

Educators' autonomy, competence and relatedness and their job satisfaction

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Sažetak

The needs for autonomy, competence and connectedness represent fundamental psychological needs. They are universal, and in the work environment, they are a significant predictor of job satisfaction. Since preschool educators' competence, commitment, and motivation in educational work with children significantly determine the quality of this process, this study aims to examine the relationship between the basic psychological needs of educators and their job satisfaction. Four hundred ten educators from all over Croatia participated in the research. Educators' attitudes were examined with the Scale of Basic Psychological Needs Related to Work (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens i Lens, 2010) and the Job Satisfaction Index (Brayfield and Rothe, 1951). As expected, the results indicate a statistically significant correlation between basic psychological needs related to work and educators' job satisfaction. Of all the basic psychological needs, autonomy and job satisfaction showed the most robust connection. Basic psychological needs explain 40.3% of job satisfaction. Analysis of variance found that educators of older chronological age and those with higher professional status and a higher level of education are more satisfied with the job. Obtained results are consistent with the theory of self-determination, and the findings of the previous studies show that the quality of an educator's work is directly related to how they feel at work. The results can also serve as guidelines for principals in improving the management process in early and preschool education institutions to raise efficiency and overall job satisfaction.

Key words

basic psychological needs; educators; preschool education; work performance

Introduction

The National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (2015) is the foundation of shaping the educational process of every kindergarten in the Republic of Croatia and the whole early and preschool education system. The fundamental preschool education role is to create optimal conditions that will enable the overall quality of preschool children's development. In addition to the stimulating material context, educators have a crucial role and an indispensable contribution to the quality of the child's overall development. The professional and personal educators' competencies are just some of the essential aspects. Instead of a technical approach, today, educators are required to make daily decisions and take a critical position towards educational practice. Creating a dynamic pedagogical process, the educator continuously thinks, learns and researches, and at the same time ensures the quality of the early learning and teaching process and space for his growth and development. Due to all the above, job satisfaction in early and

preschool education is crucial as educators response to specific aspects of educational work. Specifics in his competencies, achieving close and affectionate relationships at work, and his autonomy in approaches can lead to greater or lesser satisfaction in his educational decisions, consequently affecting his life and work. A comparison of foreign and domestic literature on job satisfaction of professionals working with children shows that teachers are more represented in research and educators only to a lesser extent. Thus, for example, job satisfaction is one of the quality indicators of working life. (Bhanugopan and Fish, 2008). As in any profession, job satisfaction is essential to the sustainability of the educators' profession. In addition to the formal personality recognition and perception in the cognitive domain, new attention in organizational behaviour is focused on affective dispositions such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment of employees (Luthans, 2011). Educators process a positive sense of work and enthusiasm into their work with children, other educators and parents, which also contributes to the achievement of vital educational goals (Tatalović Vorkapić and Lončarić, 2013). Some research (e.g., Jones, Hadley, & Johanstone, 2017) has found that meeting basic psychological needs in the preschool institution's work environment significantly predicts job satisfaction. It is essential to point out the research results that show that educators can influence their practice and the development of the educational practice in a meaningful interaction by applying critical pedagogy in their work and professional development (Wink, 2005). Since the quality of the educator's work relates to how he/she feels at work, caring for their basic psychological needs becomes imperative. In this sense, the paper sought to examine the predictive relationship between basic psychological needs and educators' job satisfaction.

Basic psychological needs

Self-determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 2002) is a general theory of human motivation that focuses on the relationship between the underlying psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and the individual's well-being. Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT; Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017) is a key concept that addresses relationships within a social context that affect individuals' motivation and well-being. Basic psychological needs satisfaction is related to the growth and well-being of the individual through their personal experience. In addition to this, the paper starts from the model of a critical (constructivist) educator (Mušanović, 2001) developed within the postmodernist, developmental-humanistic paradigm, which is based on the educators' professional autonomy. The educator is stated as an active constructor of personal meanings about one's learning and constructing educational situations. Autonomy has proven to be a significant predictor in educators' readiness to participate in professional development (Čepić, Tatalović Vorkapić and Šimunić, 2018). The need for competence refers to the need to be effective in interacting with our environment, encompasses all aspects of life: business, family and interpersonal relationships and is a significant prerequisite for achieving self-esteem and self-confidence (Deci and Ryan, 2002). Numerous studies show that the presence of basic psychological needs within the social environment has a positive effect on autonomous motivation, psychological and physical well-being and better efficiency and is associated with satisfaction (Baard, Deci and Ryan, 2004) and greater work engagement (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte and Lens, 2008). Autonomous educators critically question practice as reflective practitioners, continuously researching and analyzing educational work through reflection and self-reflection, striving to develop the quality of educational work (Šagud, 2006). The need for relatedness refers to the establishment of close and affectionate relationships with people in our environment, is activated

