

Izvirni znanstveni članek/Article (1.01)

*Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84 (2024) 1, 165—176

Besedilo prejeto/Received:05/2024; sprejeto/Accepted:06/2024

UDK/UDC: 613.86:37.011.3-052

159.964:316.356.2:37.011.3-052

DOI: 10.34291/BV2024/01/Jerebic

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## **Promotion of Mental Health through Interdisciplinary Collaboration of Family Pedagogy and Family Therapy in the Education Programme from the Perspective of Students' Experience**

*Spodbujanje duševnega zdravja z interdisciplinarnim sodelovanjem družinske pedagogike in družinske terapije v študijskem programu z vidika doživljanja študentov*

*Abstract:* The mental health of children and adolescents is an important predictor of mental health in adulthood. Planning measures and interventions aimed at improving, strengthening, and protecting the mental health of young people is crucial. Promoting mental health and developing partnerships through interdisciplinary collaboration can significantly contribute to improving mental health, with educators playing an important role. We were interested in how the interdisciplinarity of family pedagogy and family therapy in education is experienced by students of Pedagogy. A qualitative study using a phenomenological approach involved 8 participants. The results suggest the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in the context of mental health promotion in the student education programme.

*Keywords:* mental health promotion, family pedagogy, family therapy, interdisciplinary cooperation

*Povzetek:* Duševno zdravje otrok in mladostnikov je pomemben napovednik duševnega zdravja v odrasli dobi. Načrtovanje ukrepov in intervencij za izboljšanje, krepitev in varovanje duševnega zdravja mladih je zato zelo pomembno. Promocija duševnega zdravja in obenem razvijanje partnerstva z interdisciplinarnim sodelovanjem lahko k izboljšanju duševnega zdravja pomembno prispevata, pri čemer imajo pomembno vlogo pedagogi. Zanimalo nas je, kako interdisciplinarnost družinske pedagogike in družinske terapije v izobraževanju doživljajo študenti pedagogike. V kvalitativni študiji smo uporabili fenomenološki pristop; sodelovalo je 8 udeležencev. Rezultati kažejo na pomembnost interdisciplinar-

nega sodelovanja v kontekstu spodbujanja duševnega zdravja v študijskem izobraževalnem programu.

*Ključne besede:* promocija duševnega zdravja, družinska pedagogika, družinska terapija, interdisciplinarno sodelovanje, študijski program

## 1. Introduction

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The mental health of children and adolescents is an important predictor of mental health in adulthood.<sup>1</sup> It is important to plan measures and interventions to improve, strengthen and protect the mental health of young people, preventing the development of problems and illnesses, and providing quick and effective help to those who need it, together with their families (Jeriček Klanšček, Hribar and Furman 2017, 27). Two of the important measures that should contribute to the improvement of mental health are the promotion of mental health and the development of partnerships and interdisciplinary cooperation (World Health Organization: Regional Office for Europe 2005), to which educators can make an important contribution. Mental health promotion is aimed at sound mental health, where its main goal is to enhance strengths and competencies (Antolič and Novak 2016, 317), so it is important to include all participants in the school environment, where the role of parents should also be taken into account. It is important to focus on the development of skills according to the holistic theory, which for the mental health of the school population assumes not only changes in behaviour and the acquisition of knowledge but also changes in attitudes, beliefs and values. Such programs often include experiential learning, classroom interaction, games, simulations, and group work. For optimal program impact, it is important to use a multimodal approach that includes teacher education, parent engagement, parent education, and community involvement (331–332). The quality of education of professionals in education and their professional development are key factors that influence development and progress in society. With their pedagogical behaviour, these professionals directly influence children, pupils, and students, who will be the bearers of social development in the future, and indirectly influence their parents and others who participate in their educational path (Polak, Gradišek and Marentič Požarnik 2024, 49). Educators must have a good understanding of the family and the family environment as well as education, and their ability to cooperate between families and educational institutions is crucial as well. Their role in kindergartens, schools, and other educational institutions is twofold. On the one hand, in their daily work, they encounter problems that originate from the family environment or must be solved together with the children's parents, which requires a good knowledge of the family situation. On the other hand, their role requires cooperation with educators and teachers, so that they learn how to establish better relations with parents. This important part of their work and the

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<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted as part of the project "Pedagogical Aspects of Promoting Mental Health in Children and Youth" (led by J. Zloковиć, supported by the University of Rijeka uniri-iskusni-drustv-23-25)

necessary competencies also require adequate education of future pedagogues (Maleš, Stričević, Ljubetič 2010, 35).

