



Exploring Psychological Well-Being and Positive Emotions in School Children Using a Narrative Approach

by Chiara Ruini, Francesca Vescovelli, Veronica Carpi and Licia Masoni

Abstract

While a large body of research has provided quantitative data on children's levels of happiness, positive emotions and life satisfaction, the literature reflects a dearth of studies that analyze these dimensions from a narrative and qualitative point of view. Folk and fairy tales may serve as ideal tools for this purpose, since they are concerned with several concepts scientifically investigated by research in the field of positive psychology, such as resilience, self-realization, personal growth and meaning in life. The aim of the present study was to explore children's well-being and positive emotions using an innovative narrative approach, which involved interviews and group discussions, as well as the analysis of fairy tales written and discussed in a group context. The sample included 95 school children who were asked to report and discuss in a group setting situations or experiences which triggered positive emotions and happiness in them. Guided by their teachers and a school psychologist, they were then asked to write their own original fairy tale drawing on the positive emotions that had previously emerged. Positive emotions were found to be triggered mainly by interpersonal relationships with peers as well as with family members. Hobbies and leisure time were also strongly associated with happiness and hedonic well-being, while personal fulfilment, self-esteem and goal achievement emerged as highly significant for children. In sum, the findings suggest that this school psycho-educative intervention based on narrative strategies provided useful information on children's well-being and yielded positive feedback, the implications and possible further applications of which are discussed.

Introduction

Positive psychology research has devoted increasing attention to young people's well-being and positive functioning in recent years (Albieri, Visani, Offidani, Ottolini, & Ruini, 2009; Albieri, Visani, Ottolini, Vescovelli, & Ruini, 2011; Keyes, 2002a; Ruini et al., 2009; Ruini, Belaise, Brombin, Caffo, & Fava, 2006). Around the turn of the century, Keyes (2002a, 2002b) proposed the concept of *flourishing*, which describes a combination of high levels of emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being, and as such is considered a basic indicator of positive human

development (Huppert & So, 2013). In his pioneering work on American adolescents (aged from 12 to 18 years), Keyes (2006) found that only a small proportion (around 25%) is actually flourishing, while the majority manifests moderate mental health. Subsequent analysis highlighted age differences in flourishing mental health, with the lowest prevalence in the youngest age cohorts (Keyes, 2006, 2007; Keyes & Westerhof, 2012).

Other lines of research have developed assessment tools to evaluate dimensions such as life satisfaction, hope, gratitude and character strengths in young populations (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). These instruments

have good psychometric properties, are easy to use, and provide a large amount of data on the positive functioning of children and adolescents. However, this data is basically quantitative and may thus miss valuable information accessible by means of qualitative methods of research (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008).

The paucity of qualitative data in the field of positive psychology research has come to be recognized as an important issue to be addressed by future researchers (Friedman, 2008; Madill & Gough, 2008; Waterman, 2013). This issue seems to be particularly relevant for special populations, such as clinical populations, youth (including both children and adolescents), and family members (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Wong, Wong, & Obeng, 2012), where the use of qualitative methods may be more appropriate, given their specific needs and characteristics. For instance, young children or older adults might find self-report inventories difficult to understand, or too lengthy to complete, or might become confused when using Likert scales (Bennet, 2008). The use of less rigidly structured instruments, such as interviews, focus groups, diaries, or creative writing, may allow for valuable data to be collected, particularly in relation to the concepts of happiness, well-being and positivity. These dimensions of human functioning are well known and recognizable also at a very early stage of human development (Huppert, 2009).

Furthermore, within the therapeutic domain, narrative strategies have often been used with both children and adolescents (Bennet, 2008; Lubetsky, 1989), where particular stories may be utilised to help children talk about, or overcome, specific instances of fear, abuse, trauma, or other negative events (such as the death of a family member, diagnosis of severe or chronic illnesses, and so forth). As such, the clinician has become a writer and storyteller too, creating a set of tailored stories aimed at specific clinical situations (Brandt, 1983).