in social interactions, and is satisfied only when these relationships are authentic, with mutual concern for the welfare of the other. Partnership, collaboration and teamwork are significant for improving the quality of work by sharing experiences and encouraging the development of critical thinking through reflection with colleagues (Hargreaves, 2003). Psychological needs are also related to the subjective characteristics of the individual, such as personality traits. For example, Tatalović Vorkapić, Ljevar and Batistič Zorec (2020) emphasize the significant connection between personality traits, psychological needs and educators' job satisfaction. Despite numerous studies pointing to the implications of different work-related resources on meeting psychological needs (e.g., Olafsen, 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2008), basic psychological needs in the early and preschool education system are most often discussed in the context of children. This research wants to confirm the assumptions built on previous recent research, further emphasizing the importance of caring for the educators' psychological needs.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction can be defined as an individual's positive attitude towards the job he or she is doing (Locke, 1976). As one of the most frequently researched topics in organizational behaviour, it consists of many components, each uniquely forming the perception and experience of work. According to Bhamani (2012, p. 44), *educators' satisfaction directly affects their work performance*, so it is necessary to understand the factors that positively or negatively impact their job satisfaction. Studies conducted in the last two decades focus on intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing educators' job satisfaction (e.g., Shann, 1998; Thompson, McNamara, & Hoyle, 1997). A study conducted in preschools in Australia highlights the satisfaction of basic psychological needs in the work environment as a significant predictor of job satisfaction (Jones et al., 2017). The need for relatedness in the workplace relates to collaboration with colleagues and teamwork. Bhamani's research (2012) shows several significant factors related to job satisfaction, such as peers, advancement, and management. Alongside psychological needs and job satisfaction, the same study analyzed sociodemographic factors as research shows their association with job satisfaction. The results indicated a linear relationship between working conditions and job satisfaction. Cheng and Chen (2011) show similar results, which, in addition to the organizational climate, show a significant effect of fundamental psychological needs in job satisfaction. The level of job satisfaction is related to motivation, which in turn affects productivity and educators' work performance. According to Bhamani (2012), the importance of job satisfaction of employees of educational institutions (schools and preschools) is crucial for the long-term growth and development of any educational system in the world. Most research in this area focuses on the quality of work in organizations related to industry and the business world. Kim and Loadman's (1994) meta-analysis show that only 2% of job satisfaction surveys were conducted at special education or preschools. Analyzing job satisfaction in preschools in Croatia is still not represented enough. There are only a few studies with similar topics (for example, Šimić-Šašić, Klarin and Lapić, 2011; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2020), so this paper can serve as a basis for future studies.

Methods

This research examines the relationship between basic psychological needs and educators' job satisfaction. Based on the goal of the research, the following hypotheses were set:

H1. There is a positive association between basic psychological needs and educators' job satisfaction.

H2. Satisfaction of basic psychological needs will be a significant predictor of general job satisfaction, in addition to the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

H3. There is a statistically significant difference in job satisfaction concerning educators' socio-demographic characteristics (seniority, level of education and professional status). Educators with more work experience, higher levels of education and higher professional status are expected to show greater job satisfaction.

Participants

Four hundred ten educators from all over Croatia participated in the research. Over 53% of educators are from Zagreb County and the City of Zagreb. The majority of respondents, 99.5%, are female, and only 0.5% are male, which is expected since women are still dominant in the educational profession (Van Polanen, Colonnese, Tavecchio and Blokhuis, 2017). Most respondents are in the age group of 31 to 40 years, and the least to the group over 41 years. According to education, the most significant number of respondents, 51%, have higher education, indicating an increase in educators' level of education in Croatia. Most educators, 61%, have up to 15 years of service. In the context of professional status, only 12.4% of respondents have career advancement, of which 33 educators are mentors, and 18 educators are advisors. Given that the research was conducted during enhanced protection measures due to the pandemic caused by the COVID -19 virus, the online method proved to be the best solution. Online surveying has advantages such as minimal financial outlay and the ability to meet in the privacy of one's own home and at a time that suits participants (Creswell, 2002). The main limitation is that it excludes respondents who are not Internet users. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, emphasizing that the results will be used only for scientific purposes, that participation in the research is voluntary and anonymous, and that they are free to cancel the questionnaire.

