KOMPETENCIJSKI PRISTUP
KVALITETI RANOG I PREDŠKOLSKOG
ODGOJA I OBRAZOVANJA

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Pula, 2016.
Dječji vrtić Medulin

Fakultet za odgojne i obrazovne znanosti
Sveučilišta Jurja Dobrile u Puli

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Naklada: 250

CIP zapis dostupan u računalnom katalogu Sveučilišne knjižnice u Puli pod brojem 140603058.

ISBN 978-953-7320-34-8

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FREQUENCY OF CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS PERCEIVED BY CROATIAN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

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**Abstract**

Challenging behaviour occurs during early childhood as a part of typical development, but it can also be an early indication of social-emotional problems. Given that challenging behaviour can have a strong influence on later development and well-being, it is important to identify problems as early as possible in order to implement early intervention and prevention efforts. Preschool teachers have a significant role in identification and prevention of those behaviours. The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of preschool teachers related to the frequency of the challenging behaviours observed in their classrooms. A sample of 204 teachers working in Kindergarten Rijeka completed the Challenging Behaviour of Preschool Children Scale created for this study. Factor analysis revealed a two-factor structure: (1) internalizing and (2) externalizing behaviours and the scales showed good psychometric properties. Preschool teachers reported higher overall mean ratings of internalizing in comparison to externalizing behaviour. However, five of the individual items for externalizing behaviours were rated higher than the items for internalizing behaviours. Thus, while preschool teachers do observe both internalizing and externalizing behaviours, a number of externalizing behaviours are the most frequently observed challenging behaviours in their classrooms.

**Key words:** preschool, teacher perceptions, internalizing and externalizing behaviours
INTRODUCTION

The early childhood years are an intensive period of child growth and development where children build foundations for the development of future skills (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Development of emotional and behavioural self-regulation and social competence are an important feature of this growth. It is well known that children who are socially, emotionally and behaviourally adept at the time they enter school are likely to fare better in the school environment than those who struggle with these skills. Although it is not uncommon for young children to display low levels of problem behaviours across home, community and school environments (Campbell, 1995), early mastery of adequate levels of social, emotional and behavioural competencies are an indicator of the well-being of a preschool child and are associated with future success across a variety of domains. Conversely, early and persistent problem behaviours can affect the child’s development across social and emotional domains and put the child at risk for early academic failure (Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2011; Yoleri, 2013) as well as later problems in adolescence (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). Given these risks, the main theoretical worldwide approach has been aimed at prevention and early intervention for young children with challenging behaviour and their families (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Challenging behaviours cause concern for parents, teachers, and other caregivers (Powell, Dunlap, & Fox, 2006) who need the knowledge and practical competencies for preventing and responding to the problem behaviour of young children. The need for these skills is obvious, given the high rates of problem behaviour of young children found around the world. Researchers in the United States report 10% to 25% of children enter school with significant behaviour problems (Campbell, 1995; Lavigne, et al., 1996; Qu & Kaiser, 2003; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Similar results have been reported in Australia (6%- 10%) (Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2007; McLeod & McKinnon, 2007), and Northern Ireland (up to 26%) (Hyland, Ní Mháille, Lodge, & McGilloway, 2014). Thus, while low levels of behaviour problems are considered a normal feature of development, problems that are pervasive and persistent across environments are not. These behaviours require targeted efforts in order to adequately support young children in developing social, emotional and behavioural competence.

The terminology used to describe difficulties in the social, emotional and behavioural adaptation of children is varied and includes numerous combinations of terms such as disordered, disturbed, and maladjusted with variations of emotional, behavioural and social problems (e.g., emotional disturbance; Kauffman and Landrum, 2013). The Croatian professional and scientific terminology uses the umbrella term ‘behavioural disorders’ (National Pedagogical Standard for Preschool Education, 2008, Primary and Secondary Education of Students with Disabilities Regulation, 2015). The behaviour of children who are seen as having behavioural disorders is divided in terms of being predominantly active and externalizing or internalized or predominantly passive (Bouillet & Uzelac, 2007). The externalizing behaviours include insufficient control of
behaviour and other-directed behaviours such as defiance, hyperactivity, running away, aggression, and destructiveness. Excessive controlled and self-directed behaviour such as fearfulness and anxiety, withdrawal, depression, apathy, laziness and the like are described as internalized behaviours. More recent studies have focused on the term "risk behaviour" to describe children and young people who are faced with many problems that threaten their positive development and successful adaptation to the society in which they live (Basic, 2000; Baldwin, 2000; Riele 2006).