Fairy tales collected from the oral tradition may also play an important psycho-educational role, providing *ad hoc* frameworks to interpret reality, deal with personal issues and stressful events, or provide encouragement or warnings when confronted by adversity. For these reasons, folk and fairy tales are often part of teaching curricula in primary schools. They may also serve as ideal tools both to introduce and to explore positive psychology constructs such as hope, resilience, and passion (Vallerand, 2012; Weis & Speridakos, 2011), personal growth and meaning in life (Ruini & Fava, 2012; Seligman, 2002).

This paper accordingly describes a school intervention based on qualitative and narrative strategies, aimed at exploring and promoting children's well-being and positive emotions through the use of fairy tales written and discussed in a group context.

Methods

Participants

After the researchers had explained their programme and its goals to teachers and to the head teachers of the institutions approached, six classes from two elementary schools in Northern Italy volunteered to participate in the programme and to include it in the teaching curriculum. The programme was implemented with a group of 95 4th grade elementary school students with a mean age of 9 years, with the sample including an almost equal number of boys and girls. Five teachers from the schools concerned were involved in the activities.

After the procedures had been explained to the teachers, students and the students' parents, informed consent was obtained in writing. All the participants and parents provided their consent and no-one declined.

Procedures

This school-based intervention consisted of two 2-hour sessions held during normal lesson times. Two further sessions were dedicated to the training and supervision of the teachers involved.

The aim of this methodologically qualitative study was to explore children's well-being and positive emotions using a narrative approach, which involved interviews and group discussions, as well as the use of fairy tales written and discussed in a group context.

Session contents

In the first session, students were asked to write down, anonymously, one or more situations, specific events, or things that elicited happiness and well-being. After that, the children were invited voluntarily to share with their classmates what they had written and then discuss it in specific focus groups guided by the teachers and a school psychologist. In the second session, students were divided into small groups and asked to create and write their own original fairy tale, which was to involve some of the positive emotions that had emerged in the previous session.

The teachers gave them a basic, simplified narrative structure to follow, based on the concept of "functions" developed in fairy tale structuralist analysis (Propp, 1968) and comprising three main phases: initial stressful event, test and tasks, final reward. True to the tradition, each fairy tale protagonist had to deal with some problems and obstacles before achieving the "happy ending", when he or she finally experienced some of the positive emotions reported in the first session. An example of the fairy tales produced is provided in the appendix.

At the end of the second session, the children were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire requiring them to rate their satisfaction with the intervention, learning

associated with the intervention, and the quality of the team work.

Qualitative Analyses

Using Grounded Theory, qualitative analyses were performed on the written materials collected in the two classroom sessions, using an open coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). More specifically, this entailed the grouping of the data into various thematic categories by two independent raters who subsequently interrogated their categories comparatively before final agreement was reached.

Results

Situations, specific events, or things that elicited well-being and happiness in primary school children

The following six categories emerged from the open coding procedure: spending time with friends; family relationships; self-esteem and goal achievement; materialistic values; curiosity and openness to experiences; humour and fun situations. Of the children's reports, the largest number (32%) showed a link between positive emotions and spending time with friends. That family relationships positively influenced children's well-being was pointed to in 20.5% of the responses. A similar percentage (19.5%) highlighted the importance of events and situations connected with goal achievement and self-esteem, such as good performances in sport and school activities, or the development of new skills and abilities (e.g., learning to swim, or ski, or handicraft activities).

Materialistic values were also evident in 18% of the reports (e.g., receiving gifts, toys, and playing video-games). The last two categories involved curiosity or openness to new experiences (as was evidenced by the 4% of the students who reported moments such as travelling, or visiting museums, cities and foreign countries) and, finally, humour (4%), characterized by funny moments that make people laugh.

