

Original Paper

Impact of Educational Programs That Include Elements of Positive Psychology for Developing the Emotional Competences of the Students

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Received: May 10, 2018

Accepted: May 16, 2018

Online Published: May 17, 2018

doi:10.22158/fet.v1n1p51

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/fet.v1n1p51>

Abstract

Modern education considers schools and faculties for institutions whose goals have a broader scope than just an academic competence. Educational institutions have an obligation to completely prepare young people for adulthood and improve their optimal functioning and well being. This paper shows how the application of the positive psychology in the education can help schools and faculties to develop and maintain optimal functioning of the students and the employees. Educational institutions should approach strategically in the creation of positive educational programs that include elements of positive psychology, which positively reflects on the well-being and positive educational climate. The empirical findings of this paper confirm the role of positive psychology in education for improving the subjective dimensions of students: happiness, optimism, self-confidence, social and emotional competence. Students who attended educational programs with elements of positive psychology, have shown higher personal, emotional, social achievements and general well-being, which are prerequisites for realizing their potential. These findings imply the need to expand the arsenal of education through a positive education that includes the development of positive emotions that promote happiness and well-being.

Keywords

positive psychology, students, educational programs, emotional competences, well-being

1. Introduction

Positive education is defined as an education for acquiring traditional skills and for achieving the well-being, optimism and happiness of students. Positive psychology programs show good results, as confirmed in many research studies. Therefore, the term positive education is introduced, which is

implemented within the framework of the school curriculum. The high rise in depression and negative attitude towards studying among young people, brought the need to encourage introduction of educational programs which develop positive emotions and the skills needed for happiness. Educational institutions such as schools and faculties, play an important role in the development of the character of young people through positive cognitive and moral education programs in the school as well as through the ethical characteristics of the teachers which can influence the development of the personality of young people (Kohlberg, Higgins, & Powers, 1989).

1.1 Positive Education

Positive education is defined as the application of positive psychology in education. The need for positive education comes from the need for a holistic approach in the development of pupils and students with a focus on well-being opposed to classical schools where academic excellence is evidence of their success. This interest has been enhanced by the need to take a proactive approach to the protection and development of mental health and to prevent the psychological problems of pupils and students.

Positive psychology is a term that encompasses theory and research regarding what makes life worth living for (McGrath & Noble, 2010). It covers concepts such as: happiness, wisdom, creativity, emotional and social competence, and more. Positive psychology is effective in understanding and achieving a higher level of psychological well-being among pupils, students, employees and the school. It is a relatively new field of psychology, and its beginnings in education date back in the seventies when the focus was only on self-esteem in education and programs for social skills and stress resistance. Since then, this field has been updated with new programs and initiatives.

1.2 Positive Psychology and Areas of Application

The positive psychology is applicable at different levels of human existence. Positive experiences and individual qualities of the individual are the first area of application of the positive psychology. This area includes phenomena such as positive emotions, sense of psychological well-being and happiness, optimism and hope. The positive emotions allow people to learn from their mistakes and stressful situations (Folkman, 1997). Thinking in a state of positive emotions enables effective problem solving, creativity and altruistic behavior. The analyses of previous studies of happiness have shown that happiness has many positive consequences not only for the individual, but for the family, the community and the society as a whole (Lyubomirski & Abbe, 2003).

The second area of the positive psychology deals with research of the positive personality and focuses on exploring creativity, courage, compassion, integrity, self-control, leadership, wisdom, spirituality, and the like (Rijavec, 2006). Peterson and Seligman in 2004 proposed a classification in 6 categories with 24 forces of human power that are thought to contribute to a positive life. The classification of 6 categories of human forces follows (Seligman, 2004):

1) Wisdom and knowledge of cognitive power that involves the acquisition of knowledge and its use. This area includes: creative thinking about new and productive ways of creating; curiosity about

different topics and experiences; openness of the mind is thorough thinking; love for learning and gaining new skills, the ability to look at the wider picture and giving wise advices.

2) An emotional force that includes the will to achieve the goal despite the difficulties. This includes features such as: authenticity, sincerity, openness and presenting oneself in true light, courage, challenges, as well as perseverance and a vital and energetic approach to life.

3) Humanity in interpersonal relations involves: a pleasant attitude towards others, kindness, generosity, empathy as well as love, respect and development of others. These qualities are a feature of social and emotional intelligence.

4) Justice and healthy life in the community is encompassing concepts such as: honesty, morality, fairness, non-discrimination, team spirit.

5) Power guidance that protects against excessive behavior or: the ability for forgiveness, modesty, awareness of the wider universe, truthfulness, avoidance of unnecessary hazards, self-regulation.