We wanted to meet these requirements with the interdisciplinary cooperation of family pedagogy and family therapy. In the 2023/2024 academic year, in collaboration between the University of Ljubljana and the University of Rijeka, specifically the Department of Marriage and Family Therapy and Psychology and Sociology of Religion at the Faculty of Theology and the Chair for Family Pedagogy and non-institutional upbringing and education of the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, we piloted the elective course “Partnership between parents and educational institutions” for Pedagogy students at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka.

Since it is the first such implementation of interdisciplinary cooperation between family therapy and family pedagogy, and as no research has yet been done, we wanted to examine the experience of second year postgraduate students in Pedagogy. We were interested in their lived experience.

## **2. Family Pedagogy at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka**

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At the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences University of Rijeka, the Chair for Family Pedagogy was established as a special department three decades ago. Within the department, Family Pedagogy has been taught as a compulsory subject for all pedagogy students since 1970, when the Faculty of Pedagogy was founded in Rijeka (predecessor of today's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences). With the transformation of the study system into the Bologna system (academic year 2010/2011; 3+2; undergraduate + master's studies), the subject of Family pedagogy continues as a compulsory subject in the second year of undergraduate studies for students of one- and two-subject pedagogy studies. The course has a decades-long tradition and has been implemented continuously since the establishment of the Faculty of Education (1970) until today at the Faculty Humanities and Social Sciences. In the student evaluations on the quality of teaching, which began to be implemented with the introduction of the Bologna system, this course belongs to the very top of positive evaluations. As part of the family pedagogy course, many scientific monographs and publications have been published to date, which have made a significant contribution to the scientific field. According to the University of Rijeka, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, this field has developed specifically through the scientific and teaching work of the late Prof. Bogoslav Potočnjak, prof. Vladimir Rosić and the current teacher of the course since 2000, Prof. Jasminka Zloković, PhD, who contributed to the internationalization of family pedagogy and this scientific field at numerous scientific conferences in her homeland and abroad (more: CROSB). Since 2000, several other compulsory courses (Relationships in the Family, Families and Children at Risk, Family and the Prevention of Risky and Anti-social Behaviour, Gerontology) and optional courses

(Violence in Adolescent Relationships, Partnership between Parents and Educational Institutions, Pedagogical Training of parents, etc.) have been created. The subject is continuously developing based on scientific knowledge and projects implemented by Prof. Zloković (especially Pedagogical aspects of relationships in the family, Strengthening families to promote positive relationships and family community) and since 2024 Pedagogical Aspects of Mental Health of Children and Young People, University of Rijeca (uniri-iskusni-drustv-23–25).

## **2.1 Partnership between Parents and Educational Institutions**

The higher education elective course Partnership between parents and educational institutions is implemented in the 2nd year (2nd semester) of the second-level master's programme of the study of Pedagogy. It was introduced into the curriculum in the 2010/2011 school year during the transition to the Bologna system of study. The course continues (corresponds) with previous courses taught by Prof. Zloković (Family Pedagogy, relationships in the Family, Family and Children at Risk, Family and Prevention of Risky and antisocial behaviours). In the content of the course, special attention is paid to the education of parents, the pedagogical culture of parents, parenting and the establishment of partnerships with educational institutions (kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, clubs, student dormitories, homes for children, etc.) as well as the family therapy. The course is worth 5 ECTS credits.

## **3. Family Therapy at the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana**

The Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana is the holder of the habilitation field of marriage and family therapy. The advantage of the teachers is that they are also clinicians/practitioners, which means that the program is closely connected to practice since providers such as therapists, supervisors, medical doctors, and psychiatrists perceive needs in the field and can include changes with the aim of improvement in programs that are being updated.

The very beginnings date back to 2001 when the postgraduate specialist study of Marital and Family Therapy began at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana, and in 2004 the master's and doctoral program in Marital and Family Therapy began. In 2007, the Association of Marriage and Family Therapists of Slovenia was founded, which brings together marriage and family therapists who practice the model of relational marriage and family therapy. In 2009, after the Bologna study reform, the second-level master's program in Marital and Family Studies (one of the majors is marital and family therapy), the advanced study program in Marital and Family Therapy (before the Bologna reform these were Specialist Studies) and the doctoral program in Marital and Family Therapy was first implemented. In the academic year 2023/2024, the first-level undergraduate study program Human and Interpersonal Relations, Major Marital and Family Therapy and Counselling, were first implemented.