Content analysis of written fairy tales

In total, 14 fairy tales were analyzed. According to their content, these fairy tales could be classified in four thematic categories: *friendship* (36%) (i.e., two friends who were separated by their families and had overcome a series of obstacles before reuniting); *persistence and bravery* in order to reach a specific goal (28.6%) (i.e., becoming a dancer, learning how to play soccer, dealing with a long illness, and so forth); *family life* (21%) (i.e., holidays with family, adventures with brothers and sisters); *cleverness and creativity* (14.4%) (i.e., solving problems with the help of significant others, finding ways to stop being teased by other children, finding ways to solve difficult homework problems, et cetera).

Children's satisfaction with the intervention

The open-ended questionnaire completed by the children at the end of the intervention investigated three main issues:

- *Satisfaction with the intervention*: 95% of the children reported being highly satisfied with the intervention.
- *Quality of team work*: 54% of the participants reported their appreciation of the team work and the fairy tale writing phase. The rest of the children (46%) reported some difficulties in getting along with team members and working with them.
- *Learning associated with the intervention*: Four thematic areas of learning emerged:
 - (1) self-improvement;
 - (2) teamwork and listening;
 - (3) awareness of emotions;
 - (4) knowledge about fairy tales.

Examples are reported in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Qualitative Analysis of Children's Evaluation of School Intervention: Associated Learning

“What have you learned ?”

I have learned...

SELF IMPROVEMENT

- *that writing fairy tales is fun!*
- *that in fairy tales you can let your imagination wander.*
- *that all the fairy tales have a happy ending.*
- *that if you are brave you can face any obstacle.*

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FAIRY TALES

- *how to deal with difficulties and overcome them.*
- *that it is better to deal with something, even if it is scaring, instead of giving up.*
- *useful behaviours and thoughts.*
- *to improve my behaviours.*
- *that when I'm sad, I have to think positive!*

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT EMOTIONS

- *that everybody feels many emotions.*
- *that you should not ignore emotions.*
- *that there is always a way, even in the worst situation.*
- *to recognize emotions...*
- *that you should not be embarrassed about your emotions*

TEAM WORK

- *friends and family could help me to think about my problems more clearly.*
- *that team working is not easy ... but it is a good experience.*
- *to listen to other opinions.*
- *that it's good to have someone who listens to you.*

Discussion

The aim of this qualitative study in the domain of positive psychology was to explore children's well-being and positive emotions using a novel narrative approach, which involved data-gathering interviews and group discussions, as well as the use of fairy tales written and discussed in a group context. A sample of 95 grade 4 primary school children was asked to report situations, events, or things that elicited happiness and well-being. Subsequently, they were asked to use these positive emotions to create and write their own original fairy tales, collaborating in a group setting. Through a qualitative analysis of the children's reports, it was found that interpersonal relationships (with both peers and family members) are the most frequent determinants of happiness and well-being, followed by goal achievement and self-fulfilment, and then by materialistic values (such as receiving gifts, or toys, or extra pocket money). Instances involving curiosity or openness to new experiences were only rarely reported (4%), as was the case in respect of humorous or funny moments (4%). These findings confirm those of previous studies in the field that point to active participation in social activities and involvement in one's community as associated with higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Helliwell & Putnam, 2005; Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Extensive research on goal pursuit has also demonstrated that enhanced well-being is associated with intrinsic goals (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1996), valued goals (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), and the pursuit of goals congruent with personal values (Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grassman, 1998; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). The majority of these investigations, however, concerned adult populations, or adolescents (Moti, Roth, & Deci, 2014). The data obtained in the present study seem to confirm that self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) might be applicable also to younger children. Self-determination theory postulates that the basic psychological needs are autonomy, competence and relatedness, all of which are related to intrinsic motivation. Their satisfaction not only fosters immediate well-being, but also strengthens inner resources, as such contributing to consequent

resilience (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Importantly, even though the children were interviewed on instances of hedonic well-being (moments/situations or things that elicited happiness and well-being), only a small proportion of them reported it (i.e., receiving gifts, playing with toys, experiencing humorous and funny situations). Instead, the majority of the children referred to close interpersonal relationships (friends and family), or goal achievement and personal thriving, all of which clearly relate more to eudaimonic well-being and optimal human functioning (Ryff, 2014).

