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Presenting teacher's experiences of the Happiness Lesson Programme for preschool and school children

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Summary: The development of Happiness Lesson Programme for preschool and school age groups was started under the auspices of the Jobb Veled a Világ Foundation. In our study, we briefly present the theoretical background and methodology of this complex health promotion program and the experiences gathered during its implementation. Our main goal is the systemic support of children's well-being, during which we develop a positive outlook on life and the ability to be happy. The focus of this study is on the experiences collected by the implementing teachers. The Happiness Program have a positive effect on children, teachers and communities alike, which extends to the institutional atmosphere. As a result of the sessions, emotional and social competences develop, the ability to cope with stress and psychological well-being improve.

Keywords: happiness program for preschool and school, positive psychology, school well-being, teacher's experiences

INTRODUCTION

Creating the conditions for physical and mental health in childhood is an essential part of optimal social development, adaptation and performance. Kindergartens and schools are important settings for health promotion, as children spend most of their time there in an organised environment. The positive emotional experiences they have there contribute to their well-being and happiness levels. In order to have good experiences, they need tools and methods that teachers can use effectively with children [1].

Comprehensive school and institutional health promotion (TIE) includes interventions that have been included in the legislation on public education in Hungary since 2012 in order to maintain and improve children's health. This includes the transfer of health-related knowledge and skills, including, among others, good nutrition, daily physical education and disease prevention. TIE gives priority to pedagogical methods and practices that promote mental health, including links with the arts. It is in this spirit that we present the positive pedagogical and psychological aspects of the professional and methodological background for the Happiness Lesson Programme, developed and run by the World is Better With You

Foundation. Achieving happiness was first systematically addressed in the science of psychology by Martin Seligman. In his work, he emphasized that, in addition to treating mental difficulties and illnesses, we must also address well-being, lasting happiness and its enhancement [2]. Sonja Lyubomirsky argues that happiness is nothing other than the experience of pleasure, and the experience of contentment or positive well-being, which is linked to the feeling that life is good, valuable and meaningful [3]. A person who functions well on both mental and physical level is considered happy [4].

The concept of mental health is intertwined with psycho-logical, biological, spiritual and social well-being. In a later work, Seligman explained that well-being goes beyond happiness, as it consists of several components: positive emotions, mindfulness, relationships, meaning and achievement [5]. Building on this, András Vargha and colleagues argue that well-being is the ability to experience and maintain positive states, including effective coping with stress, savoring, resilience and dynamic self-regulation [6].

Lyubomirsky [3] classifies the factors that influence happiness into three categories. One is our genetic heritage, which determines 50% of how happy we are. The second group is made up of our life circumstances,

which cover 10% (e.g. social background, financial situation). The third is everything we can do for ourselves, which contributes 40% to our sense of happiness. Accordingly, it is worth looking at how we can teach our children the steps we take to ensure our well-being (Figure 1). As we know, the main characteristics of healthy people are the capacity for joy and self-expression, the ability to experience happiness and meaning in life [6].

Psychological well-being, as Carol Ryff [7] puts it, includes self-acceptance, a sense of autonomy and control, good relationships with others, the ability to set goals for life and the opportunity for personal development. In international comparisons, the life satisfaction of people in today's society is considered to be very low.

