



Life Satisfaction and Academic Performance in Early Adolescents: Evidence for Reciprocal Association

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ABSTRACT

Student subjective well-being remains a relatively neglected topic despite its intimate link to positive school outcomes. As academic achievement is a widely used yardstick of student success and school accountability, school-based mental health research and practice have focused primarily on the assessment and treatment of learning and behavioral problems. This short-term longitudinal study sought to establish the role of student subjective well-being, specifically, global life satisfaction (LS), in academic achievement. Based on the engine model of well-being (Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Seligman, 2012), the study focused on LS as a process variable and academic performance as an outcome variable and vice versa. Using two waves (five months apart) of data, the study examined the reciprocal relations between LS and academic achievement, and how the relations may be shaped by positive and negative affective experiences in school, in a sample of 821 middle school students. Results revealed positive reciprocal causal relations between students' LS and grades, even when demographic covariates, school-based positive and negative affect, and baseline values of the criterion variables were controlled. This study provides empirical support that LS does not undermine academic achievement (or vice versa), but rather it is synergistic with better school grades. Furthermore, the relations between students' LS and grades were not moderated by negative or positive affective experiences in school. These findings suggest that student LS should occupy a more prominent niche in the school agenda.

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1. Introduction

Situated in the context of positive psychology, the study of subjective well-being (SWB) has become a major area of inquiry (Eid & Larsen, 2008). Often considered synonymous with happiness in colloquial use, SWB has been defined as a higher-order construct that incorporates three related, but distinguishable lower-order constructs of global life satisfaction (LS), positive affect, and negative affect (Diener, 1984). LS has been defined as a person's cognitive evaluation of the positivity of life as a whole whereas positive affect refers to the frequency of positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest) experienced by a person over time and negative affect refers to the frequency of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, sadness) experienced over time (Diener, 1984). SWB has been linked to desirable outcomes across multiple life domains, including career success (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Russel, 2008), marital harmony (Stanley, Ragan, Rhoades, & Markman, 2012), and longevity (Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Collins, Collins, Gleib, & Goldman, 2009). Longitudinal research shows that SWB is an antecedent rather than a mere consequence of such positive outcomes (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). While the work has advanced our understanding of the benefits associated with SWB, less attention has been devoted to its contribution to school outcomes, particularly academic achievement (Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009).

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Thus, the primary aim of this study was to investigate potential bidirectional longitudinal associations between early adolescents' LS and academic performance. The secondary aim of this study was to evaluate possible moderation effects of individual differences in school-related positive (PA-S) and negative affect (NA-S) in the relations between adolescents' LS and academic performance. Because LS, positive affect, and negative affect are distinguished by children as early as third grade (Huebner, 1991a) and because LS better predicts school-related variables than positive and negative affect (Long & Huebner, 2014), the three components of SWB were examined separately, with LS as the criterion variable.

2. Subjective Well-being in Schools

Positive psychology asserts the importance of assessing how well an individual is doing in the absence or early stages of child psychopathology (PTH; Chafouleas & Bray, 2004). As Jahoda (1958) so aptly put it, "The absence of disease may constitute a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for mental health" (p. 15). Mental health is more than just the absence of PTH. The dual factor model of mental health contends that PTH and SWB are complementary but distinct components of human functioning, rather than opposing ends of a single wellness continuum (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Specifically, the dual factor model identifies four different mental health statuses: flourishing (low PTH and high SWB), vulnerable (low PTH and low SWB), symptomatic but content (high PTH and high SWB), and troubled (high PTH and low SWB). Most of the empirical support for the dual factor model comes from studies of student populations. Research findings indicate that vulnerable students have lower self-esteem, diminished motivation for learning, lower grade point average (GPA), and less engagement in school compared to flourishing students (Antaramian, Huebner, Hills, & Valois, 2010; Suldo, Thalji, & Ferron, 2011). Larson (2000) further opined that student disaffection and disengagement "are not signs of psychopathology, at least not in most cases, but rather signs of a deficiency in positive development" (p. 170).

Schools should not only attempt to remedy deficits of troubled students, but also work on optimizing the SWB of *all* students because it entails greater benefits in the long term (Huppert, 2009; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004). The benefits of SWB in school-based mental health services are twofold. First, the inclusion of positive indicators of SWB paints a more holistic and comprehensive picture of student functioning for educators and mental health professionals alike (Ben-Arieh, 2008; Huebner & Hills, 2011). The incorporation of positive indicators of SWB increases the sensitivity of screening procedures for identifying vulnerable students (with low SWB) who often slip through the cracks of traditional mental health systems because they do not meet clinical levels of PTH (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Suldo et al., 2011). Second, positive interventions focus on the development of personal strengths and resources for every student, not just troubled students (Huebner, Hills, Siddall, & Gilman, 2014). They serve the dual purpose of enhancing SWB and buffering against PTH (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which expands the scope and direction of school interventions to include a proactive rather than reactive approach to addressing psychosocial and educational concerns (Meyers & Meyers, 2003; Proctor et al., 2009). Such preventative efforts provide critical opportunities to intervene earlier, more effectually, and less intrusively within school settings (Greenberg et al., 2003). A strength-based approach to mental health also serves to increase and sustain students' motivation and efforts for positive behavior change (Huebner & Hills, 2011).

3. Subjective Well-being in Early Adolescence

Early adolescence is a pivotal developmental period for mental health, with half of all lifetime cases of mental disorders emerging by age 14 (Belfer, 2008). It marks the beginning of the identity formation process, which is characterized by a need for autonomy and independence from parental control as well as a need for acceptance and approval from peers (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Steinberg, 2004). Early adolescence also encompasses the biological transition of puberty, the cognitive transition from concrete to formal operational stage, and the academic and social transition from elementary to middle school (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). The *Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development* (1989) emphasizes that "young adolescents face significant turning points. For youths 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future" (p. 8). Given that early adolescence is considered an important phase of the developmental trajectory, it is an opportune time for adaptive change to occur and to build a strong foundation for positive well-being over the life course (Park & Peterson, 2003; Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen, 2010).

Schools provide an excellent platform for well-being initiatives as most adolescents spend a considerable amount of their time at school (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2004; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Linley, Joseph, Harrington, and Wood (2006) place great emphasis on the role schools play in adolescents' well-being: "School psychology can serve as a point of connection between positive psychology's promotion of optimal human development and schools as the a priori institutions that can serve as the vehicles for this development" (p. 10). Adolescents can acquire skills of well-being that will help them build enabling conditions of life (e.g., formation of positive relationships, access to resources) in addition to minimizing disabling conditions (e.g., academic pressures, engagement in risky behaviors) of life (McCabe, Bray, Kehle, Theodore, & Gelbar, 2011). Research has shown that incorporation of positive psychology in school practices reduces student referrals for both academic and behavioral problems (Terjesen et al., 2004). The overemphasis on academic excellence, however, has confined student SWB to the periphery of the school agenda. To provide impetus for change in schools, this study seeks to examine linkages between student SWB and academic achievement. Do students learn better when they are happy as propounded by Noddings (2003)? Or does the pursuit of academic success come at the cost of happiness? The question of whether SWB is an important determinant of academic success (and vice versa) remains to be justified given the nascent stage of the literature in this field (Suldo, Riley, & Shaffer, 2006).

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