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Strengths That Sustain: Psychological Resources Underpinning Mental Health and Life Satisfaction in Early Childhood Educators

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Previous research has clearly demonstrated that early childhood educators' mental health and life satisfaction substantially shape both learning and teaching processes in kindergarten, as well as children's developmental outcomes. Accordingly, examining the levels and determinants of positive mental health and life satisfaction among early childhood educators is of critical importance. The present study investigates the predictive roles of personality traits, social and emotional competencies, and psychological capital (optimism and resilience) in explaining educators' positive mental health and life satisfaction, given the well-established effects of these factors on the quality of early childhood educational practice. The sample comprised N = 310 early childhood educators from Primorje – Gorski Kotar County in Croatia. As criterion variables, positive mental health was measured by the Mental Health Continuum Scale and life satisfaction with the Satisfaction With Life Scale. Aside from this, personality was measured by Ten Item Personality Inventory, social and emotional competencies by the CASEL scale, optimism by the Revised Life Orientation Test and resilience by the Brief Resilience Scale as predictors. Correlation analyses yielded the expected significant and positive associations among the investigated variables. Four regression analyses identified expected significant predictors. Emotional stability, openness to experience, self-awareness, self-management, and optimism are determined as significant predictors for psychological well-being. Extraversion, emotional stability, self-management, and optimism are significant predictors for social well-being. The findings are discussed in terms of their theoretical and practical implications, with particular emphasis on directions for future research, the development and refinement of lifelong learning programmes, and the advancement of high-quality kindergarten practice.

Keywords: early childhood educators' personality; life satisfaction; positive mental health; psychological capital; social and emotional competencies

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Vrline, ki ohranjajo pri življenju: psihološki viri, ki podpirajo duševno zdravje in zadovoljstvo z življenjem pri vzgojiteljih

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Dozdajšnje raziskave so jasno pokazale, da duševno zdravje in zadovoljstvo z življenjem pri vzgojiteljih bistveno vplivata na procese učenja in poučevanja v vrtcu ter na razvojne dosežke otrok. Zato je preučevanje ravni in determinant pozitivnega duševnega zdravja ter zadovoljstva z življenjem med vzgojitelji ključnega pomena. Ta študija preučuje napovedno vlogo osebnostnih lastnosti, socialnih in čustvenih kompetenc ter psihološkega kapitala (optimizma in odpornosti) pri pojasnjevanju pozitivnega duševnega zdravja in zadovoljstva z življenjem pri vzgojiteljih ob upoštevanju dobro potrjenih učinkov teh dejavnikov na kakovost prakse vzgojiteljev. Vzorec je obsegal 310 vzgojiteljev iz Primorsko-Goranske županije na Hrvaškem. Kot merilni spremenljivki smo pozitivno duševno zdravje merili z lestvico kontinuuma duševnega zdravja, zadovoljstvo z življenjem pa z lestvico zadovoljstva z življenjem. Poleg tega smo kot napovedne spremenljivke merili osebnost z inventarjem osebnosti desetih postavk, socialne in čustvene kompetence z lestvico CASEL, optimizem z revidiranim testom življenjske usmerjenosti ter odpornost s kratko lestvico odpornosti. Korelacijske analize so pokazale pričakovane pomembne in pozitivne povezave med preučevanimi spremenljivkami. S štirimi regresijskimi analizami smo prepoznali pričakovane pomembne napovedne spremenljivke. Čustvena stabilnost, odprtost za izkušnje, samozavedanje, samoupravljanje in optimizem so bili opredeljeni kot pomembne napovedne spremenljivke psihološkega dobrega počutja. Ekstraverzija, čustvena stabilnost, samoupravljanje in optimizem so pomembni napovedniki socialnega dobrega počutja. Ugotovitve so obravnavane z vidika njihovih teoretičnih in praktičnih implikacij s posebnim poudarkom na smernicah za prihodnje raziskave, razvoju in izpopolnjevanju programov vseživljenjskega učenja ter na napredku visokokakovostne prakse v vrtcih.