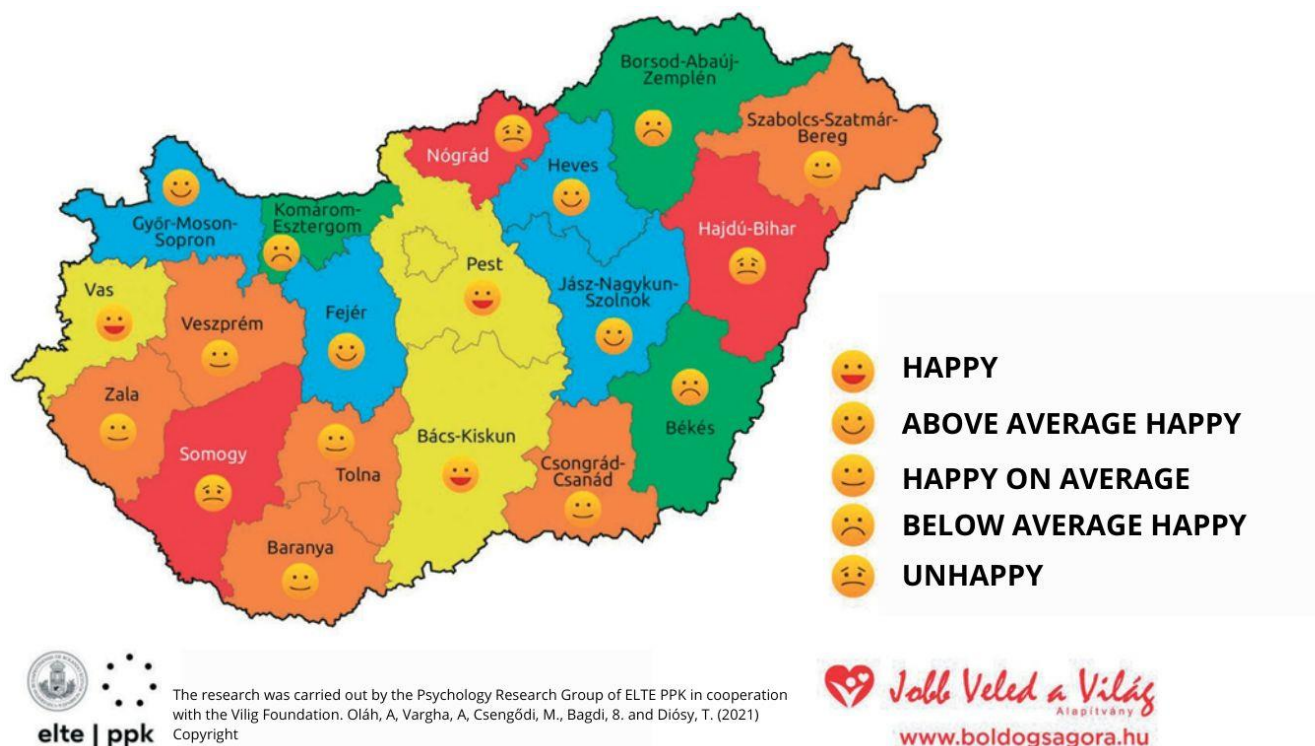
In Eurostat's survey, Hungary was ahead of only Bulgaria and Serbia out of 32 countries, and on a par with Cyprus and Greece [8]. According to the latest database of the Central Statistical Office, the trend has continued: out of 34 European countries, Hungary was ahead of only Bulgaria, Greece, Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey. These results show that it is important to work on improving the happiness and well-being of Hungarian people, depending on their economic situation (welfare).

necessarily [9].

The research team of Eötvös Lóránd University has conducted several online surveys.



1. Figure
Positive consequences of experiencing happiness based on Lyubomirsky's book "How to be happy" [3]



2. Figure
Happiness map of the subjective well-being, mental health and psychological immunity of the Hungarian population

created a happiness map of Hungary. The last time data was collected nationwide was in 2020-2021 (Figure 2). Standard questionnaires were used to assess the well-being, mental health and psychological immunity of the Hungarian population. The most recent data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Values for 18-25 year olds showed a significant decrease compared to the 2019 results.

From the point of view of health promotion in pre-school and school, it is necessary to target children's mental well-being, physical health and risk factors [10].

The notions of well-being at school and well-being at school are distinct, as they represent two different levels of children's experiences. The construct of student well-being takes a broader view of the cognitive, psychological, socio-economic, physical and material factors that determine the level of well-being. The multidimensional model of well-being in schools focuses on the psychological, social and cognitive characteristics of the learning environment [11].

The development of a variety of individual and social skills will strengthen the ability to actively cope with stress, successfully meet challenges and cope with school and work interest in learning [11-15].

All of these contribute to increased self-esteem, a positive and optimistic vision of the future, a sense of inner control and support for mental health. This enhances adaptability, which is linked to the development of emotional intelligence and cooperation, success and life satisfaction [11, 16]. Higher levels of well-being at school indicate that children have more positive attitudes towards learning and school, are more motivated, more open, more optimistic and less likely to engage in behaviours that are harmful to their health [12].

We can talk about subjective well-being when positive emotions are predominant, more frequent, more dominant and more persistent than negative emotions. As a result, students feel more balanced, achieve goals more easily, have higher life satisfaction and experience positive emotions more often in their daily lives. If students have a high self-esteem, they are more able to cope with stress and have a positive mental and physical health [17].

Tobia, Greci, Steca and Marzocchi [17], looking at children in grades 3-8 (N=1038), found that younger students have higher school well-being than older students. Other studies have also shown that, as the years progress after entering school, measures of positive attitudes towards schooling decrease steadily, while children's feelings of anxiety and fear increase [18]. This effect intensifies during adolescence and negatively affects school well-being [17]. In upper and middle school, emotions take on a negative tone: disillusioned, disappointed, sad and tired [12].