The originator of family therapy at the Faculty of Theology is a triple PhD, Professor Emeritus Christian Gostečnik, who lived in the USA between 1982 and 1995 and, among other things, trained as a marriage and family therapist. In 1995, he returned to Slovenia and began clinical therapeutic work at the Franciscan Family Center and together with his colleagues started activities for the launch of an accredited study of marriage and family therapy, the first of its kind in Slovenia (Možina 2016, 171). He is the author of more than 30 domestic and foreign scientific monographs and numerous scientific articles and papers.

Family therapy is based on systems theory and emphasises the relational dimension. At the heart of family therapy is the therapeutic relationship, which facilitates the change of relational structures and through which new experiences are produced from which individuals can begin to change their lifestyles (Gostečnik 2010, 345–350). Family therapy, which is taught at the Faculty of Theology, practises internationally established criteria and has a scientifically and research-proven high success rate, which results from numerous scientific articles and completed doctorates. As part of their studies, family therapy students complete a form of personal therapeutic experience for a certain number of hours, which, among other things, enables them to develop greater self-awareness, which is the basis for emotional regulation and prevention of (occupational) stress, while at the same time a better understanding of themselves gives them the possibility to better understand others.

#### **4. Interdisciplinary Cooperation between Family Pedagogy and Family Therapy**

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Family pedagogy and family therapy differ in their approaches but share the broader goal of supporting families and individuals. The intersections between the two disciplines are important for the education of future educators and their skills in promoting the mental health of children and adolescents in collaboration with parents.

Through the interdisciplinary collaboration of both disciplines, we aimed to combine the theoretical knowledge of students with experiential learning in the elective course Partnership between parents and educational institutions at the Pedagogy programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. In the following we present the experiences of the students. More specifically, we wanted to understand how students experience the interdisciplinary delivery of the course.

#### **5. Method**

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##### **5.1 Participants**

The participants were students enrolled in the 2nd year of the second-level master's programme of the study of Pedagogy. The research included 8 students

of the elective course Partnership between parents and educational institutions aged from 23 to 25.

## 5.2 Tools

Qualitative research was used, where we studied the experiences of students using a phenomenological approach. The data was collected through an online interview in the 1Ka online tool.

## 5.3 Procedure

The condition for inclusion in the research was that student participants chose the elective course Partnership between parents and educational institutions, which was conducted in the second semester, from October 2023 to February 2024. The lecture was conducted by two professors, one from the field of family pedagogy, and the other from the field of family therapy. At the end of the semester, students were invited to participate in a survey where they were told that they could freely participate or decline their participation. Of the 9 students enrolled, 8 chose to participate in the research. They were given a structured interview with open-ended questions via the online tool 1ka, where we asked them about their experiences, such as how they experienced the teaching and learning on the elective course. Students were guaranteed anonymity.

In the following, the results obtained from the answers to the questions based on Giorgi and Giorgi (2008, 24) and Giorgi (2009, 128) were processed. We read the data in their entirety without interpretation. In the following, we have marked the text that has changed in meaning. We reread the text and determined the meaning units. We reread them and transformed each unit to make it more general. We came up with a shorter text than the initial data. We read the data again and then determined the phenomenon based on the previous analysis.

## 6. Results

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We wanted to examine the experience of students who had chosen the elective course Partnership between Parents and Educational Institutions. Qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed important topics that reflect their experience. In this paper, we present some cited parts of student experiences as illustrative examples and our findings. The detailed description of these themes with supporting data is presented below.

### 6.1 Study Materials

Participants highlighted the usefulness of the material and hope to be able to use it in their work.

- “The *materials* that were offered to us as additional content are *excellent*.”
- “We had the opportunity to *see and use different materials* that we will be able to use as educators.”

- “I especially liked the professor showing some *additional books, websites, etc. Interesting and useful*, very diverse and deeply covering the topic with theoretical and practical knowledge. I like them and hope to be able to use them in my work.”

## 6.2 The Connection between Theory and Practice

Several participants referred to the appropriate balance between theoretical and practical work.

- “There was a *good balance between the theoretical and practical parts* of the lessons. We deepened our knowledge of the theoretical basis and used it in various practical activities. It was great because we got an insight into concrete activities that are directly useful when working with children and parents.”

One participant indicated that it was convenient for them to visit external institutions.

- “I liked our *visits to kindergartens and other institutions*. There was a *nice balance between theoretical and practical parts* in each class and nothing was too little or too much. I really enjoyed it.”
- “There were not too many unnecessary theories, as is sometimes the case with other subjects, and we had the *opportunity to participate in practical activities* in addition to lecture.”
- “I find the professor’s experience and the way she *connects theory with practical examples the most useful*.”

