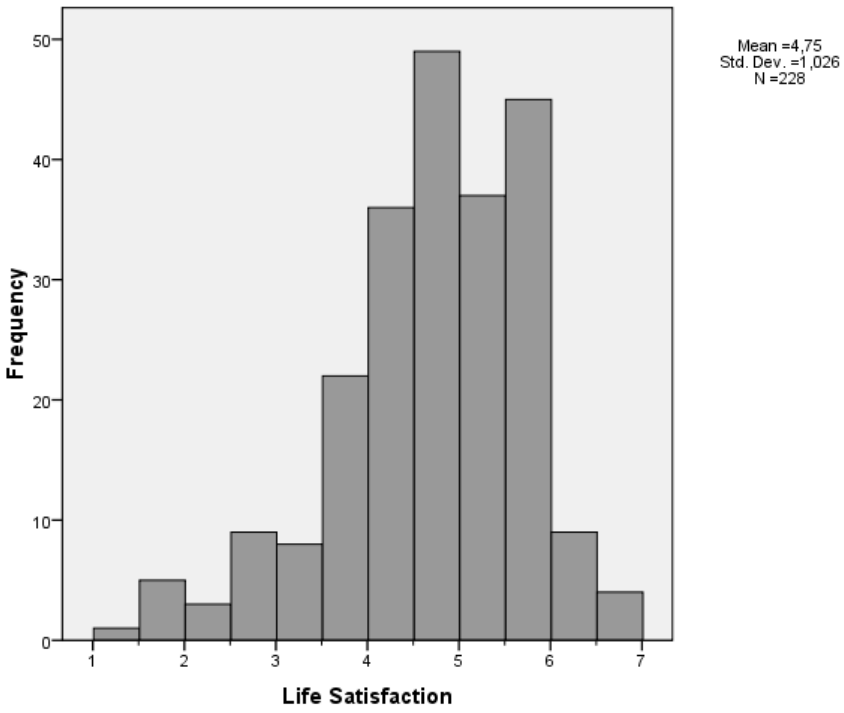

Figure 1. Distribution of Life Satisfaction scores

Regarding perceptions about their health status, almost half of future educators declared clear satisfaction (47%) although most (52%) reported some lack of satisfaction. Those with a very satisfactory perception of their health had significantly higher scores of LS (M=5.0) compared to those with a less satisfactory perception *(M*=4.7), [*Mann-Whitney test, P*=.002].

The mean score for stress was 2.99 (*SD*=.51), corresponding to the middle of the scale, that is 'sometimes'. In fact, 66% had average stress levels while 16% experienced stress 'quite often' or 'very often'. The distribution of psychosomatic symptoms scores was positively skewed, with a median of 16. Although future educators had such symptoms rather rarely on the average (*M*=16.2, *SD*=3.9), 36% had scores corresponding to 'sometimes' or 'frequently'.

Prospective teachers' satisfaction with life was negatively associated with both stress [*Spearman's r*= -.331, *P*<.001] and psychosomatic symptoms [*Spearman's r*= -.195, *P=.003*]. The correlations, although significant, were not high.

Satisfaction of future teachers with their life was associated with their socio-economic status [*Kruskal-Wallis test* $\chi 2$ =14.38 on *2 d.f., P*=.001*]*. LS was higher among those from a high socio-economic status *(M*=5.6) compared to those from medium (*M*=4.8) and the latter group had higher LS scores than those from low socio-economic status (*M*=3.9).

LS was not associated to systematic physical exercise, diet control or risky health behaviors such as smoking and drinking but it was related to perceptions of future educators weight [*Kruskal-Wallis test* $\chi 2$ =7.15 on 2 *d.f., P*=.028]. Prospective teachers who perceived their weight as lower than normal had lower LS scores (*M*=4.3) compared to those with normal weight (*M=5.0*), while those who perceived their weight as higher than normal (*M* =4.6) did not differ significantly from the other two groups.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the relation between future educators' LS and several health indicators that previous research has shown as important to the level of LS. The detected relationship between the health status and LS is in accordance with previous research, indicating that probably, a positive orientation toward life may be a protective factor of physical and psychological health (Aghaei, Khayyamnekouei, & Yousefy, 2013). The findings also revealed that the majority of the educational students are satisfied with their lives. This outcome is consistent with previous research that has used the SWLS to estimate students' satisfaction. Medical students, students in several other departments, international students have been studied and all found to enjoy satisfaction with their lives (Samaranayake & Fernando, 2011; Sam, 2001). Besides, most of the people tend to be satisfied with their lives. In over half of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, more than three-quarters of people report 'above average' scores (7 to 10) for life satisfaction. However, the percentage of people who feel an above average level of satisfaction were 50% or less in Hungary, Turkey, Slovak Republic, Korea, Poland and Japan (OECD, 2005).

The results revealed that future educators with perceived stressed lives and these who have psychosomatic disturbances are more likely to enjoy less LS, and are in line with the previous research outcomes. As far as students are concerned, their LS have been found to be negatively related to perceived negative stress (Abolghasemi & Varaniyab, 2010) as well as to their increased psychosomatic symptoms (Pikó , 2006). Considering the fact that these negative health indicators have been found to afflict pupils from adolescence (Byrne, Davenport, & Mazanov, 2007; Tanaka, Terashima, Borres, & Thulesius, 2012), we conclude that the need for students' psychological and educational counseling may be indicated, in order to promote a psychosomatic healthy model to future preschool educational places. Moreover, academic courses about health psychology which would include life satisfaction studies and stress management would contribute to the holistic preparation of a qualified educator.

Additionally, according to our results, a high socio-economic status is related to a higher LS., following the findings of Lastochkina (2012) who recently concluded that LS is related to one's financial position and the belongingness to a social class. Moreover, students' LS have been found to be related to their socioeconomic status (Serin, Serin, & Özbaş,2010). Subsequently, these outcomes suggest the need for a further social policy, pertaining to the importance of fully and suitably staffed counseling and referral services as far as the University settings are concerned, in the effort of ameliorating students' LS.

Surprisingly, in our study, LS was not found to be related to health behaviors such as exercising, smoking and drinking with the exception of the self-perceived weight, since those with normal weight were the most satisfied.

Samples' specific characteristics may contribute to this outcome. It consisted of students, the same educational level and almost all of them were women. For instance, regarding to sex, in Greece, the percentage of men and women who are lifetime abstainers from alcohol use varies a lot and is 6, 7% and 21% respectively (World Health Organization Global Information System on Alcohol and Health, 2009). Meanwhile the need for using a gender perspective when analyzing youth LS has already been concluded (Pikó & Hamvai, 2010).
The gender limitation is one of the usual ones when studying a sample of preschool educators. Moreover, the cross sectional study design may limit the statistical power of our findings. Finally, the self-reporting method could allow response distortion. However, the present study highlights the important factors associated with the LS of the next generation's preschool educators. Future research should clarify the role of the variables that have not been found to correlate with LS in contrast with previous research and extend the participants' field to other student groups. Finally, future interventions should acknowledge the importance of high LS in the overall performance of an educator.

5. Conclusion

Prospective teachers' LS seem to be negatively related to the level of stress and psychosomatic symptoms. They seem to have higher LS when they perceive their socio-economic status as good and their health condition above average. Furthermore, their LS is related to their self-perceived weight balance. Teachers should be aware of the importance of all of these indicators in enhancing LS and self-confidence. An educator with high LS could serve a dynamic model for preschool children and inspire them, in the beginning of their lives, to learn how to earn satisfaction.

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