



## Positive affect catalyzes academic engagement: Cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental evidence



Ronnel B. King<sup>a,\*</sup>, Dennis M. McInerney<sup>a</sup>, Fraide A. Ganotice Jr.<sup>b,c</sup>, Jonalyn B. Villarosa<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

<sup>b</sup> The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

<sup>c</sup> Palawan State University, Philippines

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of positive affect on academic engagement and its opposite disaffection using cross-sectional (Study 1), longitudinal (Study 2), and experimental (Study 3) designs. Results of Studies 1 and 2 indicated that students who experienced higher levels of positive affect were more engaged in school and exhibited lower levels of disaffection. Study 3 showed that students whose positive affect were induced reported higher levels of perceived engagement compared to a comparison group. These findings provide important evidence for the role of positive affect in school not only as a valued outcome in itself but also as a facilitator of engagement and a buffer against disaffection. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Educational psychologists have long been interested in the factors that drive engagement in school. Social cognitive theories of achievement motivation have focused on the role of various motivational constructs such as self-efficacy, self-concept (Marsh & Seaton, 2012), achievement goals (Maehr & Zusho, 2009), expectancy-values (Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009), and attributions (Graham & Williams, 2009) among others. While these cognitive-motivational factors have shown great utility in understanding who becomes engaged or disengaged from school, recent research in positive psychology has also suggested that positive affect may have an important role to play in understanding optimal school functioning (Linnenbrink, 2006; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Although research on affect in school settings has been burgeoning in recent years (Linnenbrink, 2006; Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011), it still lags far behind those that focus on cognitive and motivational processes. As Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun (2011, p. 3) wrote, "research on students' emotions is in its early infancy, and we still have much more work to do in this area."

The aim of this study is to examine whether positive affect facilitates success in the academic domain using cross-sectional (Study 1), longitudinal (Study 2), and experimental (Study 3) studies. We operationalized school success in terms of engagement and its opposite disaffection. The

cross-sectional study (Study 1) aims to provide correlational evidence of the relationship between positive affect and school engagement. Although a cross-sectional study cannot establish a causal relationship between variables, it is nonetheless important as it verifies that a relationship exists between the key variables. On the other hand, the longitudinal study (Study 2) provides a stronger form of evidence by showing temporal precedence. If positive affect precedes engagement in time, then it is likely that positive affect has an important role in facilitating engagement. Despite these strengths, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies cannot rule out the possibility that a third variable (e.g., IQ, personality) is responsible for the observed relationship between positive affect and engagement. Therefore, an experimental study (Study 3) that utilizes random assignment is needed to determine whether positive affect influences one's perceived levels of engagement or disaffection. Although cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies all have their limitations, if all three approaches provide converging evidence then the argument that positive affect facilitates school engagement becomes more persuasive.

In the following sections, we first review evidence of the association between positive affect and success in different domains of psychology (industrial-organization, health, and social). Fredrickson's (1998, 2001, 2013) broaden-and-build theory is proffered as a theoretical framework that can explain this positive affect-success linkage. Next, we pay particular attention to examples drawn from the educational psychology literature that provide support for the broaden-and-build framework. The review concludes with the importance of examining the link between positive affect and school functioning.

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, Hong Kong, Hong Kong.  
E-mail address: [ronnel@ied.edu.hk](mailto:ronnel@ied.edu.hk) (R.B. King).

It is important to note that the focus of this paper is on the role of affect on engagement. The literature has often referred to affect, mood, and emotions interchangeably. While these three terms share a lot of conceptual similarities, it is also possible to posit more fine-grained distinctions among them. Moods generally refer to "relatively low-intensity, diffuse, subconscious, and enduring affective states that have no salient antecedent cause and therefore little cognitive content (Forgas, 2006, p. 6–7). Distinct emotions, in contrast, are more intense, conscious, and short-lived experiences (Gendron & Barrett, 2009). In this paper, we focus on students' affect which is a broader term that encompasses moods and emotions (see also Linnenbrink, 2006 for a similar usage). Affect could either be positive or negative. Positive affect refers to the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, alert, and active, while negative affect refers to the extent to which someone is characterized by sadness and lethargy (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

### 1.1. Positive affect and successful outcomes

The landmark meta-analytic study conducted by Lyubomirsky, King, and Deiner (2005) showed that positive affect has a causal role in fostering successful outcomes across multiple life domains. Their central thesis is that "positive affect engenders success" (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005, p. 803). They found a robust relationship between the experience of positive affect and success in various fields of psychology such as industrial-organization, health, and social psychology.

