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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM SETTING FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

1. Introduction

Positive psychology is a relatively young branch of general psychology that focuses on optimal functioning associated with physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being (O’Grady, 2013) along with positive characteristics of people, positive emotions and feelings as well as the positive role of the environment and institutions in development of a person’s well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In general, it examines positive aspects and strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. Oxford (2016a, p. 22) writes that: “Focusing on human well-being, positive psychology faces human difficulties from the standpoint of strength instead of weakness”. At the same time MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer (2016, p. 3) note that it “has the potential to dramatically alter how we cope with things, how we look at life, what we believe about ourselves and others, and how we go about living”. No wonder it is so closely linked to education as its integration into the school setting might dramatically improve children’s academic achievement by “helping them to stay optimistic, delay gratification, strengthen willpower, increase resiliency, build meaningful social relationships, and find greater meaning and satisfaction” (O’Grady, 2013, p. 1). Implementation of the positive psychology into the classroom setting should facilitate both achievement and accomplishment among our students. When the teacher creates a positive school climate,

it might be predicted that both teacher and student's satisfaction as well as more optimistic outlook will be improved (Blum et al., 2002; Seligman et al. 1995). According to Seligman (2011) numerous studies prove that positive psychology skills like engagement, positive relationships or positive emotions can indeed be infused into the school setting and taught to school children. Research shows that teaching positive psychology has both short-term and long-term benefits with immediate positive effects on relationships, conflicts, mental health, and academic achievement (O'Grady, 2013, p. 27). It teaches social learning skills that influence how much and how well students learn (Wang et al. 1997) and performance in the content area improves (Elias et al., 2004). The evidence based on the aggregated results of more than 200 studies gathered by Weissbeg (2000) shows that children receiving high-quality instruction in positive psychology benefited significantly across a number of variables like: better academic performance, improved attitudes, greater motivation to learn, more positive behaviour, better attendance, increased time devoted to school-work, deeper commitment to school, as well as less anxiety, emotional distress and social withdrawal. O'Grady (2013, p. 30) notes that including positive psychology into the classroom setting increases such indicators as motivation, persistence, engagement, cooperation, as well as academic performance and attendance. The best results were found in programs that develop the emotional resiliency and the social capacity as these programs reduce stress that interferes with concentration and perseverance that is crucial in the process of learning (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

2. Positive psychology in the classroom setting

O'Grady (2013, p. 3) states that positive psychology in education is “the systematic application of its principles and practices in order to facilitate intrapersonal and interpersonal learning to increase academic, social, and emotional well-being”. She (ibid.) also suggests that implementation of the positive psychology in the classroom setting should focus on “the correlates of optimal learning, particularly the social emotional component of learning, resulting in increased positive emotion, strengths, relationships, purpose, and accomplishment”. However, when taking into account such implementation, it is of vital importance to know the existing models. The most popular one is the PERMA model by Seligman (2011), which concentrates on five components of positive psychology. Among these are: *positive* emotions, *engagement*

through strength, development of positive *relationships*, finding *meaning*, and *accomplishment*. Nevertheless, some studies (Oxford, 2014; Oxford & Cuéllar, 2014) suggest that PERMA model misses the fact “that any language learning system is deeply contextualized and has many intricately interacting, evolving components” (Oxford, 2016a, p. 24) and proposed a new model that is based on the PERMA model but includes more elaborate array of psychological components. Oxford (2016a) argues that we also need to acknowledge negative emotions as the part of the process of learning. As the result, she has proposed a new model called EMPATHICS that is tied to the concept of empathy, which is truly important in language teaching and learning, outlining at the same time” important psychological dimensions that are part of human well-being and that positively influence language learners’ achievement and proficiency” (Oxford, 2016a, p. 26). The EMPATHICS model consists of the following dimensions: E: emotion and empathy; M: meaning and motivation; P: perseverance, including resilience; A: agency and autonomy; T: time; H: habits of mind; I: intelligences; C: character strengths; and S: self factors, especially self-efficacy (Oxford, 2016b).