6) Trans-transcendental nature: respect for beauty, excellence and skills in all areas of life, gratitude for the good things in life, hope and optimism and expectation of the best, sense of humor, spirituality and coherent belief in the higher goal and purpose in life, well-being of students, including social and emotional learning programs.

1.3 The Positive Psychology in Education

In the school system in the Republic of Macedonia emphasis is put on academic skills, which are considered as a prerequisite for a good job and a successful life. This approach neglects the skills for success in interpersonal relationships, stress response and anxiety that are integral to the work of every successful professional. According to Seligman (2009) and many of his contemporaries in education, positive programs that are concerned with the development of well-being should be introduced. This approach will lead to increased life satisfaction and help for better learning and creative thinking, as well as reducing depression. Such programs are implemented in many modern countries where through various activities it influences the development of positive qualities and skills. Such learning is included in the regular school curriculum, and the researches proves students' progress in positive emotions and moods, greater creativity and critical thinking as well as reduction of depression and anxiety.

1.3.1 The Positive Psychology in the Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions are the places that create the future, progress and constant improvement of reality. The methods applied in the higher education institutions encompass a wide range of activities from concept to realization. Therefore, each occurrence deserves proper treatment, with special treatment of the emotional intelligence.

Positive education is the inclusion of the science of positive psychology in the life and work of schools (Fischer & Sharon, 2006). In the past two decades, positive psychology in education has been the focus of researchers' interest. It is the third area of positive psychology that explores the ways in which institutions can influence the development of goodness, tolerance, equality and open opportunities for

all, because in such environment it is more likely to develop characteristics of positive people. Studies show that investments in the level of personal happiness are greatest in societies that are more prosperous and that protect human rights (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Seligman (2002) considers that the positive development of young people can affect the synergy of educational institutions, the development of character and positive subjective experiences. Positive higher education institutions encourage the development of positive personality characteristics that enable positive subjective experiences (Park & Peterson, 2003).

The programs based on positive psychology have shown very good results in improving school performance (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). The style of thinking of people who are in a state of positive emotions is more creative in problem solving (Lessen, 1993). Greater part of the successful results for promoting the application of the principle of positive psychology is most commonly received among primary school students, but also in higher education has positive effects.

According to several surveys, various positive psychology programs conducted in primary, secondary and higher education institutions showed some positive results, contributing to increasing general well-being and better school success. Positive effects are positively reflected in other areas of the individual's life and have long lasting effects. The results of the studies involving teachers and parents show better effects than when only students are involved.

2. Methodology of the Research

The methodology of research applied in this paper is based on an insight into contemporary empirical findings on the impact of educational programs with elements of positive psychology on students' emotional and social competence. The emergence of research in this paper is the influence of positive psychology on the emotional and social competence, self-esteem and well-being of students in higher education. The problem of the research is how to improve the emotional and social competence of the students, or how emotional and social competence can be improved by adequate programs in education. Is the improvement of educational programs and implementation of elements of positive psychology going to improve the emotional and social competences of students and also the overall well-being and mental health?

Subject of the research is the influence of educational programs from positive psychology on students' emotional and social competences.

2.1 Objectives of the Research

The overall aim of the research was to determine the impact of the application of positive psychology on the emotional and social competences and the general well-being of the students.

The practical goals are to point out the need for introduction of educational programs with elements of positive psychology in the higher education institutions as methods for developing the emotional and social competences of students and staff in the function of well-being and psychological health.

2.2 Hypothetical Framework

The research starts from the assumption that there is a connection between the positive education represented by adequate workshops from positive psychology and the level of development of students' emotional and social competence.

The general hypothesis reads: The implementation of positive psychology in higher education affects the development of the emotional and social competence of students.

2.3 Research Techniques

The measuring instruments used in this study are:

- Questionnaire for measuring emotional and social competence—Questionnaire for emotional competence, PEC (Takšić, 1998). Questionnaire for assessment of successful training in the workshops for positive psychology.
- Survey questionnaire for determining the attitudes of students and teachers about the importance of positive psychology for the development of emotional and social competences.

2.4 Population and Sample

The educational program has been applied to a sample of higher education students in the Republic of Macedonia. The study was attended by 57 students from the Faculty of Economics at the age of 19 to 24, of which 31 are women and 26 are male.

2.5 Steps in the Research Process

The research was conducted by implementing an educational program of positive psychology of students in higher education. One day a week during four months, fifteen workshops were held through which students were introduced with terms such as: self-consciousness, self-esteem, self-control, optimism, creativity, gratitude and forgiveness. All the elements of positive psychology were integrated in the workshops, and students formed attitudes and acquired certain knowledge. The survey lasted four months, in order to see the impact on the development of emotional and social competencies.