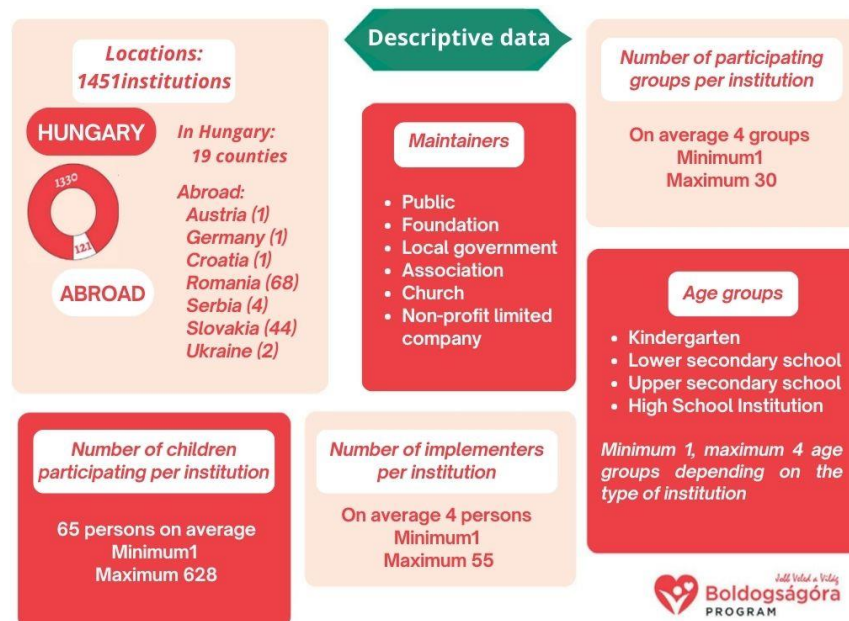
According to Zsolnai, Kinyó and Jámboři [19], Hungarian children aged 9-14 years think negatively about themselves, are less balanced, deliberate and decisive, and tend to see themselves in terms of their weaknesses rather than their strengths. 14- to 18-year-olds have low self-esteem and conflictual perceptions; the level of self-esteem was related to the socio-economic status of the family.

In a study conducted in 2018, positive and negative dimensions of well-being at school were measured among 9th grade students (N=164). They found that students who had positive self-esteem had significantly more positive attitudes towards school, a more positive self-image at school, fewer physical complaints and fewer conflicts with their peers.

They were also less anxious and performed better at school than their peers. Conversely, children with negative self-esteem experienced significantly more physical complaints, more conflict and higher levels of anxiety at school [18].

According to Józsa, Molnár and Zsolnai [20], various affective factors such as attitudes, interest, motivation and social behaviour play a crucial role in academic performance. These factors and the ability to regulate emotions play a key role in shaping the school and classroom climate. Those who manage stress effectively have better social relations, are perceived as more sympathetic, are better play partners and are better at resolving conflicts than their peers. Those who have lower levels of emotion regulation are more likely to have a problem behaviour (e.g. bullying, aggression, etc.) [12].

Studies have shown that developmental targeting interventions in schools have positive results [10]: they reduce depressive symptoms, increase engagement in school and boost strengths. The development of children's emotional and social competencies is most effective when it is embedded in the daily pedagogical routine of teachers in kindergarten and school. Programmes that provide targeted support for teachers in this area are important and necessary. They also have an important role to play in promoting a positive classroom, creating an atmosphere of acceptance, support and task-orientation [19].



3. Figure
Descriptive data on institutions, implementers and groups of students participating in the Happy Hour Programme (2022)

The main objective of this paper is to present the Happiness Lessons Programme and to review the experiences that teachers who have been conducting happiness lessons have gathered over the years. We believe that this will allow us to demonstrate the positive effects that our programme can have on the mental health of preschool and school children.