2.1. Teacher’s role in creating a positive classroom climate. Many researchers pointed out that teacher’s personality, awareness, motivation and enthusiasm are of crucial importance when it comes to the process of teaching and creating a positive classroom environment. Teachers who possess knowledge and skills in creating positive rapport with students could be regarded as one of the most important sources in structuring students’ development. Wilson, Pinata and Stuhlman (2007) showed that in classrooms marked by high-quality emotional support and evaluative feedback from the teacher, children displayed significantly better social competence than children in other classrooms. Some other findings suggest that engaging students in learning requires consistently positive emotional experiences, which contribute to a classroom climate that forms the foundation for teacher-student relationships and interactions necessary for motivation to learn (Mayer & Turner, 2006). Appropriate behaviour on the part of the teacher is a necessary, indispensable prerequisite for generating motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). It was emphasized that one of the most important aspects of teacher’s behaviour are enthusiasm and motivation. An enthusiastic teacher derives pleasure and satisfaction from teaching, is full of passion, dedication and motivation. Such an attitude is absolutely essential for enhancing learners’ motivation towards a given subject.

3. Method

The present study is to focus on pre-service teachers' perspective towards teaching. We are to address the following research questions:

1. What are, from the pre-service teachers' point of view, the most important aspects that should be included in their teaching practice?
2. What are, from the pre-service teachers' point of view, the most important characteristics of a good teacher?

In order to be able to answer these questions we are to present the results of the qualitative data analyses based on semi-structured interviews with 27 pre-service teachers.

3.1. Participants. The participants of this study were 27 final year university students among which there were 22 females and 5 males. They were all students enrolled at the University of Bielsko-Biala attending their final year of university education required to obtain necessary qualifications to teach English in the primary schools in Poland. They had already finished their teaching practicum based on both observations of the lessons as well as active teaching that provided them with some authentic hands-on experience in teaching.

3.2. Research methods and tools. The present study aims to employ qualitative data analysis while trying to answer the research questions. We are to present the analyses of the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews that consisted of two open questions asked to every single participant. The questions were:

1. What are, from your point of view, the most important things that you should focus on while teaching?
2. Based on your experiences, both positive and negative, describe what are the major characteristics of a good teacher?

4. Data analysis

All of the answers were analysed qualitatively with the use of inductive category development (Mayring, 2001). The criterion of definition was derived from theoretical background and research questions. Following this criterion the material was worked through and categories were deduced. Later on categories were revised and reduced to main categories and analyzed in terms of frequencies. Detailed data analysis is presented below.

4.1. Data analysis concerning ‘important aspects that should be incorporated into the teaching practice’. There were 27 participants of the study but every single person enumerated more than one aspect that they believe should be present in their future teaching practice. As the result 108 answers were reported that were later coded into the following categories. The most numerous category that contained 29 answers (27% of all answers) was *supporting students strengths and multiple intelligences*. We have decided to create one joined category as almost in all instances students were pointing to these two aspects interchangeably. The second largest category was *creating positive classroom climate* with 26 answers, which amounts to more than 24% of the all answers. The third category was *motivating students* with 21 answers (19,4% of all answers). Last three enumerated categories were *supporting students self-efficacy* (12 answers, 11,1% of all answers); *supporting students autonomy* (10 answers, 9,3% of all answers); *perseverance* (8 answers, 7,4% of all answers); and *empathy* with just 2 answers (1,8% of all answers). Figure 1 below provides graphical representation of the results.

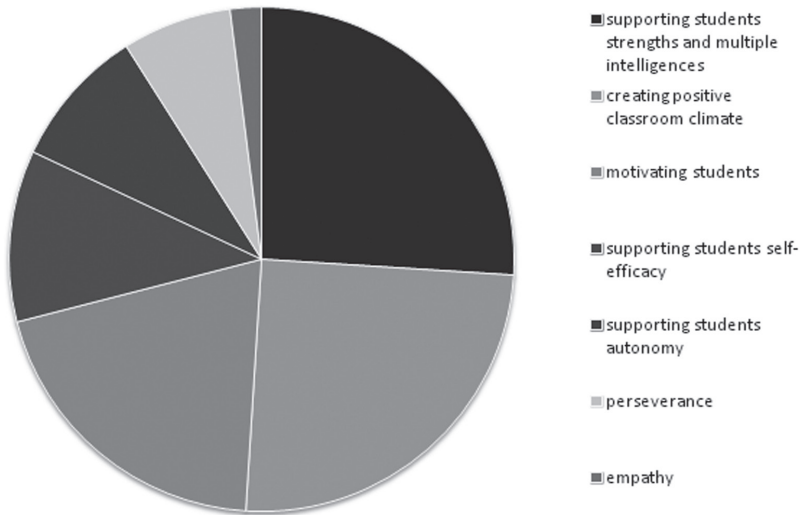


Figure 1.
Important aspects of teaching.