The content of the new fairy tales written by the children in a collaborative group context could be grouped into thematic categories that parallel the data on eudaimonic well-being. Indeed, the narratives developed during the school intervention concerned stories of friendships, persistence in pursuing goals, creative problem solving, or adventures and travels with family members. The children were asked to write their fairy tales following a specific structure that included an initial stressful event, a series of tests and tasks to perform, and a final reward (Propp, 1968), but they were left free to choose the characters, the task contents, and the "happy ending". As a consequence, the children spontaneously chose to write stories about friendship, goal achievement, mastery, bravery and self-improvement (Fig. 1).

The findings of this qualitative study confirm Keyes's model of flourishing, which includes psychological, emotional and social well-being (Keyes, 2002a, 2002b) and is considered a basic indicator of positive human development (Huppert & So, 2013). The majority of theories on eudaimonic well-being and optimal human functioning have addressed adult populations (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 2014; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). As a consequence, the majority of questionnaires and self-report schedules have been developed and validated to measure adults' eudaimonic well-being, with very few instruments available for younger populations (Keyes, 2002a, 2006; Ruini et al., 2006, 2009). The qualitative data obtained in the present study provide information on children's basic concepts of eudaimonic well-being

and might be useful for the development of quantitative measures appropriate to this age cohort.

This study is limited by its preliminary and descriptive nature, as well as by the self-selected sample and the absence of quantitative measures of happiness/positive emotions with which to compare the findings. However, it provides interesting data on children's well-being and its promotion through a school intervention based on fairy tales. The teacher-supervised team work involved in writing a new fairy tale following Propp's structure (1968) was generally enjoyed by the children and deemed by them to be useful for gaining a better understanding of emotions, problem solving, and personal skills (Fig.1). This very active part of the intervention

aimed at stimulating playfulness and creativity, along with prompting the finding of new logical and causal connections between events, and increasing group cohesion (Proyer & Ruch, 2011; Treadwell, Reisch, Travaglini, & Kumar, 2011). At the same time, the process contributed to heightened awareness of personal resources and more flexible problem-solving techniques. Creativity, self-awareness and flexibility (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010) are the contemporary focus of the majority of positive interventions (Seligman, 2002). Considering the inclusion of fairy tales in standard teaching curricula at primary school level, fairy tales could become a preferred tool for the promotion of well-being, resilience and flourishing in children and young populations.

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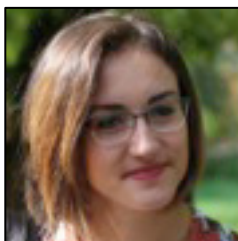
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Appendix

Example of One of the Fairy Tales Created and Written by the Children

Title	The Spolverati family on holiday
Initial Event	Once upon a time there was a family composed of mum, dad and their two children. One day the family decided to gather together and leave for a holiday in England, driving a caravan through Europe.
Test and tasks	On the road, many troubles and adventures happened to the Spolverati family. Suddenly the caravan drove over a nail and one tyre burst. Luckily, Dad knew what to do, and with the help of his children, they replaced the tyre and could continue the journey. After 20 km the caravan accidentally slammed into a truck proceeding on the road, and the front of the Spolverati family's vehicle broke. They all were in a panic, but tried to control themselves and solve this second problem by calling the car assistance. They waited and waited and waited to get help, and were worried about missing the ferryboat to England. Eventually, the car assistance arrived and fixed the vehicle. The Spolverati family was really late for the ferryboat, but they remained hopeful about the possibility of reaching their destination. While they were discussing possible alternatives, a magic eagle suddenly landed on the roof of their caravan and suggested that they drive through a new Channel Tunnel under the sea to reach England.
Final reward	The Spolverati family followed the advice of the wise magic eagle, which protected them flying over the caravan along the journey. They arrived to England just in time for afternoon tea. The Spolverati family spent an unforgettable holiday in England and lived happily ever after.
