



Accuracy of teachers' judgments of students' subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

The study examined teachers' competence to assess students' subjective well-being, which is the basis of mental health and youth development. Forty-four teachers were asked to judge students' attitudes towards school, enjoyment at school, academic self-concept, worries about school, social problems, and physical complaints in school. Teachers' judgments were related to the self-reports of 800 eighth-grade secondary school students. Results show that teachers predicted students' subjective well-being with low to moderate accuracy, but were able to capture positive aspects of student well-being with higher accuracy than negative ones. The reason may be that students in general report about high well-being at school, making it difficult for teachers to detect negative student feelings. The study signalizes considerable potential for improvement, especially in case of student difficulties, because teachers are hardly in a position to judge students' physical, social, and psychological problems with accuracy.

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1. Introduction

Many schools nowadays conceive students' subjective well-being as a mission statement (Pyhältö, Soini, & Pietarinen, 2010). Subjective well-being can be regarded as an important educational outcome that supplements schools' first and foremost interest of promoting cognitive outcomes (van Petegem, Aelterman, Rossell, & Creemers, 2006). The aim is not to develop fun at school to the maximum but to create a friendly learning environment where students can learn and perform well. Students who feel comfortable in school can develop a positive attitude to the requirements of schooling. A positive school climate meets students' legitimate need of liking school and feeling good in it throughout the school days (Hascher, 2004, 2011).

Teachers' judgments in school are of outstanding importance. They serve as a basis for the assessment of student performance, instructional decisions, and the selection and placement of students with special talents or deficits (Südkamp, Kaiser, & Möller, 2012). In terms of subjective well-being, teachers' judgments mainly have the function to detect students with negative affective beliefs and attitudes. Teachers may be asked to identify students with high test anxiety (Helmke & Fend, 1982) or depression (Auger, 2004). Even a low academic self-concept (Praetorius, Karst, Dickhäuser, & Lipowsky, 2011; Urhahne, Chao, Florineth, Luttenberger, & Paechter, 2011) or lack of interest in classes (Karing, 2009) may affect students' subjective well-being and call for a proper identification by the teacher. Especially when students do not feel comfortable in school and are not accepted by their classmates,

they cannot perform well. Students' subjective well-being is the basis of mental health and youth development.

This study examines teachers' competence to assess students' subjective well-being. Teachers are not only sources but also judges of students' well-being and should be able to perceive whether students like to go to school, have fun in class, and develop a desire to learn or whether they are plagued by worries and social problems with classmates. Making accurate judgments is within in the range of teachers' responsibilities and can be considered as a first step towards improving students' feelings and attitudes towards school.

In the following, an overview of the theoretical concepts and selected empirical findings on subjective well-being in school is provided. With the aid of a theoretical model, the difficulties are explained that may be encountered in the assessment of students' emotional and cognitive dispositions. As currently no comprehensive study on teachers' judgments of students' subjective well-being exists, a number of research findings will be displayed that illustrate teachers' competence to judge some single aspects. This is followed by the empirical study that seeks to answer how well teachers are informed about different facets of students' subjective well-being.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Well-being in school

Subjective well-being can be described in two different ways. In emotional terms, Bradburn (1969) refers to the dimensions of positive and negative affect. Subjective well-being does not only depend on the absence of negative emotions such as avoiding fear, but also on the presence of positive emotions such as enjoyment, pride, and

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happiness. The frequency and intensity of pleasant and unpleasant emotions can be regarded as crucial for experiencing well-being (Larsen & Diener, 1987). In cognitive terms, Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) emphasized the distinction between life satisfaction and domain satisfaction. While life satisfaction covers all evaluative beliefs and attitudes about one's own life, domain satisfaction is more specific and can be directed, e.g., to the area of school as an important aspect in the life of adolescents (Schimmack, 2008). The conceptual considerations of Bradburn (1969) and Diener et al. (1999) are reflected in school-based research on subjective well-being.

In defining subjective well-being in school, Hascher (2008) mainly concentrated on the balance of positive and negative affect, but also took the cognitive aspects of well-being into account. Hascher (2008, p. 86) formulated: "Students' well-being in school is an emotional experience characterized by the dominance of positive feelings and cognitions towards school, persons in school and the school context in comparison to negative feelings and cognitions towards school life. Well-being in school represents subjective, emotional and cognitive evaluations of school reality and can be seen as an imbalance of positive and negative aspects in favor of positive aspects".

Students' subjective well-being has not played a prominent role in psychological research for a long time (Hascher, 2008). It was implicitly included in the search for age and gender differences, but specific models and questionnaires devoted to the well-being of students were missing. Exemptions are the work done by Konu and colleagues (Konu & Lintonen, 2006; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002) and the multidimensional students' life satisfaction scale of Huebner (1994) that has nowadays been translated into many different languages (Civitci, 2007; de Barros, Petribu, Sougey, & Huebner, 2014; Galindez & Casas, 2011; Hatami, Motamed, & Ashrafzadeh, 2010; Jovanovic & Zuljevic, 2013; Weber, Ruch, & Huebner, 2013; Ye et al., 2014; Zappulla, Pace, Lo Cascio, Guzzo, & Huebner, 2014).