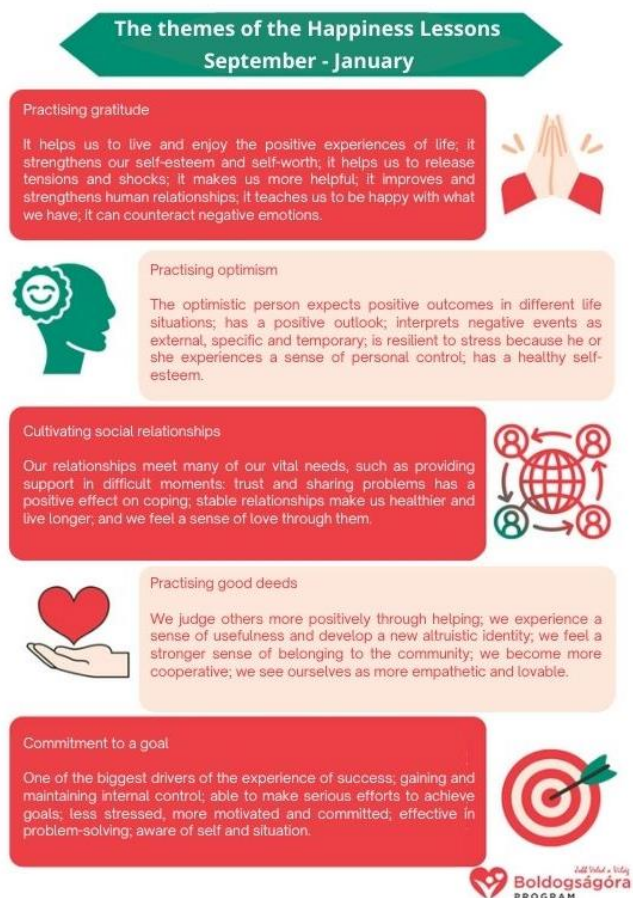
PRESENTATION OF THE HAPPINESS LESSON PROGRAMME

Over the past decades, more and more countries have been holding happiness oriented lessons to promote children's well-being in a systematic way, and we have joined this trend with our own programme. In Hungary, the Happiness Lesson Programme was created, which focuses on health promotion, and is run by the World is Better with You Foundation, founded in 2012. At the beginning, the 10 units were developed month by month with the help of volunteer professionals.

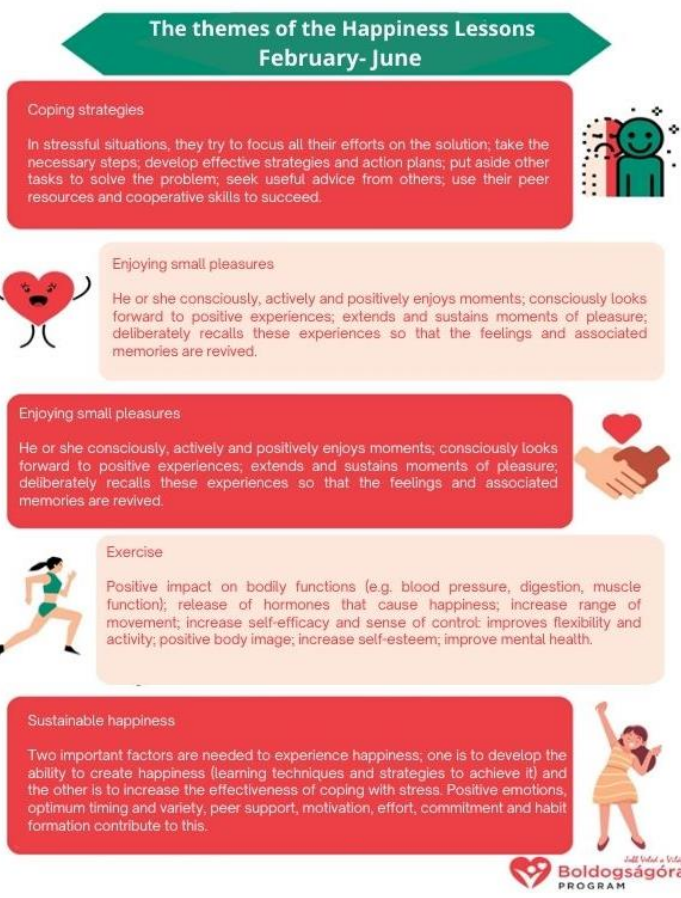
In the first year, hundreds of teachers have registered and used the method in their groups. We now count more than 7,500 Happiness Lesson groups, contributing to the well-being of nearly 100,000 children across the country and beyond. The exact figures are shown in Figure 3.

The Happiness Lesson Programme is based on widely accepted and proven positive psychological and pedagogical research and knowledge, and aims to strengthen students' self-esteem and promote their happiness. The aim is not, of course, to present young people with a problem-free life model, but to provide a guideline for facing and overcoming challenges and developing factors for physical and mental health [21].

What makes our programme unique is that anyone can join us voluntarily, regardless of the type of institution. Teachers of all ages can find a practical package that supports children's optimal development.



