Chapter 9

Positive Psychology Competences of Pre-School Teachers as a Tool for Understanding and Nurturing Children's Play

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ABSTRACT

The Positive Psychology frame and definition present a natural environment for understanding and researching children's play in the context of nurturing overall positive characteristics in children's development. Therefore, this article presents a structured review of the common ground between the basic principles of positive psychology and children's play in the context of early and preschool institutions. Also, it demonstrates the implementation of positive psychology principles in children's play and the methods by which positive psychology could be promoted through children's play in kindergartens. Within that frame, the importance is given to the needed preschool teachers' competences in this area. In this context, various activities are presented that reflect a common ground of positive psychology and children's play. Finally, some significant guidelines for future research and practice enhancement are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Children's play is crucial for their happiness, well-being, learning opportunities and healthy development in general. Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, (2012, p. 2) stated: "If children's opportunities for play are restricted there are likely to be profound effects on their life experience in general and more specifically on their physical and mental health. For example, obesity, rickets and attention deficit disorder

are just some of the growing problems experienced by children that health experts have recently linked to a lack of particular forms of play." It presents a complex human activity and has been in the focus of many scientific fields such as psychology, pedagogy, sociology, ethnography, etc. (Bodrova, 2013; San Chee, 2014; Tatalović Vorkapić & Katić, 2015). Because of its complexity, children's play should be analyzed and understood through the application of holistic and multidisciplinary ideas (Kamenov, 2006). Schousboe and Winter-Lindqvist (2013) emphasized that it is impossible to separate children's play from their learning and development. "All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities" (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012, p.4). Therefore, having in mind the whole frame of children' play, it is clearly observable that it presents the essence of positive psychology. Pearson, Russ and Spannagel (2008) demonstrated that pretend play and positive psychology are natural companions in presenting research on pretend play that fits under the umbrella of the positive psychology movement, and that is closely linked to the adaptive and optimal functioning in children within various environments. Even though these authors have reviewed five areas of positive psychology in relation to pretend play (creativity, coping, emotion regulation, empathy/ emotional understanding, and hope), there are also other areas worth mentioning. Therefore, in this article, we present examples of proposed activities for nurturing positive emotions, thinking, traits and relationships with others.

BACKGROUND

Children's Play

Definition of children's play consists of four core aspects (Duran, 2003). The first aspect is a stimulatory behavior with features of divergence, incompleteness and inadequacy. Divergence means the children's behavior is new and unusual. Incompleteness represents that the play does not include the achievement of a specific target. Inadequacy is visible in the children's play since the play presents behavior that is not in accordance with the given situation. From the second, autotelic aspect, children' play has its own motivation sources. This means that the process of play is more important than the outcome of play. In addition, it means that the purpose of children's play is the play itself, where means dominate the goals in the absence of direct pragmatic effects. The third aspect refers to the fact that children's play realizes the private functions of players. This means that children's play releases tension, resolves conflict, and regulates the physical, cognitive and social-emotional development of children. Finally, the forth aspect is the fact that children's play is always running in an optimal condition motivational tone. In other words, it occurs in the absence of immediate biological compulsion and social threats, and in a state of moderate psychological tension. For example, if the child feel sick or (s)he is tired, s(h) will not be able to play spontaneously.

Play is the oldest form of physical education and most autonomous activity of man, spontaneous and a freely chosen human activity, which includes the diversity of movement and a strong sense of happiness and satisfaction (Kvesić, 2008). Considering that the largest part of the game consists of fun, as such it is an ideal way to encourage the child's positive psychological aspects, which motivate them to learn, socialize and develop basic social behaviors. Play is a nice way of meeting people and making friends regardless of racial, linguistic, religious or other differences among children. When children play, they

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