Our research is based on the multi-dimensional model of school well-being by Hascher (2004, 2011). The model is theoretically related to the distinction of six dimensions of well-being by Ryff and Keyes (1995) and empirically grounded in questionnaire development by Grob et al. (1991); Grob, Little, Wanner, Wearing, and Euronet (1996)). The well-being model of Hascher (2004, 2011) contains six components, directed towards three positive and three negative aspects. Accordingly, students' subjective well-being in school can be conceptualized as follows: (1) Positive attitudes and emotions towards school in general; (2) enjoyment in school; (3) positive academic self-concept; (4) absence of physical complaints in school; (5) absence of social problems in school; and (6) absence of worries about school.

Empirical studies show that, in general, students from European nations such as Germany, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, or the Netherlands feel well in school (Hascher, 2007). Differential results point to the fact that boys report a less positive attitude towards school, while physical complaints are more common in girls (Hascher, 2007; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2011; Palsdottir, Asgeirsdottir, & Sigfusdottir, 2012). Students' achievement in school has an additional effect on well-being. High-achieving students feel better in school than low-achieving students (Hascher, 2011).

2.2. The realistic accuracy model

The realistic accuracy model of Funder (1995, 2012) illustrates the difficulties in making precise teacher judgment of students' subjective well-being. The model describes the process that connects a person's characteristic such as subjective well-being with the judgment of a perceiver. Four components build the core of the model, which Funder (2012) labels as relevance, availability, detection, and utilization. First, the student must do something relevant to express subjective well-being such as giving a friendly smile. If the student does not emit such signals, the teacher has no way to infer student's emotions. Second, the relevant behavior of the student must be available to the teacher.

If the student shows happiness only outside and not in the classroom, the teacher lacks a proper basis for judging. Third, the teacher must detect the available behavior. He or she needs to realize that the student feels well in school. Fourth, the teacher has to utilize the detected information correctly. Only when the teacher deciphers student's smile as a sign of subjective well-being and not as insecurity or irony, an exact judgment can be made.

The realistic accuracy model of Funder (1995, 2012) provides a suitable explanatory framework for why students' subjective well-being is much harder to assess than, e.g., their academic achievement, which teachers can reasonably check by examinations and tests. Subjective well-being is a conglomerate of positive and negative feelings and evaluations. Students in class will not let out every emotional impulse and every self-assessment (Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004) so that teachers cannot detect and utilize them. Often students even have very good reasons to hide their true feelings when they do not want to be judged adversely. If there are demands to present oneself in a favorable way, although negative emotions prevail, teachers will hardly come to the right conclusions. It is therefore not expected that teachers' judgments of students' subjective well-being will lead to comparable correlations of .60 and higher as in the area of academic achievement (Hoge & Coladarsi, 1989; Südkamp et al., 2012).

2.3. Teachers' judgments of students' well-being

Up to now, no research study has specifically dealt with the accuracy of teachers' judgments of students' subjective well-being. However, there are some studies examining various aspects of students' emotional beliefs and attitudes. They can serve as points of reference for estimating the relationships between teacher report and student self-report. According to the model of Hascher (2004), the following overview is divided into six areas: positive emotions, enjoyment, academic self-concept, physical complaints, social problems, and worries.

Positive emotions in the school were assessed in a study of Givvin, Stipek, Salmon, and MacGyvers (2001). The authors found correlations between teachers' ratings and students' self-assessments of their positive emotions of .15 at the beginning and .22 at the end of the school year.

Enjoyment in school was examined in a study by Zhu and Urhahne (2014) where sixth grade English teachers made assessments based on both single and multiple items. The authors detected correlations to student ratings of .44 when teachers used single items and .48 when teachers applied multiple items. Karing (2009) found correlations of .37 in elementary school and .32 in secondary school for interest in mathematics. For interest in language, relations turned to .30 for elementary school and .21 for secondary school.

Academic self-concept has already been investigated extensively and consistent positive relationships between teacher judgment and student self-report could be identified. Praetorius et al. (2011) reported correlations of .55 for mathematics, .52 for reading, and .25 for writing. Moderate teacher–student agreement about students' academic self-concept was found in studies of Urhahne et al. (2011) with .43, Spinath (2005) with .39, and Givvin et al. (2001) with .26.

Physical complaints in school can, e.g., be described by emotionality—the physical component of test anxiety. Karing, Dörfler, and Artelt (in press) reported for emotionality a rank component of .27 for language and .20 for mathematics. Physical complaints can also be caused by depression. Auger (2004) showed that teachers can assess the depression of middle school students with an accuracy of .22. Student gender was not related to teachers' ability to identify depressive symptomatology in students.

Social problems in school may give rise to a lack of social competence. Sommer, Fink, and Neubauer (2008) found a correlation of .11 for teachers' judgments of fourth-graders' social competence. Boys, who often show the more conspicuous social behavior, were not easier to assess than girls.

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