4. Figure Themes for happiness lessons in the 1st semester of the school year



5. Figure Themes for happiness lessons in the 2nd semester of the school year

For example, in a school year, they go through a month-by-month cycle of 10 topics that are specifically designed to increase happiness, e.g. September is the month of gratitude, February is the month of coping strategies. All of the exercises offered reflect a positive psychological approach: they focus on the strengths, opportunities and development paths that young people can take.

One of the requirements to be included in the Happiness Lesson Programme is to apply for the annual Open Call, in which the teacher uploads a photo that at least one group in his/her institution has already participated in a Happiness Lesson during the current school year. The second requirement is that the head of the institution must declare in a letter of intent that the Happiness Lesson Programme will be included in the institution's pedagogical programme and work plan by 30 September of the current school year at the latest. This will include a timetable in accordance with the ten-month programme's methodology, the persons responsible, the deadlines for implementation and a plan for the involvement of the teaching staff and parents. In addition, participation in the programme will be published on the website of the applicant institution after the award of the title.

Detailed information on the institutions' participation is available at <https://boldogsagora.hu/>.

A further condition of our programme is that if the institution does not already have a teacher who has completed the 30-hour accredited training course, the institution undertakes to have at least one teacher complete it in the given school year. During the training, teachers will receive professional help to implement the Happiness Lesson Programme, learn the principles of positive pedagogical approaches and gain experience and practice of the methodology, while developing professionally. During the training, teachers will learn a variety of playful methods (e.g. individual work, project work, use of art tools, etc.) to ensure that children have a positive experience of the teacher-led sessions. Happiness Lessons allow children to learn about ways of increasing happiness at their own level in a practical way [21]. Figures 4 and 5 show the themes around which teachers run the sessions.

We have a wide range of tools to support individual and group learning. The lessons are based on an encouraging, reinforcing pedagogical attitude, and the sessions include stress release, relaxation and

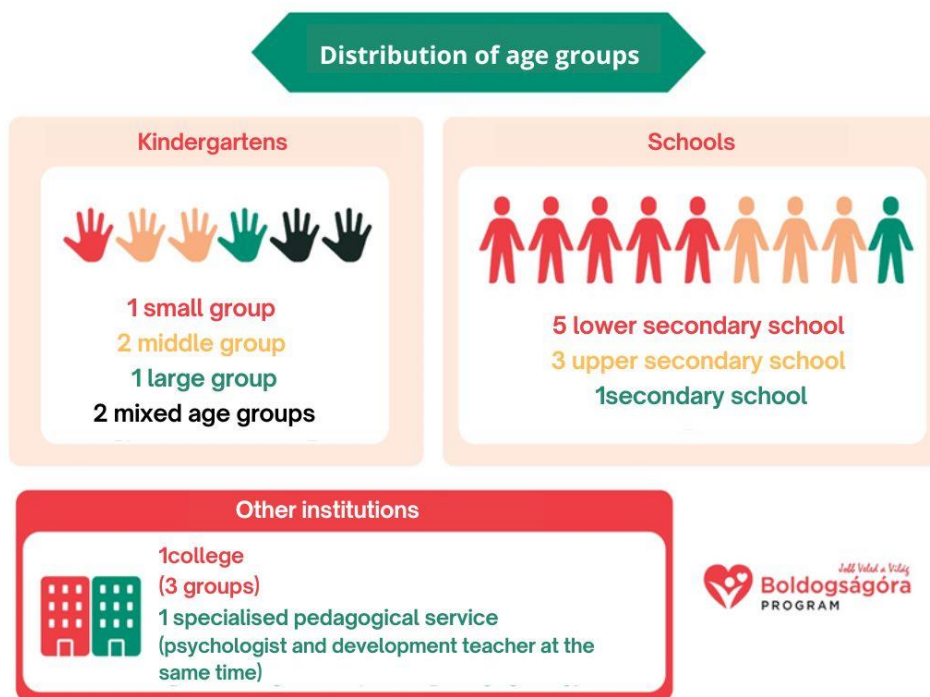
meditation, experiential exercises, as well as collective reflection or the experiential construction of new ideas. Therefore, movement, music, singing, drawing, dramatic games, photography, video film making and many other creative activities are used in the Happiness Lessons.