## 6.3 Interpersonal Relationships

In relation to the interpersonal relationships, participants highlight the importance of understanding interpersonal family relationships.

- “I understand why it is important to consider the *relationships in the family* when establishing collaboration and partnership between parents and teachers. It was most interesting for me to hear about the causes and problems that arise in the family in general regarding school. I also became aware of the *role of the relationship* that the school plays in identifying certain behaviours in children that are different from others and how to prevent potential further problems. Very useful, interesting and important.”
- “After listening to the topics touching *family relationships*, I understood what could cause various situations that we may encounter in our future work, which I had not thought about before, and what can make it easier for us to work with and *establish relationships* with people /.../ because it is not only important to know what our work will be, but also how to *navigate all these relationships* with other people.”
- “Family therapy provided insight into relationship and the *importance of building relationships of respect and understanding with parents*. The professor also showed us different *ways to approach the parents* to reassure them and establish the first level of cooperation.”

One participant said how now that she understands family relationships, she will be able to understand differently the parents' reactions to their children's turbulent reactions, which are also related to their past childhood relationships.

- “I learned that ‘difficult’ parents are afraid for their child and because of that they could react violently. At the same time, the possibility that the parent reacts badly may come from the background of their bad *childhood experience in relationships*, which we must take into account when working with parents. A connection that might not have occurred to us at first glance, but I can now see everything is very much connected.”

#### 6.4 Attitude of the Professors

Most of the participants reported the attitude of the professors, which they experienced as safe, positive, encouraging and motivating.

- “In my opinion, the professor *encourages us* to express our opinions, to not be afraid of future work despite potential challenges in working with people.”
- “The professor tried to create a *positive and encouraging atmosphere* from the first day, which we quickly recognized. She always encouraged us to express our own opinions, share experiences, respected us and showed understanding. She constantly *motivated us* and highlighted our abilities for our future work.”
- “We always felt that we all remained motivated after the class, full of new information and ideas. The professor had a truly different approach which we have never experienced before, *creating a safe, stimulating and motivating environment.*”
- “In the lack of motivation in the last year, this subject *motivated us* precisely because of the *attitude of the professor*, who always tried to get the best out of us.”

#### 6.5 Creativity

Participants indicated that learning through creativity, using a variety of methods, materials and practical examples, promotes the acquisition of practical skills that help to better understand, motivate and are directly applicable to their future work with parents and children.

- “I was most impressed by *the use of children’s drawings* to describe the current state of the child, which can tell a lot about the child’s family situation and family relationships, for example, whether there is violence in the family.”
- “Introducing *creativity* was something completely new to us. If it were an approach that we had already encountered, there would probably be more emphasis on just historical theories as the ‘basics we need to know’ but it often stops there, and more ‘will be gained’ by ourselves in our future work. The approach to this course brought us a much better understanding of the importance of partnership in a new way, as well as some *concrete tools* that we have already used in lessons and will undoubtedly use in future work. I think we have *gained skills* incomparable to any subject before. In terms of knowledge, I think we

have learned a lot about children and the transmission of values through the family. This is essential for the high-quality work of a teacher.”

- “A very interesting course with a *different approach* than in previous courses, the professor used *various activities, methods, and resources* that were completely new to me, and which I think I will remember well and be able to use in my future practice. I consider the simulations and *various motivational activities* that the professor showed us to be the most useful because we immediately got feedback and her suggestions on how we can tackle the problem better.”

Participant emphasised the practice-oriented approach, mentioning practical examples and creative activities through which they could better understand the theory.

- “I think that *learning through practical activities with examples* from the professor’s practice and the visits we had made it possible for me to better understand the content and remember it more easily. I consider the acquired knowledge, skills and experience to be valuable both in my private and professional life.”

## 6.6 Personal Growth

Participants indicated that learning through personal experiences increased their understanding and leads to a change to understanding others.

- “I want to emphasize understanding parents as individuals and ourselves as professionals, as well as *inner work*, which really resonated with me and I believe is key to the development of a partnership. And it is precisely with a therapeutic approach that it is possible to work on this more deeply. I think this is a prerequisite. To be good partners, it is *essential to first be aware of yourself to understand others*. That’s why I like that *we did a lot of inner work, processed our emotions and touched some problems*.”
- “There was a lot of interaction during the lectures, and most importantly, we had the *opportunity for inner work and to become aware of our needs and feelings*.”
- “*I learned a lot about myself*, which made it *easier for me to understand the family problems we may face*.”

## 6.7 Course Suggestions

The students were satisfied with the educational experience in the elective course, but some made suggestions that could improve their experience. They indicated a time that might be more convenient. The lectures took place in the late afternoon.

