



# Linking life satisfaction with school engagement of secondary students from diverse cultural backgrounds in Hong Kong



Celeste Y.M. Yuen\*

Department of Education Policy and Leadership, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, N.T., Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examines the association of life satisfaction with school engagement in relation to gender, grade level, family income, parental education and religious affiliation. A sample of 5809 adolescents aged 12 to 19 with diverse cultural backgrounds was tested with the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) and School Engagement Questionnaires. ANOVA results confirm that significant differences exist in both measurements among the four student groups: Hong Kong mainstream students (HKMS), South Asian Students (SAS), Chinese Immigrant Students (CIS), and Cross-Boundary Students (CBS) from Mainland China. Regression analyses reveal that life satisfaction is a significant predictor of school engagement across the four student groups. Results of the correlation and regression analyses support that life satisfaction is positively linked with their school engagement. Additionally, religion is found to be a particular salient predictor for the life satisfaction of SAS while the family income and parental education are vital for both HKMS and CIS. However, neither religion nor family factors are significant predictors for CBS.

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## 1. Introduction

Schooling is a major component in the life of adolescents and educational success is significantly linked to their life satisfaction (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011). Students who actively and positively engage with schools are often associated with multiple positive life outcomes such as improved academic performance (Lippman & Rivers, 2008), higher resiliency and positive conduct (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Moreover, students with a balanced school life tend to have high self-efficacy in learning and better holistic development (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). Because of such benefits, school engagement has been high on the research agenda in youth studies across the globe.

In the West, researchers on positive youth development and school engagement have discerned a close link among demographics, family socio-economic status (SES) and school engagement (Elmore & Huebner, 2010; Gomolla, 2006; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Some demographic variables were found to have a large contribution to life satisfaction, such as cultural characteristics (Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002), ethnic group identification (Bonini,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [cmyyuen@ied.edu.hk](mailto:cmyyuen@ied.edu.hk) (C.Y.M. Yuen).

2008), religious affiliation and identity (Amit, 2010; Davis & Kiang, 2015) and income and resources (Diener & Diener, 1995). However, there has not been parallel research attention paid to students in an Asian context. This is certainly the case with regard to Hong Kong where, given that the disengagement of youth is increasingly a public concern, the need for such research would appear to be especially relevant. The studies (Yuen, 2014; Yuen & Lee, 2014; Yuen, Lee, & Leung, 2016) report that mainstream Chinese students are less satisfied with their life and school than their ethnic South Asian peers. However, the association between life satisfaction and school engagement is less certain. The present study is a response to deepen our understanding in this particular area by examining the role of some specific demographic variables in this association. Prior studies have underscored the prediction of gender for life satisfaction and religious practices (Davis & Kiang, 2015; Yuen, 2014, 2015; Yuen & Lee, 2013). In this study, the variables specifically examined are gender, grade level, religious affiliation, family income and parental education.

## 2. Measurements of life satisfaction and school engagement

### 2.1. The multidimensional nature of life satisfaction measures

Life satisfaction is a multi-dimensional construct reflecting the self-assessed quality of an individual's relationship with oneself, significant others, living conditions and community (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener, Robert, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). This concept has been further advanced by Huebner's (1995) instrument, the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS), which assesses five domains of satisfaction: self, friends, family, school and living environment. This instrument has been widely adapted and referenced in various cultural contexts. Each domain represents a key element of subjective well-being and each element is potentially affected by the demographic variables under review (Ash & Huebner, 1998). Yuen and Lee (2013) adapted and validated the MSLSS to suit the Hong Kong context. The adapted version was employed by this study to measure adolescents' life satisfaction.

### 2.2. School engagement and academic outcomes

School engagement is a multifaceted construct that assesses the interdependent nature of affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions of student adaptation in school (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Glanville and Wildhagen, 2007; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). International studies have established a close association between learning engagement and school success (Johnson et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2011). There is an acknowledgement that positive school engagement promotes high academic self-efficacy and positive outcomes. This has led to an increased emphasis upon the importance of promoting positive behaviours and well-being among students (Appleton et al., 2008). Students who develop a strong sense of belonging and attachment to their school are also committed and dedicated towards independent learning and knowledge construction (Bomia et al., 1997). Higher levels of school engagement increase personal willingness to concentrate on and persist in learning, furthermore, it improves subjective well-being and future vocational advancement (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Additionally, it also mediates against at-risk behaviours such as depression, conduct problems and school dropout (Li & Lerner, 2011). Engaged students often have a stronger desire for greater learning regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Numerous studies have examined the mechanism behind the socio-cultural factors of young immigrants and their academic and school behavioural engagement (Johnson et al., 2001; Umana-Taylor, Wong, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2012). The study of Bhattacharyya, Ison, and Blair (2003) reports that the low school attainment of children from ethnic minority families in the United Kingdom may link to their low family SES. However, the work of Maynard and Harding (2010) reveals that despite some young ethnic minority adolescents in America receiving less parental homework support and family control, nevertheless they exhibited better mental health than their mainstream peers. Additionally, Davis and Kiang (2015) note that religious identity and participation contribute greatly to the psychological well-being of Asian American adolescents. Thus far, international data paint a very diverse picture of the educational and life experiences of ethnic minority students and highlights the need to further understand the complex as well as increasingly common phenomenon of minority education.

### 2.3. Life satisfaction and school engagement among adolescents

Although numerous studies have documented the positive link between engagement and school outcomes, there is relatively little literature on the role of life satisfaction in school engagement. Suldo, Shaffer, and Riley (2008) note that school climate, attachment to school, and problem behaviors relate to life satisfaction in young students. Students with strong connections to school and peer relations report higher levels of life satisfaction (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011). In turn, students with high levels of life satisfaction are more likely to have high educational attainment and fewer depressive symptoms (Ou, 2008). The study of Li and Lerner (2011) reveals that middle-school students with higher levels of behavioural and emotional engagement with school also rated higher in their well-being than those with lower levels of engagement. However, the study of Lewis et al. (2011) determines a significant bidirectional correlation between life satisfaction and cognitive engagement, but no such correlation was found between life satisfaction and emotional and behavioural engagement.

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