Instruments

In the first part of the questionnaire, respondents answered questions about sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, county, work experience, education and professional status). In the second part, they expressed the degree of agreement with statements referring to psychological needs related to work and job satisfaction.

Work-Related Basic Need Satisfaction scale

Basic work-related psychological needs were examined by the Work-Related Basic Need Satisfaction scale (W-BNS) (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). The scale measures basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence and relatedness and consists of 16 items. The subscale of autonomy (e.g., *Tasks I have to do at work correspond to what I really want to do*) and relatedness (e.g., *Some people I work with are close friends of mine*) contain six items each, and the subscale of competence at work contains four items. The scale is of the Likert type, and responses ranged

from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The overall reliability of the instrument is high; the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is $\alpha = .88$. The determined reliability of the subscales also shows high values of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (autonomy $\alpha = .88$; competence $\alpha = .78$; correlation $\alpha = .85$). Previous research has shown that the instrument has satisfactory reliability (Van der Broeck et al., 2010; George and Mallery, 2003). The Bratko and Sabol (2006) study also shows a satisfactory level of reliability for all three subscales (autonomy $\alpha = .73$; competence $\alpha = .71$ and connectivity $\alpha = .74$).

Index Job Satisfaction

Educators' job satisfaction was measured using the Job Satisfaction Index (IJS) (Brayfield and Rothe, 1951). The questionnaire measures general business satisfaction and measures the general employees' attitude towards work. It consists of five items (*I am quite satisfied with my current job* ; *Every day at work seems infinitely long*; *Most of the time, I am enthusiastic about my job*; *I hate my job*; *I enjoy my job*). Responses were assessed on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Instrument validation determined a reliability coefficient $\alpha = .87$ (Brayfield and Rothe, 1951). The reliability of the measuring instrument in this study shows that Cronbach's alpha coefficient's value is also $\alpha = .87$, which indicates an excellent internal consistency according to George and Mallery (2003, p. 231). Galić and Plećaš (2012) also obtained high-reliability $\alpha = .88$. in their research conducted on the Croatian representative sample.

Results

Distribution normality indicators are shown in Table 1.

Table 1					
<i>Descriptive data</i>					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>K-S z</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Autonomy	3.08	.90	.05	-.07	-.43
Relatedness	3.73	.89	.09	-.50	-.36
Competence	4.30	.56	.12	-.70	.52
Job satisfaction	3.91	.82	.13	-.96	.80

The Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis results indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between basic psychological needs, autonomy ($r = .60$, $p < .001$), competence ($r = .43$, $p < .001$) and relatedness ($r = .46$, $p < .001$) with educators' job satisfaction (Table 2), thus accepting hypothesis H1. The most robust connection between autonomy and job satisfaction was of all the basic psychological needs.

Table 2				
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficients (basic psychological needs and job satisfaction)</i>				
	Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness	Job satisfaction

Autonomy	1	.33**	.48**	.60**
Competence	.33**	1	.28**	.43**
Relatedness	.48**	.28**	1	.46**
Job satisfaction	.60**	.43**	.46**	1
** $p < .001$				

The contribution of basic psychological needs to the explanation of job satisfaction is analyzed by hierarchical regression analysis. The first step of regression analysis is statistically significant $F(4,405) = 5.79$, $p < .001$, and sociodemographic variables explain 5.4% of the total variance in job satisfaction of educators ($R^2 = 0.054$; $p < .001$). Of all sociodemographic variables, the following have a significant contribution: level of education $\beta = 0.152$, $p < .01$; length of service $\beta = 0.28$, $p < .05$ and professional status $\beta = 0.13$; $p < .05$. The second step of regression analysis is also statistically significant $F(3, 402) = 99.39$; $p < .001$ and explains the significantly higher percentage of variance of 40.3% ($R^2 = 0.403$; $p < .001$). All variables entered in blocks 1-2 explain 45.7% of the variance of educators' job satisfaction, therefore is concluded that the model is important for predicting educators' job satisfaction (Table 3).