More of the participants stated that if the lectures were held in the morning, they would be able to absorb more knowledge.

- “I would like the course to take place *in the morning* because at 4 or 5 pm the concentration drops a little.”

- “I suggest that the lecture be held at an *earlier time*, as this way we could absorb all the knowledge and experience even more actively.”

Another participant stated that he would like the course to be conducted over a longer period, not just one semester.

- “It would be beneficial if the course was *conducted longer*, in the second semester as well.”

The next participant suggested that the course should be compulsory for all students, and she hopes that the next generation of students will be able to benefit from interdisciplinary cooperation experiences.

- “I hope that *other generations will also have the opportunity* to work with the professor and experience this kind of teaching. This course should be *compulsory*.”

One participant stated that more visits to external institutions would be needed.

## 7. Discussion

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The results suggest that students understand family problems and parents in a new light through personal experience, which means that they have been able to change their perspective by working on themselves, through personal growth. Personal experience is an essential part of the education of family therapists. Before using interventions, it is important to experience them for oneself. In this way, they experience the emotions associated with it, including hopes and fears. Personal experience is always about learning about oneself, one’s insights, behavioural patterns and what one feels at the time (Klimkus and Bohak 2009, 82). In their work as teachers, they will face many challenges in their interpersonal relationships, not only with parents but also with children, which makes it all the more important that they are equipped to cope and feel confident about their future work.

However, personal experience can only be positive for learning if it is supported by the right attitudes. The attitude of both professors was perceived by participants as encouraging, positive, motivating. This is because attitudes that focus on stimulating motivation and related neurobiological processes allow for the experience of positive attention and acceptance (Nežič Glavica 2022, 721). Emotional attunement to each other enables learning from each other, which requires therapeutic and social models of engagement and contact, where empathy is the key (Erzar 2022, 675). In a reciprocal relationship, listening is paramount, based on the desire to hear the other, because only in listening can a response occur that enables the other to be who he or she is (Platovnjak and Svetelj 2022, 634). It is a warm and encouraging approach that can create a positive learning environment. In such an environment, visits to external institutions can be perceived positively, and appropriate materials can enhance such an experience.

In a globalized, rapidly changing world, where there is more and more knowledge and information, it is becoming increasingly important to understand and develop

an individual's personality traits and individual potential. In addition to the transfer of knowledge, educational institutions and programs must provide a safe and stimulating environment that enables the development of social and emotional competencies. Individuals in modern society need to evolve not only on an intellectual level but also on a personal level (Nežič Glavica 2023, 1052). All participants listed the categories of personal growth they had experienced. This represents an important component of the professional growth of prospective students, and it is important to explore the changes that students experience (Pascual-Leone, Wolfe and O'Connor 2012, 155). An interdisciplinary designed study programme should help to shape the student's qualities such as emotional maturity, empathic attitudes and the ability to internally regulate one's own problems and emotions. It is about the need to learn skills that are linked to personal development and learning self-awareness (Pascual-Leone, Rodriguez-Rubio and Metler 2013, 579). In this context, the Pedagogy program at the Department of Pedagogy, in cooperation with the Department of Marriage and Family Therapy and Psychology and Sociology of Religion, became more than just a place for acquiring knowledge. Rather, it was a safe environment for personal and professional development, where individuals could learn and grow experientially. The above emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to education that goes beyond mere academic goals and places the holistic development of the individual at the centre (Kristovič, Kristovič and Pangrčič 2022, 91). The ability to recognise one's own needs, patterns and feelings, and to accept oneself, are fundamental elements of mental health that can be promoted through self-awareness practices.

## **8. Limitations and Further Research**

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It is also necessary to mention the limitations. The research is based on a small sample of participants, which was limited to only one elective course carried out by the two researchers. Although the answers of the participants were anonymous, at the time of the research the participants were still students of one of the researchers, so they may be coloured by concern about how they will be seen in the eyes of the teacher. Perhaps they would be different if the students had already completed their studies. Despite the limitation, the research examines the experience of interdisciplinary cooperation, which is generally experienced as positive by the students involved. In the future, it would be necessary to check objectively what competencies for promoting mental health the students acquired through interdisciplinary education and to test the acquired skills in their concrete pedagogical work.

## **9. Conclusion**

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The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of postgraduate students of the Pedagogy programme. The results suggest the importance of interdisci-

plinary collaboration between family pedagogy and family therapy in providing experiential learning and training for future educators to address important topics in support of mental health promotion for children and adolescents.

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