Ključne besede: osebnost vzgojiteljev, zadovoljstvo z življenjem, pozitivno duševno zdravje, psihološki kapital, socialne in čustvene competence

Introduction

Regardless of the socio-cultural context, contemporary educational discourse continues to grapple with balancing children's educational and developmental achievements with the realisation of their full potential (Cefai et al., 2022). Children's well-being is both a prerequisite for realising this potential and an important outcome of the educational process. Within this context, early childhood educators play a pivotal role. Their well-being mediates the relationship between children's well-being and their developmental and educational outcomes (Cefai et al., 2021). As reflected in the phrase "*Well teachers, well students"* (McCallum & Price, 2010, p. 1), the quality of educational practice and children's learning and well-being are closely linked to educators' mental health. Consequently, educators require systematic support to cope effectively with the demands of their profession and to maintain their own psychological well-being (Cavioni et al., 2020).

The educational process is inherently dynamic and shaped by multiple interacting factors, with educators' personal characteristics and well-being exerting a substantial influence on classroom and group dynamics. Over the past four decades, the locus of responsibility for well-being has increasingly shifted from collective systems toward individual responsibility (Wyn, 2009). At the same time, rapid digitalisation has expanded access to information about societal change and strategies for promoting well-being. Despite these developments, educational systems continue to show limited effectiveness in fostering learning in the affective domain and supporting children's well-being, particularly during sensitive developmental transitions such as adjustment to kindergarten (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2024). These challenges highlight the need for systematic research into the evolving demands of contemporary education, with particular attention to identifying the factors that promote positive mental health and well-being among early childhood educators and translating this knowledge into evidence-based educational practice.

Positive Mental Health and Life Satisfaction in Early Childhood Educators

Mental health is a concept that covers two extremes: good (positive) mental health and impaired (negative) mental health, which aligns with the Mental Health Continuum (MHC) model (Keyes, 2002). According to this model, mental health and mental illness are two related but distinct parts of a continuum. The MHC model features the side representing optimal mental health, called ‚flourishing,' and the side representing low mental health, called

‚languishing,' with moderate states in between. According to this understanding of mental health, it is illustrated as a dynamic rather than a fixed state. When measuring mental health, most measures have focused on mental illness (Keyes, 2002, 2006). In contrast, the current MHC model highlights well-being and the positive side of the continuum. It includes three basic components of human well-being: emotional well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being. The hedonic component, called emotional well-being by Keyes, is a well-studied aspect of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1985) and it reflects positive emotions. The eudemonic component includes both psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) and social well-being (Keyes, 2002). Psychological well-being refers to an individual's subjective assessment of optimal functioning (both intrapersonal and interpersonal) reflecting autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989), while social well-being (Keyes, 2002) refers to the individual perception of one's relationships with others and social groups reflecting social functioning that includes acceptance, actualisation, contribution, coherence and integration. A high level of all these components indicates individual flourishing.

Although positive mental health encompasses subjective (hedonic) well-being, the approach of examining it as a separate variable provides a more detailed insight into human life satisfaction. This is all the more important for the study of educators' life satisfaction which represents the overall evaluation of a person's life as a cognitive component of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1985). The level of life satisfaction assessed in this way is the result of a comparison of life conditions (i.e. achievements) with the standards the individual has set for defining a good life (i.e. expectations). Nakamura et al. (2022) point out that people make this evaluation based on the factors that are most important to them. Although there are more studies on teachers' job satisfaction (Dağlı & Baysal, 2017; Hongying, 2007; Hoque et al., 2023; Sahito & Vaisanen, 2020), previous research on their life satisfaction has shown that it is significantly positively associated with positive emotions, positive thinking and relationships, and higher mental health (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2013).

Early Childhood Educators' Personality Traits, Social-Emotional Competencies and Psychological Capital

Given the complexity of interactions among all participants in the educational process, as well as the principles, goals, and values underpinning institutional early childhood education, high-quality educational practice depends not only on educators' professional competencies but also on their personal

characteristics (Devjak et al., 2021; Shumetu Taye et al., 2025). The teaching profession is inherently demanding, making educators' well-being, competencies, and personality traits fundamental to the quality of educational practice. Such practice is more likely to be achieved when educators experience positive mental health, perceive their work as meaningful, and feel supported in their professional roles and relationships (Drobnič, 2023; Jurčec et al., 2023). Against this background, the present study examines the contribution of educators' personality traits, social-emotional competencies, and psychological capital operationalised through optimism and resilience, to positive mental health and life satisfaction (Luthans et al., 2004).