4.1. Data analysis concerning ‘important characteristics of a good teacher’. There were 54 answers to the second research question, which concerned major characteristics of a good teacher. The majority of answers (21 answers, which constituted 39% of all answers) pointed to *empathy and understanding* as the most important characteristics of a good teacher. The second category that gathered almost the same number of responses (20 responses that constituted 37% of all responses) was *motivating*. The remaining two categories were *creating positive rapport with students* (9 answers, 16,6% of all answers) and *instilling perseverance and resilience* (4 answers, 7,4% of all answers). Figure 2 below provides graphical representation of the results.

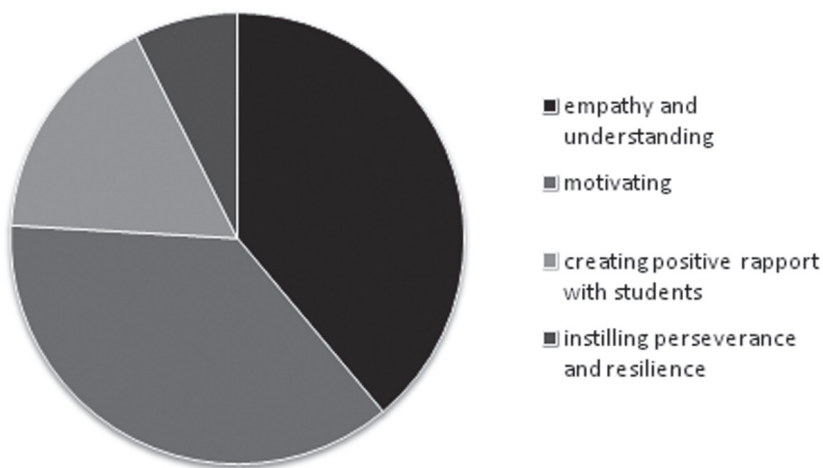


Figure 2.
Important characteristics of a good teacher.

5. Discussion

The answers to the first research question, *What are, from your point of view, the most important things that you should focus on while teaching?*, show that pre-service teachers are fully aware that incorporation of the positive psychology into the classroom setting is of vital importance. Even though they haven't precisely mentioned positive psychology, all of their answers could be linked to the categories presented in both mentioned models of positive psychology by Seligman (2011) and Oxford (2016b). It needs to be mentioned that the answers given by the researched sample of the pre-service teachers were mostly

in line with the EMPATHICS model (Oxford, 2016b) as they tap directly into some categories like empathy, motivation, perseverance, autonomy, intelligences, character strengths or self-efficacy. The respondents of the study failed to address only two aspects enumerated in the model, namely: time and habits of mind. They also seem to be aware that creation of the positive classroom climate is of crucial importance when it comes to teaching and motivating their students to learn. When it comes to the answers to the second research question, concerning the major characteristics of a good teacher, their answers also indicate aspects mentioned in the positive psychology like empathy and understanding, motivating, creating positive rapport with students or instilling perseverance and resilience. These findings are in line with the previous literature suggesting that teacher's personality, awareness, motivation and enthusiasm are essential aspects of creating a positive classroom climate that facilitates both achievement and accomplishment among students (Mayer & Turner, 2006; O'Grady, 2013; Seligman, 2011; Wilson, Pinata & Stuhlman, 2007).

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Summary: The present article is to focus on aspects connected with the positive psychology and their possible implementation into the classroom setting. The research sample that consisted of 27 pre-service teachers was interviewed in order to elicit factors that, from their perspective, are of crucial importance while teaching as well as some key characteristics of a good language teacher. Qualitative data analysis revealed that most of the categories mentioned by the informants of the study were directly linked to the positive psychology.

Keywords: positive psychology, PERMA, EMPATHICS, second language learning, pre-service teachers

PSYCHOLOGIA POZYTYWNA W ODNIESIENIU DO KLASY SZKOLNEJ Z PUNKTU WIDZENIA PRZYSZŁYCH NAUCZYCIELI

Streszczenie: Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na aspektach związanych z psychologią pozytywną i jej odniesieniem do klasy szkolnej. Próba badawcza składała się z 27 przyszłych nauczycieli, z którymi zostały przeprowadzone wywiady w celu poznania czynników o kluczowym z ich punktu widzenia znaczeniu podczas nauczania, jak również wyłonienia najważniejszych cech, jakie ich zdaniem powinien posiadać dobry nauczyciel języka obcego. Analiza danych jakościowych wykazała, że większość kategorii wymienionych przez badanych była bezpośrednio związana z psychologią pozytywną.

Słowa kluczowe: psychologia pozytywna, PERMA, EMPATHICS, nauczanie języka obcego, nauczyciele