In order to support teachers in both prevention and response efforts to address behaviour problems among young students, it is important to have a clear understanding of the types of problems teachers are likely to encounter. In some studies, specific behaviours related to school readiness have been examined (e.g., staying on task, following directions; McClelland & Morrison, 2003; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000). Others have examined behaviours to determine if student behaviour fits profiles of children referred for clinical evaluation and mental health support (e.g., Child Behavior Checklist; Myers, 2012). In the present investigation, we asked teachers about the occurrence of a variety of classroom behaviours that might directly interfere with teaching practices and require attention from the teacher to get the student back on track and participating in the learning task.

A major hallmark of early education is the development of positive social behaviours. One set of practices known as positive behaviour supports (PBS) has been implemented in over 7,000 schools (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on PBS) to address issues related to school climate and the development of prosocial behaviour. PBS practices can be implemented with relatively simple changes to teaching routines and research has supported its use in the development of positive behaviours across school settings. Notably, in elementary schools the practices of PBS have led to significant reductions in office discipline referrals and suspensions for problem behaviours (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010). The challenging behaviours examined in the current study were behaviours that could be addressed through PBS practices.

METHOD

The aim of the current study was: (1) to examine teachers' perceptions of the occurrence of challenging behaviours found in preschool classrooms, (2) determine the latent structure of the measure used to assess challenging behaviour, and (3) determine the possible relation between teachers' perception of the occurrence of challenging behaviour and the demographic characteristics of age, work experience, class size and number of children with challenging behaviour, and experience with children with challenging behaviour.
Participants

A sample of 204 preschool teachers from urban preschools in Rijeka, Croatia participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 24 to 62 years old (SD = 43), with an average of 21 years of experience (SD = 8.64). Considering gender, 196 reported female and 1 male. The average class size was 21 students (SD = 4.71), with an average of two children with challenging behaviour in each group (M=2.39; SD=.90; Min=0, Max=4), and 74% of the teachers reported having had prior experience working with children with challenging behaviour.

Socio-Demographic Information. Teachers completed a profile indicating socio-demographic characteristics related to age, work experience, class size, the number of children with challenging behaviour, and previous experience in working with these children.

Measures

Challenging Behaviours of Preschool Children Scale consisted of 14 items including items related to externalizing behaviour problems (e.g., physical aggression, blaming others, disturbing others’ work) and internalizing behaviour problems (e.g., difficulty maintaining attention to task, difficulty engaging in shared play). Teachers reported the frequency of their observations of these challenging behaviours in their classrooms using a five-point scale of 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (occasionally), 4 (often) to 5 (always). The internalizing and externalizing subscales demonstrated adequate internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α= 0.81 and α=0.88, respectively).

Procedure

A letter was first sent to the head teacher at each preschool to introduce the purpose of the research and request permission for teachers to be invited to participate in the survey. Once approval was granted, surveys were distributed to the teachers by an associate of the kindergarten. The preschool teachers were provided instructions to fill out the survey and were given a window of two weeks to complete them. The completed surveys were collected by the associate and delivered to the researchers.