Personality traits play an important role in the educational process, regardless of whether it concerns children or early childhood educators (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2013). The majority of research utilised the Big Five model and showed elevated levels of all personality traits (extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience) except for neuroticism, which is in line with their professional role (Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2016; Tatalović Vorkapić & Peloza, 2017).

Previous research has consistently demonstrated the importance of high levels of social-emotional competence among early childhood educators. This includes the ability to recognise and regulate their own emotions, understand and respond to the emotions and needs of others, build and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions when addressing professional challenges. These five dimensions are recognisable within the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) model (CASEL, 2003), which is the most widespread and most frequently used theoretical model of social and emotional competencies (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014). Socially and emotionally competent teachers are more effective in empowering children's social-emotional development and learning (Cefai et al., 2022).

Moreover, two dimensions of psychological capital, namely teachers' optimism and resilience, have also been shown in previous research to be very important attributes. Besides confidence and hope, dimensions of optimism and resilience present the main aspects of positive psychological capital that should be taken into greater consideration while thinking about an institution's capital, i.e. "resources withdrawn from consumption that are invested for future anticipated returns" (Luthans et al., 2004, p. 45). Higher optimism and resilience lead toward higher institutional satisfaction and productivity. Teachers' tendencies to perceive things more often as positive rather than negative (Scheier & Carver, 1987) and their ability to continue to function smoothly despite the adversity they encounter in life (Masten 2018) are significant for higher quality teaching

(Marušić et al., 2024). Furthermore, if teachers are positive role models for children, they are able to teach them optimistic thinking and resilience more effectively (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Rijavec et al., 2008).

There is an evident lack of research studies that deal with positive mental health in early childhood educators in Croatia and worldwide. Most of the previous studies focused on educators' stress, burnout and some aspects of their well-being (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2013). On the other hand, Keyes (2007) demonstrated that the absence of mental illness does not imply the presence of mental health since these are related but distinct constructs. Even though there are more studies on educators' life satisfaction, it is of utmost importance to explore it further, both in and of itself as well as its determinants. Positive mental health and life satisfaction showed similar positive relations with personality, social-emotional competencies, and psychological capital. Neuroticism is the main correlate of psychopathology, while extraversion and agreeableness are positively related to positive mental health and life satisfaction (Braun et al., 2020; Ignat & Clipa, 2012; Khan et al., 2023; Laranjeira & Querido, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020).

Study Aim, Problems, and Hypotheses

The main objective of this research is to analyse the predictive role of early childhood educators' personality, social-emotional competencies, and psychological capital regarding their positive mental health and life satisfaction. Specific research tasks explore: (1) the levels of educators' positive mental health, life satisfaction, personality traits, social-emotional competencies and psychological capital (optimism and resilience); (2) the relationships between educators' positive mental health, life satisfaction, personality traits, social-emotional competencies and psychological capital (optimism and resilience), and their socio-demographic variables; and (3) the possible predictors' roles of educators' personality traits, social-emotional competencies and psychological capital (optimism and resilience) in their positive mental health and life satisfaction as criterion variables. Based on previous studies, it was hypothesised: (1) to confirm previously determined levels of focused variables with (2) significant relationships between them, and (3) to determine personality traits, social-emotional competencies and psychological capital (optimism and resilience) as significant predictors of educators' positive mental health and life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

A total of N = 310 early childhood educators from Primorje – Gorski Kotar County in Croatia participated in this study. All but one participant were female. They were recruited to participate from 24 kindergartens in 15 towns, with the majority of participants from Rijeka (59.4%, n = 184). Their average age was M = 37.64 (SD = 10.69), ranging from 22 to 69 years of age; and their average working experience was M = 12.7 (SD = 10.88), ranging from 6 months to 48 years of working experience. 71%, n = 220 of them were working in mixed-age groups and 28.1%, n = 87 of them in nurseries. 61.6%, n = 191 reported having a Bachelor's degree, 32.6%, n = 101 of them a Master's degree, while 2.9%, n = 9 of them were still studying. This can be considered a cluster sample, since all kindergartens that agreed to participate are located near the Faculty of Teacher Education, with whom previous cooperation was established within the mentioned university-funded scientific project.