PRESENTATION OF TEACHERS' OPINIONS ABOUT THE HAPPINESS LESSONS PROGRAMME

The 1451 institutions implementing Happiness Lessons were visited in September and October 2022 to conduct a survey on the experiences of active teachers who teach Happiness Lessons. In response to the call we sent out, presumably partly due to the short time available for data collection, we received responses to the questions below from 13 institutions:

- *Since when have happiness been held in the institution?*
- *What or who motivated them to join the programme?*
- *In which age groups are the lessons being implemented?*
- *Who and how are they involving and how successful are they?*
- *What professional materials and tools do you use from the age-specific package we have put together?*
- *How are the tasks and games used to fit the group of children?*
- *What changes have you noticed in the work with the children and in yourself?*
- *How has the programme affected the institutional culture and atmosphere?*

It was assumed that active implementer educators would gain many positive experiences through regular Happiness Lessons. This applies to the mental health and well-being of the children, the teacher's own professional and personal development, and the wider impact of the programme (e.g. on the institution, the child, the community). Respondents included 4 kindergartens, 4 primary schools, 2 secondary schools, 1 secondary school student dormitory, 1 school for Special Needs' children and 1 specialised educational service.



6. Figure
Institutional settings and age groups participating in the Happiness Lesson 2022 autumn survey

To process and analyse the data, we used a qualitative content analysis approach [22].

In most of the institutions, the Happiness Lesson Programme was initially launched in one group or class, and soon more groups were involved. The 15 teachers involved in the programme are using the games and exercises in the lower age groups (Figure 6).

In the content analysis, we found that in two institutions, one teacher holds the happiness lessons. There are also institutions where, after the teacher who first implemented the programme, one or more (min: 3, max: 7) colleagues were won over to the cause and have since then formed a small community in their kindergarten or school. In one institution, at the request of the head, three teachers at a time completed the accredited Happiness Lessons' training, supporting each other in integrating the knowledge acquired into their practice. Feedback was received from a further institution where 70% of the teaching staff (more than 30) had completed the training. Several of the respondents (N=15) mentioned that although they were the only ones who had taken part in the training, they had seen the enthusiasm and positive changes in the children (e.g. reduction of behavioural problems, development of cooperation skills, etc.) and their colleagues had taken some of the lessons from them.

Respondents joined the Happiness Lesson Programme between the 2014/2015 and 2020/2021 school years. It is worth noting that many of the responding teachers had completed their training at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, they only started their sessions later; others decided to use the tools and games we developed during the online training. In all cases, the teachers who completed the Happiness Lesson training started the sessions in their own group or class and over time introduced them to other groups or classes in their institution.

As for the initial motivation, several people mentioned that the children's songs and concerts of the founder, Bella Bagdi, caught their attention, and then they delved into the details of the programme. In all cases, there was an emphasis on intrinsic motivation (15 people), i.e. teachers started to search for methodological innovations for personal or professional - or both - reasons. There were also respondents in our survey who, at the suggestion of a fellow teacher, had looked for the possibility of joining the Happiness Lessons Programme online, either through the online platform or through other online sources.

The need to develop the children was the main factor that led to the accreditation

Most of them mentioned the development of children's personality and the development of a positive outlook on life as the main motivation. There are also teachers in our sample (5) who were mandated by their head of institution to take part in the Happiness Lesson training. All of them highlighted that their external and internal motivation was in line. Some found that, after the implementation of the Happiness Lessons, the supportive attitudes of managers and colleagues slowly developed after they had observed the positive impact on the children.

According to the guidelines of the programme, a minimum of one session per month is suggested, but many of them arrange their curriculum to include a happiness lesson every week or two weeks (e.g. in the context of a class, in the form of a workshop, etc.). Others use the exercises with varying frequency, depending on, for example, the children's current state of mind or the links with the 10 themes in the curriculum. To qualify for the survey, the respondent had to be an active 'happiness lesson' teacher in the 2022/2023 school year, delivering sessions in at least one group or class.

The teachers interviewed (11) are glad to use the professional materials of the Happiness Lesson Programme, which are tailored to their age groups. This means that there are separate packs for teachers of pre-school children (3-6 years old), lower school children (6-10 years old), upper school children (10-14 years old) and secondary school children (14-20 years old). The basic resources are The Happiness Lesson Teacher Manuals, which present in detail the theoretical and practical aspects of each topic to support the sessions. Related workbooks have been produced which can also be used by teachers in their lessons (2 teachers). Most teachers (9 teachers) are constantly looking for downloadable resources and find them useful in planning and innovating their Happiness Lessons.

Among the developmental games, board games (e.g. Positivity) and cards (e.g. I am a positive child) can be used preferentially in different age groups. They are often used for some of the topics in Happiness Lessons and are also used for other lessons or extra-curricular activities (6 teachers and 3 teachers). In some cases, the cards are displayed in a prominent place in the classroom to inspire the pupils; during lockdown they were used during online lessons to orientate pupils' mental health.

Parents of preschool and kindergarten children (5) reported that their kids often listen to the shared children's songs during and outside of Happiness Lessons, e.g. from CDs, YouTube.

