

Chapter 3

Gratitude and Prosocial Behaviour Among Preservice Preschool Teachers: Their Significance in the Future Educational Work

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ABSTRACT

Considering the significance of a preschool teacher's influence on children's overall behavior, this research focuses on the characteristics and positive emotions, like gratitude which are associated with good wishes and the tendency to do something positive (i.e. prosocial behavior). Therefore, the main question of this study was to explore gratitude and prosocial behavior among preservice preschool teachers, and to analyze the relationship between their gratitude, prosocial behavior and academic year and age. Results of a sample of 96 Early and Preschool Education students have shown higher levels of gratitude and prosocial behavior among students who participated in this study. In addition, the significant positive correlation between gratitude, prosocial behaviour and the students' age was determined. These findings have been discussed within the framework of preschool education students' future roles as preschool teachers who would be significant in the lives of preschool children.

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INTRODUCTION

We are only happy when we do not ask anything from tomorrow, but instead gratefully accept what we have today. – Herman Hesse

The contemporary approach to early and preschool education, at its roots, has a humanistic paradigm that places great emphasis on freedom, dignity and human potential. In this context, great attention is paid to the development of individual competencies. When educating preschool teachers as one of the crucial participants in the early and preschool educational process, the continuous and lifelong development of professional and personal competencies is promoted.

Within this contemporary humanistic paradigm, the importance of the role of preschool teachers in the educational process has been noted, which with its full personality, work and professional development can positively influence the child's full development and learning (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012, 2015, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to conduct research and among future educators, i.e. preservice preschool teachers. Initial education enables all preschool teachers to acquire the contemporary knowledge needed to achieve the quality of work. Nevertheless, we witness the rich diversity among them, which is reflected in their respective approach to the child, attitudes, beliefs, personal values and personality traits. We can argue that the quality of the preschool teachers' work and their interaction with children is influenced, along with professional competences and knowledge, by the entire preschool teachers' personality and his/her implicit pedagogy (Slunjski, 2003).

When one focuses particularly on personal competencies and personality traits with the aim of highlighting the value and crucial influence of the preschool teachers' implicit pedagogy, contemporary studies zero in on the gratitude and prosocial behaviour of future preschool teachers. These studies also, relate preschool teachers' prosocial behaviour with the promotion of altruism among preschool children. The need for encouraging (future) preschool teachers to re-examine their immediate work and practices for the continuous improvement of its quality is one of the reasons for choosing this subject.

From the theoretical perspective of positive psychology, gratitude is a positive, universal human characteristic that goes beyond the boundaries of historical periods and cultural differences (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Only recently, interest in gratitude prompted psychologists to empirically prove the importance of gratitude and its positive impact on people (Emmons & Mishra, 2010). More research has been carried out recently to study the biological, psychological and sociological aspects of the emotion of gratitude. Contemporary trends in psychology, particularly positive psychology, devote deserved attention to the emotionality of gratitude as one of the preconditions of satisfaction and happiness in the life of an individual (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & Hill, 2004). According to McCullough et al. (2002), gratitude can be viewed as a personality trait, emotion or psychological state. The feeling of gratitude often accompanies an intensive and relatively short and transient emotional reaction to receiving a certain contribution from the other, while the trait and the state of gratitude are characterized by greater durability and stability that is manifested as a focus on recognizing everything positive in life (Froh et al., 2011). In that sense, gratitude is, at the same time, a feeling, a moral attribute, a virtue and a conscious act, and it can be maintained independently of life circumstances. As well as prosocial behaviour, gratitude has been included in the VIA classification of human strengths and virtues as one of the positive human traits that enable the evolution of the meaning of life and its connection with the wider universe (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

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