Instruments

Six instruments for gathering data in a form of self-rating scales were applied in this study. These scales were administered according to their adapted versions in the Croatian language.

The 14-item Mental Health Continuum Short Form scale, MHC-SF (Vuletić et al., 2018) measures positive mental health that consists of three well-being dimensions: emotional (three items covering positive affect and life satisfaction), psychological (six items covering Ryff's six dimensions of psychological well-being: autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth and purpose in life), and social (five items covering acceptance, actualisation, contribution, coherence and integration). Participants were instructed to rate how they felt in the past month, using the six-point Likert scale (*0–Never, 1-Once or twice, 2-About once a week, 3-2 or 3 times a week, 4-Almost every day, 5-Every day*).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale, SWLS (Rijavec et al., 2008) consists of five items that measure the respondents' overall satisfaction with their life and represent a subjective assessment of their own life based on their own criteria. Subjects provided self-ratings on the 5-point Likert scale (*1-strongly disagree* to *5-strongly agree*).

The Ten-Item Personality Inventory, TIPI (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2016) is a questionnaire designed as a short version of the Big Five Inventory that measures the dimensions of the 5-factor model. The questionnaire consists of

10 items, and each two of them represents one of the personality dimensions: extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. Subjects rated their agreement with items on a seven-point Likert scale (*1-strongly disagree* to *7-strongly agree*). Due to its brevity, which affects internal consistency reliability, it is recommended to check the test-retest reliability or the Cronbach alpha for the whole scale (for details, please see Gosling et al., 2003).

CASEL-The Personal SEL Reflection Scale (CASEL, 2021) was back-translated independently by the author for this study. It is developed as a professional learning tool to help adults understand and contextualise the five SEL competencies. This tool is rather similar to the one that has already been used in Croatia (Maglica et al., 2022), but since the emphasis was on self-reflection rather than on the growth of SEL competencies, i.e. the process rather than the state, this tool was chosen. It has 46 items on which respondents reflect on their SEL competencies using a 4-point Likert scale (*1-very difficult; 2-difficult; 3-easy; 4-very easy*). The questionnaire consists of 5 subscales: self-awareness (9 items), self-management (9 items), social awareness (9 items), relationship skills (10 items), and responsible decision-making (9 items).

The Brief Resilience Scale, BRS (Slišković & Burić, 2018) consists of six items that measure the ability to bounce back from adverse situations. Participants rated themselves on a five-point Likert scale *(1-I completely disagree, to 5-I completely agree*).

Dispositional optimism was measured with the Life Orientation Test-Revised, LOT-R (Rijavec et al., 2008) and has six items on which participants rated themselves using a six-point Likert scale (*1-I completely disagree to 5-I completely agree*).

Research Design

This study is based on correlational research design. Early childhood educators whose principals agreed to collaborate within the university-funded project participated in this study. Having established verbal consent from the kindergarten principals and early childhood educators, a printed set of scales was distributed within kindergartens, and after 10-15 days, they were sent back to the researcher. The educators' anonymity and confidentiality were assured, since only the information on the name of the kindergarten was known to the researcher. The research was approved by the Ethical Board of the faculty (Klasa: 641-01/25-01/01, UrBroj: 2170-1-38-03-25-8). Collected data were statistically analysed in JASP 0.17.2.1 using descriptive, correlation and regression analyses.

Results

First, the levels of early childhood educators' positive mental health, life satisfaction, personality traits, social-emotional competencies, and psychological capital (optimism and resilience) were explored. Descriptive results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Parameters for Early Childhood Educators' focused variables

		Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Mental health continuum	Psychological well-being	4.37	.77	-.51	.09	.797
	Social well-being	4.08	.93	-.41	-.22	.855
	Emotional well-being	4.90	.87	-.93	.63	.866
Life satisfaction		3.77	.71	-.64	.12	.808
Personality traits	Extraversion	4.69	1.41	-.27	-.58	.660
	Agreeableness	5.81	1.05	-.96	.69	
	Conscientiousness	6.23	.91	-1.25	1.04	
	Emotional stability	5.60	1.30	-.86	-.12	
	Openness to experience	6.07	.91	-1.27	1.34	
Social-emotional competencies	Self-awareness	3.38	.37	-.28	-.19	.795
	Self-management	3.03	.41	.04	.00	.798
	Social awareness	3.31	.36	-.24	.39	.782
	Relationship skills	3.29	.39	-.18	-.73	.823
	Responsible decision making	3.17	.40	.00	-.22	.843
Psychological capital	Optimism	3.82	.71	-.30	-.46	.782
	Resilience	3.13	.63	-.24	.59	.742