Data processing methods

Basic statistical indicators (mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum score) for all variables are calculated. Exploratory factor analysis was used to determine whether there were underlying latent variables that could explain the variability of answers on the Challenging Behaviours of Preschool Children Scale. To examine the relation between factors and between factors and continuous variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As can be seen in Table 1, teachers reported nine of the fourteen behaviours with means falling between the ratings for 'occasionally' to 'often' range. Just over half (six) of the eleven externalizing problem behaviours and all of the internalizing items received ratings above the 'occasionally' rating. In general, the overall mean rating for the items related to internalizing behaviours was higher than the overall mean for externalizing behaviours. However, the externalizing items of does not obey the rules and established arrangements, physical aggression toward peers, very noisy, deliberately interferes with others and difficult to control emotions all received higher ratings than the highest ratings for any of the internalizing behaviours (i.e., 3.19). The lowest ratings were also for externalizing behaviours; for verbal and physical aggression towards teachers with ratings falling between 'never' and 'rarely'. Thus, while preschool teachers do observe both internalizing and externalizing behaviours, a number of externalizing behaviours are the most frequently observed.

Table 1. Mean Teacher Ratings of the Challenging Behaviours of Preschool Children Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Externalizing behaviours</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not obey the rules and established</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits physical aggression toward peers</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very noisy</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberately interferes with others</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to control emotions</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student must be a winner</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuses to follow instructions of teacher (I will not)</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constantly &quot;blames&quot; others for their own actions</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits verbal aggression toward peers</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits verbal aggression toward teacher</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits physical aggression toward teacher</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing behaviours</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to maintain attention in solving tasks</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to participate in shared play with peers</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a hard time &quot;fitting in&quot; among their peers</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Previous research examining childrens' externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems as perceived by preschool teachers in Croatia is scarce. As the current measure was exploratory in nature, exploratory factor analysis was used. The factor analysis with the maximum likelihood (ML) extraction method and oblimin rotation using the scree plot criteria suggested two significant factors explaining 47.49% (32.14%; 15.31%) and eigen values for the two extracted factors were 5.54 and 1.99 respectively.

Table 2. Factor Structure of Challenging Behaviours of Preschool Children Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR externalizing behaviours</th>
<th>h²</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits verbal aggression toward peers</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very noisy</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits physical aggression toward peers</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student must “be a winner”</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constantly “blames” others for their actions</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberately interferes with others</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to control emotions</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits physical aggression toward preschool teacher</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits verbal aggression toward preschool teacher</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not obey the rules and established arrangements</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuses to follow instructions of teacher (I will not .)</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR internalizing behaviours</th>
<th>h²</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to participate in shared play with peers</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>-.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a hard time “fitting in” among their peers</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>-.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to maintain attention in solving tasks</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>-.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

h²- communalities; β-factorial loading greater than 0.3

The correlation between the extracted factors was .37, indicating dependent constructs. The factor loadings presented in the pattern matrix (Table 2) indicate that the first factor can be labelled as externalizing behaviours as it includes verbal and physical aggression toward peers, disruptive behaviours and emotional instability.

The second factor could be labelled as internalizing behaviours as it includes childrens’ difficulties in interaction with peers in shared play and other activities, and to maintain attention in solving tasks. These components had negative loadings on the factor.

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine correlations between perceived externalizing and internalizing behaviours and sociodemographic characteristics of preschool teachers including age, work experience, class size, as well as the number of children with challenging behaviours and previous experience in working with children with challenging behaviours. Small correlations between
internalizing behaviours and the number of students in groups \( (r = .19, p < .05) \), and externalizing behaviours and experience in working with children with challenging behaviour \( (r = .27, p < .01) \) were found. Preschool teachers who worked with larger groups of children perceived more internalizing behaviours among their students. This association seems counterintuitive in that internalizing behaviours are generally less visible than externalizing behaviours and therefore might be harder to identify in a larger group of students. However, this finding may be due to that when teachers have more students, they have less opportunity to interact with individual students in ways that would prevent the internalizing behaviours from occurring (e.g., problems with fitting in with their peers). The finding that teachers with experience in working with children with challenging behaviour observed more externalizing behaviours may be due to a heightened awareness of externalizing behaviours stemming from prior experience with these behaviours.