We were also curious to know what other sources teachers use for their Happiness Lessons, in addition to the materials we have compiled. They often look for specific exercises for the monthly themes from materials uploaded by their implementing colleagues, lesson plans in teacher portfolios, theses, relevant literature, professional websites, or from other professional-methodological training courses they attend (9 people). Many of them (7) have professional materials, creative ideas and games that they have made themselves, either specifically for Happiness Lessons or for other initial motivation (e.g. final project, portfolio, personal interest, etc.). The following quote reflects the opinion of one of the respondents.

"My goal is to compile a collection of games, which, in addition to personality development, self-confidence and self-confidence building, will also serve to develop the skills necessary for our students to lead a self-sufficient life and facilitate social integration. It is accessible to teachers and parents alike, in a clear and accessible format. It will be a collection of developmental toys, not by age group but by ability, with a printable downloadable annex so that they can make them." (Teacher of children with learning disabilities)

Teachers take into account age specificities (6 people), which we also take into account when developing teaching aids. The other aspect is the composition of the group and their specific developmental needs (5), such as the integration of a child from the periphery into the group. The third aspect is tasks adapted to individual characteristics, such as age, specific life situation (10 people).

Without exception, the interviewees perceive that, after six months, the children's abilities and skills are visibly improving as a result of the sessions (15). Positive changes are most evident in social and emotional competences, cognitive skills, attentive functions and behaviour. These effects are illustrated by two examples.

"We have repeatedly received feedback from students that the practices they learned in happiness lessons (gratitude, optimism, good deeds, helping others, regular

exercise, etc.) they try to incorporate it into their lives, so we feel the happiness lessons are successful." (secondary school teacher)

"Results: more anxious children opened up, became more communicative and braver in their daily lives. Behaviour problems have been reduced. Children's empathy and emotional intelligence have improved. Several parents have been successfully involved in working through the issues. We recommend repeating the simple exercises learned in the class as an exercise that can be done at home." (Teacher working in a pedagogical service)

The changes mentioned above are also noticed and confirmed by the parents, thus giving the teacher feedback on the effectiveness of his/her work, motivating him/her to further develop the children entrusted to him/her and maintaining good relations with the parents. We present an example of a complex effect perceived by teachers and parents.

"It has become a tradition to donate to vulnerable groups in December, thus parents ask in advance: when do we collect for charity? With incredible dedication, they give up toys or even bring food and put it in the basket. Parents are fully supportive, they love the programme, they see the mental development, they can articulate their children's emotions." (kindergarten teacher)

On the one hand, they get to know each child and the group dynamics much better (4), and on the other hand, the teacher-student relationship is strengthened (8), where everyone feels comfortable, a creative atmosphere is created and learning becomes a value for the children. Teachers (5) also noticed that the lessons had a positive impact on their community in the nursery and school, and often on the whole teaching staff. Either a positive atmosphere is created where cooperation is fruitful, they are emotionally supportive, optimistic and grateful.

Teachers perceive their own personal and/or professional development as intensive as a result of the Happiness Lesson Programme (10). In addition to the continuous increase in their methodological repertoire, they feel effective and enriched by the experience of success in their teaching situations. They experience more positive emotions in their daily lives, have a more optimistic outlook on life and their emotional intelligence develops (e.g. they are more patient and empathetic). The following quote illustrates our findings.

"From the beginning of my teaching career, I felt that something was missing from my lessons. With the help of the programme, I realised it was the positive charge. I focused a lot on the material and less on the

experiential. The happiness lessons have had a positive impact on my personal development, building good relationships with both students and colleagues. I can also relate better to parents and approach them with more understanding and respect." (Secondary school teacher)

They also discussed how the positive classroom atmosphere created by the sessions has an impact on others. Experience shows that the atmosphere in kindergarten and school is improving (10 people). This is mainly achieved by involving other groups and classes, organising community programmes and workshops. The same emphasis is placed on a harmonious child- teacher- parent relationship, which is achieved through the active involvement of parents (11). In practice, this is most likely to appeal to families with pre-school and school-age children. They organise various programmes for them (e.g. open days, parents' club) and involve parents in positive initiatives (e.g. fundraising) and in the development of children at home. The following examples represent teachers' experiences in this respect.