Determined means on three mental health dimensions showed that a high level of emotional well-being early childhood educators experience every day, and psychological and social well-being almost every day. A criterion for high/moderate was set according to the measurement scale of each variable. For example, for the MHC scale the measurement scale has six levels ranging from *0–Never to 5-Every day*. Educators rated their life satisfaction as moderate to high, the same as their optimism. Their resilience was rated as moderate. Regarding their personality traits, they showed the highest rating on conscientiousness, then openness and agreeableness, which are followed by the levels of emotional stability and extraversion. All the social-emotional competencies were self-rated very similar, at the level of being able to easily show and experience them. Going from the highest to the lowest rated levels, these are

the following social-emotional competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and finally self-management. Based on the Skewness and Kurtosis results, all variables' distribution satisfied the criteria for parametric statistics.

Second, the results of correlation analyses between early childhood educators' positive mental health, life satisfaction, personality traits, social-emotional competencies and psychological capital (optimism and resilience), and their socio-demographic variables (age, working experience, working position, and level of education), can be seen in Table 2. The highest correlations were determined between three mental health continuum dimensions: emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

Table 2

Pearson's correlation coefficients with statistical significance of all focused and socio-demographic variables

		Psychological well-being	Social well-being	Emotional well-being	Life satisfaction
Mental health continuum	Psychological well-being	1			
	Social well-being	.704***	1		
	Emotional well-being	.713***	.639***	1	
Life satisfaction		,450***	.456***	.568***	1
Social-emotional competencies	Self-awareness	.451***	.381***	.335***	,307***
	Self-management	.506***	.489***	.412***	,386***
	Social awareness	.309***	.259***	.189***	,191***
	Relationship skills	.390***	.363***	.271***	,250***
	Responsible decision making	.392***	.370***	.279***	,293***
Psychological capital	Optimism	.486***	.397***	.533***	,589***
	Resilience	.364***	.384***	.402***	,387***
Personality traits	Extraversion	.287***	.312***	.208***	,213***
	Agreeableness	.196***	.139*	.241***	,175**
	Conscientiousness	.304***	.219***	.211***	,239***
	Emotional stability	.438***	.393***	.462***	,433***
	Openness to experience	.369***	.259***	.261***	,258***
Age		.007	-.062	-.009	-.046
Working experience		.039	-.019	.021	-.002
Working in nurseries (1) or mixed-age groups (2)		-.085	.036	.001	-.060
Level of education		.044	.149**	.093	.077

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p <. 001

Significant positive correlations were determined between life satisfaction and all three mental health dimensions. Regarding the relationship

between five social-emotional competencies and mental health dimensions and life satisfaction, positive significant correlations between them were determined. Optimism and resilience also showed a significant positive correlation with all three mental health dimensions and life satisfaction. All five personality traits showed significant positive correlations with all three mental health dimensions and life satisfaction, with lower levels of correlation between agreeableness and those criterion variables. Regarding the relationship between socio-demographic variables, it could be seen that only a higher level of education is significantly positively correlated with a higher level of social well-being.

Third, the exploration of possible predictors of three mental health dimensions and life satisfaction among early childhood educators resulted in four separate three-step hierarchical regression analyses (Table 3). The steps in the hierarchical regression analyses reflect the order of inserting the variables in the analyses based on the previously presented theoretical models and empirical studies.

Overall, four regression analyses showed that significant predictors of three dimensions of positive mental health are for psychological well-being (emotional stability, openness to experience, self-awareness, self-management and optimism), for social well-being (extraversion, emotional stability, self-management and optimism), and for emotional well-being (emotional stability and optimism). Significant predictors of life satisfaction are emotional stability and optimism.