After the completion of the experimental learning, the students were measured for the emotional and social competence, and evaluated of the successfully mastered program through an evaluation list that was evaluated by the educator himself, the classmates and the educators. Students were given a questionnaire about their attitudes, in terms of positive psychology. The data is statically processed and analyzed.

3. Results

The results are presented according to the answers from the questionnaires and the tests given to the respondents, as well as the estimates for the level of coverage of the educational program. The obtained results confirm that there is a connection between the emotional competence of the students, measured by the Questionnaire for Emotional Competence PCU-45 and the level of mastering the program for positive psychology, represented by a performance evaluation in the educational program for positive psychology. This connection is confirmed by the existence of a high correlation between the

assessment of the degree of overcoming of the educational program for positive psychology with the level of development of students' emotional and social competences.

The statistical processing showed that emotional intelligence, represented by all emotional competences, statistically and significantly correlates with the grades for positive psychology ($r=0.51$; $p<0.001$) and confirms that students with higher knowledge of positive psychology have higher emotional and social competence.

The knowledge of the content of positive psychology participates with 26% in determining the competencies of emotional intelligence: self-consciousness, self-esteem, self-control, social-consciousness (optimism and empathy). (Table 1)

Table 1. Presentation of the Multiple Correlation between the Performance Grades of the Educational Program and the Competencies of Emotional Intelligence Altogether

Respondents	Multiple correlation quotient	Multiple determination quotient	Variant
N	R	R ²	%
57	0,51	0,26	26

In Table 2, the correlation between social competencies one by one and the grades of the educational program for positive psychology are presented.

Table 2. A Demonstration of a Multiple Correlation between the Assessment of the Knowledge of Positive Psychology and the Competences of Emotional Intelligence among Students

Grade for successful knowledge of positive psychology	Self-consciousness	Self-esteem	Self-control	Social-consciousness
Grade for successful knowledge of positive psychology	1			
Self-consciousness	0,32***	1		
Self-esteem	0,38***	0,39	1	
Self-control	0,41***	0,35	0,38	1
Social-consciousness	0,47***	0,21	0,36	0,39

It can be stated that the knowledge of positive psychology methods and techniques highly correlate with social awareness of students which covers empathy and optimism ($r=0.47$; $p<0.001$). Correlations have shown meaningful connection with the rest of the social competencies: self-domination, self-confidence, self-awareness.

The obtained results indicate that in the development of socio-emotional competences among students there is a significant influence of an adequate education, i.e., applying programs with positive psychology and their solid learning by students. Those students who regularly attended and successfully mastered the education and showed high marks in the process of evaluation showed a higher level of developed self-awareness, self-control, self-confidence, as empathy and optimism, which are prerequisites for a mature, healthy and happy person.

And the results of the survey questionnaire showed a high level of awareness among students about the importance of applying educational programs with elements of positive psychology for the development of emotional competences and point to the perceived need for development of the same among students and also among the staff. These conclusions were reached by analyzing the responses of the questionnaire compiled for this research. When asked if they know what positive psychology is, 80% of the students answered that they know, 16% heard but do not know, while the other 4% do not know this concept. On the question of whether there is a need for applying positive psychology in education for their own development of emotional and social competences, 72% answered that they have such a need, 10% answered—maybe and 8% did not have that kind of need. When asked if they would be involved in education in the field of positive psychology, 70% of students would join, 25% maybe and only 5% would not join.

4. Concluding Observations

Taking into account the considerations and findings in this paper, it can be concluded that the students' social and emotional competencies are significant for cognitive achievements and psychological health, fulfilled with well-being and happiness. According to the statements of the respondents on the questionnaire and the interview, the introduction of positive psychology in higher education can lead to the development of emotional competences among students. Students with a high level of self-awareness and empathy can influence the formation of a positive culture based on positive motivation, while students with low level of emotional competence do not have the power to create a positive motivation that indirectly negatively affects academic success and a sense of well-being.

The results of this study support the inclusion of positive psychology in higher education for the development of emotional and social competences and the concepts of happiness and well-being of students. It is necessary to create trainings with elements of positive psychology that are directed towards further development of positive emotions and improvement of emotional competences for dealing with the responsibilities and life.

World trends find a greater application of positive education based on positive psychology. This means greater systematic and planned investments in creating and implementing educational programs for student development at every level, i.e., their social and emotional competencies. This has been confirmed in this research and as a future direction it would be good to invest in development of programs for development and their institutional implementation in the educational system and organizations. “Even the most successful professionals are willing to admit that neither one nor any graduate student is a finished product, and therefore everyone has a lifelong learning obligation for their professional and personal development” (Palmer, 1995).

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