"We try to involve the other groups in our kindergarten in our Happy Lesson Programme. On Earth Day, more than 100 children and adults sang in connection with the "Sing for the Earth" initiative. In the spirit of sustainability and giving back, we made a video clip to the song of "The World is Better with You", where children from six groups, kindergarten teachers and technical staff moved together in a spirit of love and solidarity." (kindergarten teacher)

"In our lobby, we have put up a notice board - We are 'Happy Kindergarten' - which can be seen by all the groups in our building, parents and guests visiting us. There is a short description of the theme, motivational quotes, ideas for parents and we exhibit children's artwork. We also involve the public in small games. On World Gratitude Day in September, we gave all parents a family calendar, created by the Happiness Lesson Programme team. We have expanded the presentation of the programme by presenting the Happiness Lesson groups on a weekly basis with videos, pictures and heart-warming stories on our kindergarten's Facebook page under the title "Daily Smile". It is a source of pride to see more of these smile-inducing "children's stories" on the Positive Pedagogy and Education Programme website." (Kindergarten teacher)

Other positive impacts include organising Christmas activities with the children for local elderly people, or attracting role model guests to visit the children on a Happiness Lesson theme. They also reach out to other colleagues and professionals,

at various conferences and forums (15 people). They share a wealth of experience of the sessions at training courses for other teaching staff, at teachers' professional days and during mentoring. And in online spaces, they upload photos and game ideas from their class experiences, make posts, etc. In this way, they share the holistic and happiness-enhancing impact of our programme on participants. We provide two examples to support our findings.

"The most touching, however, was the period before Christmas, when we visited the elderly people living alone in the village with poems and songs related to the holiday. This programme has become a tradition. It's very heartbreaking when a single pensioner tells the children with relief that this show was their Christmas present. My students and I have been preparing for this every year since then, and they see what little things can bring so much joy." (Primary School Teacher)

"For each topic, I invited people to the class whose lives and actions were good examples for the children - it was the "Life of Great Value" series... I asked each guest to write a biography in advance, and three children prepared to come up with questions for the guest. We arranged the room in a circle and asked questions in the form of an interview with the person they were interviewing. In the second part of the lesson, the others asked their questions. The interactive lessons were always a great success." (Senior teacher)

They find it valuable that they are in constant contact with the professional development team of the Happiness Lesson Programme. They feel supported and motivated to persevere with the work they have started. They are also grateful to receive feedback on their activities, such as winning Teacher of the Month or Group of the Month awards. As new teaching aids are made available to them on a regular basis for each topic, and they share their own materials with us and their fellow teachers, they are able to improve continuously. We also provide them with various training courses, professional days and conference presentations where they can learn from prominent figures in positive psychology and pedagogy and the latest research findings.

Experience has shown that the Happiness Lesson Programme helps children to develop problem-solving skills, broaden their horizons and mindsets, and build physical, mental, spiritual and social resources.

The programme elements counterbalance negative emotions and promote positive emotions, reducing aggression and conflict in the community. In many cases, there is also an improvement in academic performance. As the children improve, the teacher himself or herself is also positively changed by the programme [21].

CONSULTATION

As we have seen through our research, the ability of students to be happy can be developed, and the skills needed can be taught at pre-school and school level. Teachers themselves feel that it is increasingly important to support children's healthy personal development through methods that engage preschool and school children with interest and joy. In addition, the teachers have a deeper understanding of the individual pupils and of the classroom environment, which allows for successful cooperation and a positive atmosphere, which can be beneficial for the school climate. Implementing teachers develop both in their professional identity and self-awareness and have a positive impact on the functioning of their colleagues and the community. The practice of happiness lessons is an effective way of communicating messages of love, tolerance and subjective well-being to children. All this contributes to the implementation of whole-school health promotion.

Due to the small number of items, it is not possible to draw general conclusions from our short survey. Nevertheless, the participants are the more motivated teachers who actively follow and implement the programme. It is also a limitation that the survey questions did not cover all elements of the programme, and it may be worthwhile to expand them in the future. Overall, however, the 10-year-old The World is Better With You Foundation is doing significant work in the field of mental health and is having a positive impact on the children and teachers involved. The way to do this is through active involvement in open-ended, creativity-building games where they can express themselves and enjoy connecting with their peers and teacher.

CONCLUSION

We believe it is important to build on past and present experience to move towards a more positive future. To this end, we are making new developments available to kindergartens and schools. The target groups of the intervention are teachers, and we plan to involve parents and the whole institution in the development of a positive nursery and school culture. We are working in a multi-level and structured system, in which all the groups involved are targeted with educational materials, programmes and training courses adapted to their needs. One example is our Strengths-based Education Programme (EKOP), which focuses on the positive resources of the personality, the character strengths. Our special education programme, which builds on this, contributes intensively to the development of children's health behaviour.

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