The first hierarchical regression analysis for psychological well-being as criterion variable showed that at a first step personality traits explained 29.1% of the variance of psychological well-being. In the second step of the first regression analysis an additional 11% of variance was explained. Finally, in the third step an additional 5.3% variance was explained. The final model explained overall 45.4% variance of psychological well-being, and the final regression equation was significant $F_{(12,296)} = 20.506$, $p < .001$) with emotional stability ($\beta = .149$, $p < .01$), openness to experience ($\beta = .1018$, $p < .05$), self-awareness ($\beta = .155$, $p < .01$), self-management ($\beta = .132$, $p < .05$), and optimism ($\beta = .256$, $p < .001$), as significant predictors of criterion variables.

The second hierarchical regression analysis for social well-being as the criterion variable showed that at a first step, personality traits explained 22.6% of the variance of social well-being. In the second step of the first regression analysis an additional 10.5% of variance was explained. Finally, in the third step an additional 3.5% variance was explained. The final model explained overall 36.6% variance of social well-being and the final regression equation was significant $F_{(12,296)} = 14.210$, $p < .001$), with three determined significant predictors:

extraversion (β = .123, $p < .05$), emotional stability (β = .120, $p < .05$), self-management (β = .196, $p < .01$) and optimism (β = .165, $p < .01$).

The third hierarchical regression analysis for emotional well-being as the criterion variable showed that at a first step, personality traits explained 24.8% of the variance of emotional well-being. In the second step of the third regression analysis an additional 5.5% of variance was explained. Finally, in the third step an additional 9.7% variance was explained. The final model explained overall 40.1% variance of emotional well-being and the final regression equation was significant $F_{(12,296)} = 16.488$, $p < .001$), with two final significant predictors: emotional stability (β = .183, $p < .01$) and openness (β = .328, $p < .001$).

The fourth hierarchical regression analysis for life satisfaction as the criterion variable showed that at a first step, personality traits explained 22.3% of the variance of life satisfaction. In the second step of the first regression analysis an additional 4.3% of variance and in the third step an additional 15.6% variance was explained. The final model explained overall 42.3% variance of life satisfaction, and the final regression equation was significant $F_{(12,296)} = 18.074$, $p < .001$), with two final significant predictors: emotional stability (β = .142, $p < .05$) and openness (β = .438, $p < .001$).

Table 3

Summary results of four hierarchical regression analyses for predicting psychological, social, emotional well-being, and life satisfaction

	Predictors variables	Criterion variables			
		Psychological well-being β	Social well-being β	Emotional well-being β	Life satisfaction β
Step 1	Extraversion	.155**	.218***	.106*	.106*
	Agreeableness	.000	-.006	.087	.009
	Conscientiousness	.109*	.054	.015	.073
	Emotional stability	.322***	.313***	.386***	.362***
	Openness to exp.	.195***	.092	.092	.098
	F(df), p R^2 (Adj. R^2)	$24.847_{(5.303)}$*** .291*** (.279)	$17.702_{(5.303)}$*** .226*** (.213)	$20.022_{(5.303)}$*** .248*** (.236)	$17.437_{(5.303)}$*** .223*** (.211)

	Predictors variables	Criterion variables			
		Psychological well-being β	Social well-being β	Emotional well-being β	Life satisfaction β
Step 2	Extraversion	.077	.140**	.055	.066
	Agreeableness	-.020	-.019	.077	.004
	Conscientiousness	.066	.008	-.014	.049
	Emotional stability	.243***	.214***	.321***	.303***
	Openness to exp.	.137**	.036	.052	.063
	Self-awareness	.213***	.132*	.166*	.124
	Self-management	.158*	.231***	.142*	.113
	Social awareness	-.041	-.097	-.095	-.039
	Relationship skills	.083	.108	.063	-.008
	Responsible decision making	.023	.046	.005	.068
	F(df), p	$19.920_{(10.298)}^{***}$	$14.734_{(10.298)}^{***}$	$12.984_{(10.298)}^{***}$	$10.823_{(10.298)}^{***}$
	R^2 (Adj. R^2)	.401*** (.381)	.331*** (.308)	.303*** (.280)	.266*** (.242)
	ΔR^2	.110 ***	.105 ***	.055 ***	.043 ***
Step 3	Extraversion	.071	.123*	.040	.055
	Agreeableness	-.030	-.022	.066	-.014
	Conscientiousness	.060	.011	-.018	.039
	Emotional stability	.149**	.120*	.183**	.142*
	Openness to exp.	.118*	.032	.032	.031
	Self-awareness	.155**	.085	.087	.025
	Self-management	.132*	.196**	.100	.070
	Social awareness	-.009	-.077	-.054	.016
	Relationship skills	.086	.107	.066	-.001
	Responsible decision making	.017	.056	.005	.058
	Optimism	.256***	.165**	.328***	.438***
	Resilience	.033	.123	.083	.055
	F(df), p	$20.506_{(12.296)}^{***}$	$14.210_{(12.296)}^{***}$	$16.488_{(12.296)}^{***}$	$18.074_{(12.296)}^{***}$
	R^2 (Adj. R^2)	.454*** (.432)	.366*** (.340)	.401*** (.376)	.423*** (.399)
	ΔR^2	.053***	.035 ***	.097 ***	.156 ***