Table 3				
<i>Hierarchical regression analysis results</i>				
		Job Satisfaction		
Predictors		β	ΔR^2	R^2
	Age	-.16		
	Education Level	.15**	.05***	.05***
1. Step	Length of Service	.28*		
	Professional Status	-.13*		
	Age	-.04		
	Education Level	.10*		
1. Step	Length of Service	.11		
	Professional Status	-.02		
	Autonomy	.43***	.40***	.46***
	Competence	.21***		
	Relatedness	.19***		
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$				

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine differences in job satisfaction with regard to sociodemographic characteristics (age, length of service, level of education and

professional status). It turned out that there is no statistically significant difference in job satisfaction among educators compared to years of service $F(6,403)=1.07$; $p=.38$ (Table 4); in other words, educators with longer and shorter work experience show equal job satisfaction. However, looking at the arithmetic means, a slight trend is observed according to which educators with longer experience, 26-30 years ($M=4.03$; $SD=0.64$) and more than 30 years ($M=4.15$; $SD=0.76$) show greater job satisfaction. The Levene test was statistically significant in three cases (age, education level, and professional status) (Table 5).

Table 4 <i>ANOVA results</i>					
Job Satisfaction					
	SS	df	MS	F	p
Lenght of service					
Between groups	4.31	6	0.72	1.07	.38
Within groups	271.71	403	0.67		
Total	276.02	409			

Table 5 <i>Levene's test results</i>				
	Job Satisfaction			
	F	df1	df2	p
Age	2.93	3	406	.033
Lenght of service	2.04	6	403	.060
Education evel	3.49	4	405	.008
Professional status	7.80	2	407	.000
* $p<.05$				

A robust Brown-Forsythe test was used for further analysis of the mentioned variables. A statistically significant difference was found in educators' job satisfaction with regard to age, level of education, and professional status (Table 6).

Table 6 <i>Brown-Forsythe test</i>				
	Job satisfaction			
	Statistic	df1	df2	p
Age	3.52	3	360.88	.015

Education level	3.07	4	110.81	.019
Professional status	24.56	2	71.71	.000

Post hoc Games Howell test found a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) in job satisfaction between educators of two age groups, $F(3,406) = 3.310$; $p = .020$. Specifically, differences were found for the age group of 31 to 40 years ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 0.90$) and more than 50 years ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.77$). Furthermore, a statistically significant difference was found in educators' job satisfaction with regard to the level of education, $F(4,405) = 1.84$; $p = .120$. Arithmetic means show a slight trend towards greater job satisfaction of educators with high school education ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 0.53$), graduate ($M = 4.10$; $SD = 0.63$), and postgraduate education ($M = 4.20$; $SD = 0.28$), but these differences are very small. The most prominent statistically significant differences were found in relation to the variable professional status $F(2,407) = 9.07$; $p < .001$. The post hoc test found statistically significant differences in job satisfaction between educators mentors ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 0.50$) and advisors ($M = 4.54$; $SD = 0.41$) in contrast to those who don't have professional status ($M = 3.85$; $SD = 0.84$).

Discussion

Correlation analysis found a statistically significant high positive association of basic psychological needs with job satisfaction. Educators who assess the presence of autonomy, competence and connection to a greater extent are also more satisfied with their work. The presence of basic psychological needs in the workplace positively affects autonomous motivation, psychological and physical well-being, efficiency (Deci and Ryan, 2002), satisfaction (Baard et al., 2004) and greater engagement at work. Broeck et al., 2008). It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that these educators will have greater motivation and invest significantly more effort in working with children and thus act in the direction of improving the overall quality of the institution's work. Latter is confirmed by the research of Usop, Askandar, Langguyuan-Kadtong and Usop (2013), according to which teachers who are satisfied with their work will develop and maintain a higher level of performance. The most robust connection was discovered between autonomy and job satisfaction. Educators, who estimate that their need for autonomy is met to a greater extent, are more satisfied with their job. The same result was shown in a recent study by Worth and Van den Brande (2020). Castle (2004) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) highlight autonomy as one of the essential factors associated with professional satisfaction with administrative support, leadership, and the school climate. Employees who have greater autonomy are more willing to take on greater responsibility and put more effort to achieve a common goal of the organization (Deci et al., 2017). The stimulating preschool institution environment that encourages the educators' autonomy and the collective knowledge construction leads to the development of continuous learning culture and thus to improving the quality of educational work. According to Slunjski (2018), in an autonomy-supportive environment, educators have greater self-confidence and a sense of self-worth, prefer challenges, are more productive and creative. The importance of autonomy is also evident in the educators' readiness for professional development (Čepić et al., 2018; Slunjski 2018; Jurčević Lozančić and Tot, 2020), which encourages the strengthening of their pedagogical competencies. An autonomous educator thinks critically and contributes to generating change and self-generated progress through action. Predictive relationships of basic psychological needs in explaining job satisfaction were analyzed by hierarchical regression analysis in two steps. The first step is