None of the correlations between perceived externalizing and internalizing behaviours and the sociodemographic characteristics of age, years of teaching experience, and the number of children with challenging behaviours in the group were statistically significant. These teacher characteristics were not significantly associated with their perceptions of challenging behaviours in their classrooms. However, in future research these results should be verified to determine which factors, if any, influence teachers' perceptions of the problem behaviours they observe as challenging in their classrooms.

Behaviour is an early indicator of future success across many domains of development. Early problems have been associated with school failure as well as social and emotional difficulties that persist throughout life. Importantly, the early signs of behavioural problems are those that should be seen as calls for action by educators because the children exhibiting these problems are at increased risk for the occurrence of more serious disorders in behaviour, negative lifestyles and poor health in the future (Trbovic Koller, 1998).

While studies of the incidence of challenging behaviours have not yet been systematically addressed in Croatia, some do exist. For example, it has been estimated that approximately 15% of children and youth are at “high risk” for having behavioural disabilities in Croatia and 10% are at “very high risk” (Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe: Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia, 2007). The current investigation points out that there is at least some indication of problems as early as preschool in Croatian schools, and that these problems are both internalizing and externalizing in nature. Regardless of the onset of symptoms later in life, good social skills at an early age are associated with a lower incidence of psychopathological symptoms at a later age (Burt et al., 2008; Masten et al., 2006, according to Bournstein, 2010). Thus, preschool educators have the unique opportunity of providing both preventative and early intervention supports to the youngest of our student populations.
to assist them in the development of important social competencies (e.g., Rosenthal & Gatta, 2010). As previously mentioned, implementation of Positive Behaviour Supports has been noted as a positive practice for improving social behaviours across school settings (Bradshaw et al., 2010) and would be a logical next step for assisting Croatian preschool teachers in the area of challenging behaviour.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that preschool teachers in Croatia have the opportunity to observe challenging behaviour of both an internalizing and externalizing nature among their students. The present investigation begins to present a picture of the range of some of the challenging behaviours that these teachers encounter. This information provides an important foundation for preschool teachers to aim their efforts when intervening to prevent the development of challenging behaviour. As social and emotional skills are critical to success throughout life, preschool provides an early avenue for assisting children in this critical area of development. As this area of research has not been fully explored in Croatian schools, further studies are needed to gain a clearer understanding of the range of behaviour problems that preschool teachers encounter in their classrooms and the variables that influence these problem behaviours.

References


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**Sažetak**

Zahtjevna ponašanja sastavni su dio tipičnog razvoja djece tijekom ranog djetinjstva, ali ona također mogu biti rani pokazatelji socio-emocionalnih problema. Obzirom da zahtjevna ponašanja imaju snažan utjecaj na kasni razvoj i dobrobit djeteta, važno ih je identificirati što ranije te započeti s ranom intervencijom i prevencijom. Odgojitelji imaju značajnu ulogu u identifikaciji i prevenciji ovih ponašanja. Cilj je ovog istraživanja bio ispiti učestalost zahtjevnih ponašanja u odgojno-obrazovnim skupinama opaženim od strane odgojitelja.

Uzorak čini 204 odgojitelja zaposlenih u Dječjem vrtiću „Rijeka“, koji su ispunjavali Skalu zahtjevnih ponašanja predškolske djece, kreirana za potrebe ovog istraživanja. Faktorskom analizom dobivena su dva faktora: (1) internaliziranih i (2) eksternaliziranih ponašanja, dobrih metrijskih karakteristika.

Odgojitelji izvještavaju o većoj pojavnosti internaliziranih od eksternaliziranih ponašanja. Ipak, pet eksternaliziranih ponašanja imaju najveću učestalost, i u odnosu na internalizirane. Stoga, iako odgojitelji opažaju i internalizirana i eksternalizirana ponašanja, učestalije zapadaju eksternalizirana ponašanja u odgojno-obrazovnim skupinama.

**Ključne riječi:** eksternalizirana i internalizirana ponašanja, odgojiteljska percepcija, vrtić

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