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Discussion

In comparison with the findings from the validation study in our country and in other countries (Lee & Kim, 2024), it is determined that the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of early childhood educators who participated in this study is rather high, with emotional well-being showing as the highest. Overall, the educators feel happy, interested in life, and satisfied with their lives, and almost every day are socially and psychologically well. Regarding the previous research findings that educators who showed higher positive mental health have better overall mental health, have a more positive atmosphere in educational groups, more positive outcomes regarding children's development, and a lower level of absence from work (Jeon et al., 2018; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2023), this finding is a very positive one. Furthermore, determined levels of life satisfaction and optimism in this study are high, and the level of resilience is found to be moderate, which is aligned with previous research findings on early childhood educators (Cefai et al., 2022; Grazzani et al., 2020; Tatalović Vorkapić, 2013). As expected, all personality traits were found to be elevated, confirming previous findings (Burns et al., 2024; Ciceu et al., 2016; Jin & Kim, 2018; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2016; Wong & Li-Fang, 2013). Very similar levels of each of the five social-emotional competencies have been determined, i.e. from moderate to high levels. These results are similar to those from previous studies (Cefai et al., 2022), which is very important regarding overall well-being and professional development (Dixon, 2023).

Correlation analyses revealed significant associations among all variables. This finding is consistent with previous empirical research and theoretical models, which identify social-emotional competencies, optimism, life satisfaction, and resilience as key determinants of positive mental health (Cefai et al., 2022). Specifically, educators who were more proficient in recognising, expressing, and regulating their own emotions, understanding and empathising with others, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions also reported higher levels of optimism, life satisfaction, and resilience. Together, these characteristics represent core constructs of positive psychology and provide an important foundation for educators' positive mental health (Rijavec et al., 2008). Although all significant correlations were positive, associations between the positive psychology constructs and mental health were generally stronger than those involving personality traits. The strongest relationships were observed between emotional stability and all dimensions of mental health, as well as life satisfaction. This finding aligns with the Big Five personality framework, according to which emotionally stable individuals are

characterised by lower emotional reactivity and greater behavioural consistency when facing external demands (McCrae & Costa, 1991). Consequently, the stronger association between emotional stability and mental health, compared with the other personality traits, is theoretically expected. Similarly, the strong relationship between emotional stability and life satisfaction is consistent with previous findings (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2013). Regarding socio-demographic characteristics, only educational level was significantly associated with the dependent variable, i.e. early childhood educators with higher levels of education reported higher levels of social well-being. It is interesting to determine no significant correlation between educators' age and working experience with mental health and life satisfaction, since previous studies revealed that with the increase of age and working experience there is a significant decline of life satisfaction and optimism (Tatalović Vorkapić & Jelić Puhalo, 2016) and the significance increase of various mental health symptoms (Huang et al., 2020).