For example, industrial-organization psychologists have found that that positive affect was associated with work success. Studies have shown that employees who experienced a greater degree of positive affect score higher in terms of organizational citizenship behaviour (Crede, Chernyshenko, Stark, Dalal, & Bashshur, 2007), customer service (George, 1995), income (Graham, Eggers, & Sukhtankar, 2004), supervisory evaluations (Wright & Staw, 1999), and overall job performance (Wright, Cropanzano, & Bonett, 2007). In the domain of health (see Pressman & Cohen, 2005; Steptoe, Dockray, & Wardle, 2009 for overviews), studies have shown that positive affect predicts global health (Piqueras, Kuhne, Vera-Villaruel, van Straten, & Cuijpers, 2011), survival (Steptoe & Wardle, 2011), physical activity (Wang et al., 2012), and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011).

Positive affect has also been linked to success in the social domain as indexed by marital satisfaction (Harker & Keltner, 2001), spouse's marital well-being (Ruvolo, 1998), number of friends (Myers, 2000), satisfaction with friends (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & DiMatteo, 2006), and quality of social interactions (Berry & Hansen, 1996).

Relative to cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, experimental studies provide the strongest evidence of how positive affect can facilitate success in various tasks (see Ashby, Isen, & Turken, 1999 for an overview). Using mood induction techniques, researchers have shown that positive affect can cause participants to increase their self-efficacy (Baron, 1990), goal setting (Hom & Arbuckle, 1988), perceived task performance (Barsade, 2002), intrinsic interest (Erez & Isen, 2002), and self-control (Isen & Reeve, 2005) among others.

### 1.2. Broaden-and-build theory

A useful framework that can help us understand why and how positive affect is associated with successful outcomes is the broaden-and-build theory of Fredrickson (1998, 2001). This theory posits that positive emotions are evolved psychological adaptations that increased peoples' odds of survival and reproductive success across evolutionary time. Negative emotions gear people for narrow behavioural responses such as fight or flight, while positive emotions broaden the array of thoughts and actions that people can call forth thereby enhancing cognitive and behavioural flexibility and generativity.

The broadening function of positive emotions leads to actions that promote resource building. It leads to greater feelings of confidence,

optimism, and self-efficacy and produce the tendency to approach rather than avoid goals. The linkage between positive emotions and school success may lie in two factors: First, students who experience higher levels of positive affect are more likely to strive for new goals while they are in a positive affective state. Second, they are more likely to acquire learning skills and resources which they have built up over time during previous experiences of positive emotional states (see also Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

The broaden-and-build framework has received much empirical support. Studies have shown that positive emotions predicted the building up of personal resources such as resilience, coping strategies, and mastery orientation among others (see Fredrickson, 2013 for a review). In the educational context, we focus on students' engagement as a form of personal resource that positive emotions may help foster. This is congruent with previous research which has explicitly treated academic engagement as a personal resource that could accrue from the experience of frequent positive emotions (e.g., Suldo, Thalji, & Ferron, 2011).

### 1.3. Positive affect and academic engagement

Engagement refers to "the quality of a students' connection or involvement with the endeavour of schooling" (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009, p. 494). Engagement in school is recognized as an important academic outcome in its own right. It improves academic achievement and enhances learning gains (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engaged students are portrayed as energized, enthusiastic, and focused. These conditions create an optimal condition for students to actually learn more.

The opposite of engagement has been termed as disengagement or disaffection (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). This state is characterized by apathetic withdrawal from learning activities, passivity, lack of initiation, and giving up in the face of perceived difficulties (Vallerand, 1997). Students high in disaffection are more likely to drop out of school, have lower academic grades, and are at risk for developing a host of other school-related problems.

Students' positive affect is likely to facilitate engagement and buffer against disaffection. Positive affect triggers approach-oriented behaviours and broaden people's mindsets which are thought to be conducive to engagement (Fredrickson, 2013). On the other hand, negative affect would direct students to engage in rigid behavioral repertoires, inhibit approach-oriented motivation, and decrease their cognitive flexibility which could lead to disaffection.

Research on emotions in the educational setting provides evidence for our contention that positive affect would be positively associated with engagement and negatively associated with disengagement. Emotions research in education has mostly focused on emotions felt in relation to classroom and learning-related activities, which have been referred to as academic emotions (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). Although these studies were not framed using the broaden-and-build model, results from these studies align well with the theoretical predictions of the broaden-and-build framework.

For example, Pekrun, Elliot, and Maier (2009) have found that positive academic emotions such as pride and hope positively predicted performance, while negative academic emotions such as boredom, anger, anxiety, and hopelessness negatively predicted academic performance. Positive academic emotions were also associated with adaptive types of achievement goals such as mastery-approach goals, while negative academic emotions were positively associated with more maladaptive achievement goals such as performance avoidance goals (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006). Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, and Perry (2010) found that the negative academic emotion of boredom was positively related to attention problems and negatively related to motivation, effort, self-regulation, and academic performance. Villavicencio and Bernardo (2013) found that the positive academic emotions of enjoyment and pride were positively associated key

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