statistically significant, and it shows that sociodemographic variables (level of education, length of service and professional status) have a significant contribution to the explanation of educators' job satisfaction. Educators with a higher level of education, with longer work experience and professional status, are more satisfied with their work. The second step of regression analysis is also statistically significant, and the underlying psychological needs of educators are a significant predictor of job satisfaction, which is consistent with the research findings by Jones et al. (2017). This research further confirms the importance of nurturing the educators' basic psychological needs in preschool institutions. Such care for educators will positively impact the overall experience and job satisfaction. Differences in educators' job satisfaction with regard to sociodemographic characteristics were examined by analysis of variance. The results show that educators of older chronological age, higher level of education, and those with professional status are more satisfied with work. Educators with a higher level of education and professional status are more confident in their knowledge and competencies, which further strengthens them in working with children, colleagues and parents, and thus they are more satisfied with their work. The Abu Taleb study (2013) also reveals a significant association between higher education and job satisfaction. Statistically significant differences in the educators' length of service were not found. A possible reason for this is the online survey of only interested educators and those who use modern technology. These results are not consistent with research that mainly indicates a negative association between length of service and job satisfaction, with individuals with longer service showing less job satisfaction than younger ones (Krogstad, Hofoss, Veenstra, & Hjortdahl, 2006). This research can contribute to the autonomy and professional development of educators in early and preschool education institutions. Also, these results have implications for the improvement of culture and the management process in early and preschool education institutions. It is essential to point out that this research has limitations, such as online surveys and an unrepresentative sample (more than 50% of participants are from the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County, while other counties are less represented). Satisfaction with the educators' job is associated with several factors such as the institutions' culture, the principals' competencies, the educators' professional development, teamwork and others, which are not examined here. Therefore, future research should focus on examining these variables in relation to educators' job satisfaction.

Conclusion

This research confirms the expected statistically significant positive relationship between basic psychological needs related to work and educators' job satisfaction. Specifically, the strongest association was found between autonomy and job satisfaction, while the need for relatedness and competence was moderately associated with educators' job satisfaction. Also, predictive variables explain 45.7% of job satisfaction variance, which is in line with previous research. Job satisfaction in the early and preschool education system is a unique area that needs more attention in terms of educators' professional growth and development and the sustainability of the educational profession. Basic psychological needs are significant in job satisfaction, which manifests through the educators' productivity. In educational institutions, employees' job satisfaction is crucial for any educational system's long-term growth and development.

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2. međunarodna znanstvena i umjetnička konferencija
Učiteljskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu Suvremene teme
u odgoju i obrazovanju – STOO2 - in memoriam prof. emer. dr. sc.
Milanu Matijeviću, Zagreb, Hrvatska

Autonomija, kompetentnost i međusobna povezanost odgojitelja i njihovo zadovoljstvo poslom

Sažetak

Potrebe za autonomijom, kompetentnošću i povezanošću predstavljaju temeljne psihološke potrebe. One su univerzalne, a u radnom okruženju značajan su prediktor zadovoljstva poslom. Budući da kompetentnost odgojitelja, njihova predanost i motivacija u odgojno-obrazovnom radu s djecom bitno određuju kvalitetu tog procesa, cilj je ovoga istraživanja ispitati odnos temeljnih psiholoških potreba odgojitelja i njihovog zadovoljstva poslom. U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 410 odgojitelja s područja cijele Hrvatske. Stavovi odgojitelja ispitivani su Skalom osnovnih psiholoških potreba povezanih s poslom (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens i Lens, 2010) i Indeksom zadovoljstva poslom (Brayfield i Rothe, 1951). Rezultati očekivano ukazuju na statistički značajnu povezanost temeljnih psiholoških potreba povezanih s poslom i zadovoljstva poslom odgojitelja. Od svih temeljnih psiholoških potreba najsnažnija povezanost pokazala se između autonomije i zadovoljstva poslom. Temeljne psihološke potrebe objašnjavaju 40,3% zadovoljstva poslom. Analizom varijance utvrđeno je da su odgojitelji starije kronološke dobi, kao i oni s višim profesionalnim statusom i višim stupnjem obrazovanja zadovoljniji poslom. Dobiveni su rezultati u skladu s teorijom samoodređenja i nalazima prethodnih istraživanja da je kvaliteta rada odgojitelja izravno povezana s tim kako se osjeća na poslu. Rezultati mogu poslužiti i kao smjernice ravnateljima u unaprjeđenju procesa upravljanja u ustanovama ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja s ciljem podizanja učinkovitosti i općeg zadovoljstva poslom.

Ključne riječi

odgojitelji; predškolski odgoj; radni učinak; temeljne psihološke potrebe

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