Regarding the primary study objective, the findings indicate that educators' personality traits, social-emotional competencies, and psychological capital significantly contribute to the prediction of positive mental health and life satisfaction. Among the Big Five personality traits, extraversion, openness, and emotional stability initially emerged as significant predictors of mental health dimensions and life satisfaction. However, after accounting for social-emotional competencies and psychological capital, extraversion remained a significant predictor only of social well-being, and openness only of psychological well-being, whereas emotional stability consistently predicted all three dimensions of positive mental health as well as life satisfaction. The prominent role of emotional stability is consistent with the strong associations observed in the correlation analyses and with previous research demonstrating its robust relationship with teachers' well-being and life satisfaction (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Given the biological underpinnings of personality traits, particularly emotional stability and extraversion, positive psychology interventions and well-being training for educators (Yeh & Barrington, 2023) can significantly enhance their positive mental health while indirectly equipping them with more effective strategies for coping with lower levels of emotional stability, extraversion, and openness. Beyond personality, two social-emotional competencies provided additional predictive value. Self-awareness significantly predicted psychological well-being, whereas self-management predicted both psychological and social well-being, corroborating previous findings (Ornaghi et al., 2023; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2023). In contrast, no social-emotional competency significantly predicted life satisfaction, which is consistent with the correlational findings reported in this study. The importance of social-emotional competencies for mental health and

well-being has been widely emphasised in existing theoretical models. At the same time, the fact that only two CASEL competencies emerged as significant predictors may reflect the substantial overlap among the competencies themselves. Their high intercorrelations should therefore be considered in future research when examining their unique contributions to educators' well-being.

Finally, looking at psychological capital as a possible predictor of mental health and life satisfaction among educators in this study, it can be observed that optimism showed a large percentage of independent contribution in explaining the variance of all three mental health dimensions and life satisfaction. The tendency to have more positive than negative expectations in life within positive thinking significantly predicts a higher level of psychological, social-emotional well-being in educators, and also their higher level of satisfaction with life. This finding is expected due to previously described theoretical models and prior research findings (Laranjeira & Queriodo, 2022; Mavi et al., 2024; Song, 2022). Numerous programs and interventions, especially those implemented in kindergartens and schools through a whole-school approach, clearly demonstrated the significant effect of optimistic thinking on overall mental health and well-being, both for teachers and children (Cefai et al., 2022). Finally, the absence lack of resilience being a significant predictor could be explained by its high collinearity with educators' optimism.

Conclusions

Prior to concluding on the determined results, a critical approach should be taken regarding several methodological aspects of this study. These include cluster sample, relatively small sample, and the application of TIPI that, due to its practicality (smaller number of items), has inherently lower reliability. Bearing these limitations in mind, future studies should be run with a more representative sample, a bigger sample and measures with a higher level of internal consistency reliability.

To summarise the results, as it was expected, personality traits (extraversion, openness and emotional stability), self-awareness and self-management, and optimism showed to be significant predictors of all three mental health dimensions: psychological, social-emotional well-being, and life satisfaction among early childhood educators who participated in this study. The research hypotheses are confirmed. Even though significant correlations were found between all studies' variables, not all of the predictors were found to be significant regarding dependent variables of positive mental health and life satisfaction. This could be explained by determined significant intercorrelations between predictors.

However, even though in the last 20 years, teachers' mental health and well-being have begun to have a much greater importance and focus in society (Hascher & Waber, 2021), there is still a lack of relevant empirical research on this topic. Therefore, the determined results are an important contribution since they are filling the research gap. Regarding the national context, this is the first study on early childhood educators that explores their mental health applying MHC-SF, since a validation study on MHC-SF was run on a student sample (Vuletić et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, this rare study in Croatia greatly contributes to the deeper understanding of positive mental health and life satisfaction in early childhood educators, in regards to their possible significant predictors. Bearing the theoretical models in mind, this article accentuates the importance of early childhood educators' mental health and life satisfaction in the sense that they are crucial for quality teaching practices. Furthermore, early childhood educators need to have opportunities for higher levels of support for their mental health and life satisfaction within enhanced initial study programs, life-long learning programs and programs of professional development. Therefore, all of these conclusions have a clear application in early and preschool care and education practice.

Ethical Statement

The research study was approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka, Croatia (Klasa: 641-01/25-01/01, UrBroj: 2170-1-38-03-25-8).

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due embargo period related with project duration, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

I have no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the author used the AI tool InstaText only for proofreading. The InstaText (https://instatext.io/editor/) was used on two occasions: December 1st, 2025, and June 29th, 2026, for editing the English language. InstaText is available in English and other major languages, with precise,

context-aware suggestions that have been significantly improved in the latest version. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accepts full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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