



The trajectories of student emotional engagement and school burnout with academic and psychological development: Findings from Finnish adolescents



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the longitudinal trajectories of emotional engagement and school burnout in Finnish adolescents from 9th to 11th grade and how these trajectories related to the development of adolescents' academic performance and depressive symptoms. We found that despite their high academic performance, Finnish adolescents experienced a decline in the overall quality of their emotional engagement with school as they moved from 9th to 11th grade. Specifically, Finnish adolescents found school less enjoyable and less valuable, becoming more overwhelmed and anxious about school with the passing years. In addition, emotional engagement and school burnout had distinct trajectories and longitudinal associations with academic and psychological wellbeing. These findings underscore the importance of examining both positive and negative emotional processes in order to improve understanding of student emotional engagement and its differential effect on adolescent development.

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1. Introduction

Emotional engagement in school is thought to play a central role in adolescents' academic achievement and adjustment. Positive and negative emotional engagement has been shown to have significant concurrent and prospective associations with multiple indicators of academic and psychological functioning (Li & Lerner, 2011; Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010; Wang & Degol, 2014; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Many policymakers and educators focus on enhancing youth's emotional engagement in school as a way to address issues of underachievement, truancy, and school dropout (National Research Council, 2003). However, fundamental developmental questions regarding adolescents' emotional engagement remain: Do youth *need* to be emotionally engaged in order to attain positive outcomes? Does emotional engagement *work in the same way* for different types of youth outcomes? Our understanding is

limited in part by the fact that most of the research in emotional engagement at school focuses on adolescents in the United States (Arnett, 2008; Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013), where many students experience declines in emotional engagement, as well as academic and psychological outcomes, over the course of secondary school (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Studying the course and consequences of emotional engagement in a country like Finland—where students attain consistently high levels of academic achievement throughout secondary school despite recent evidence showing that students may not enjoy school—could provide some unique insights into the issue of student emotional school engagement.

In 1970, the government of Finland decided to overhaul its traditional education system in favor of a “modern, publicly financed education system with widespread equity, good quality, and large participation—all at a reasonable cost” (Sahlberg, 2009, p. 324). After the reform, Finnish students became one of the best performers on the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), consistently achieving top scores in mathematics, science, and reading (Abrams, 2011; Partanen, 2011). However, recent evidence shows that Finnish adolescents may not be emotionally engaged in school. The 2012 PISA results reveal that 15-year-old Finnish students ranked 60th out of 65 countries for

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how much they like school (OECD, 2013). The research shows that many Finnish secondary school students report feeling inadequate to be successful in school, exhausted by school, and cynical about school value, a phenomenon which Finnish scholars call school burnout (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikäinen, & Jokela, 2008). While evidence of school burnout among Finnish youth is mounting, researchers have yet to investigate whether school burnout could be a process of negative emotional engagement that unfolds over the course of secondary school years. Studies of Finnish adolescents have also rarely examined emotional engagement and school burnout simultaneously (see Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014 for exception), even though research suggests that positive and negative emotional processes are distinct and may have differential effects on adolescents' academic and emotional wellbeing (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990).

In this study, we evaluated emotional engagement and school burnout in Finnish urban high school students. We aimed to: (a) identify the trajectories of emotional engagement and school burnout for Finnish adolescents from 9th to 11th grade; and (b) examine the longitudinal associations of emotional engagement and school burnout with academic and psychological outcomes. This study can shed light on whether trajectories of emotional engagement and school burnout differ by educational contexts, or whether they might be a developmentally normative response to the norms, structures, values, and goals shared by formal education settings. Most importantly, this study can help us determine the extent to which emotional engagement and school burnout predict different types of adolescent outcomes, informing the design for targeted interventions.

2. Conceptualizations of emotional engagement and school burnout

While there are some variations in how scholars conceptualize emotional school engagement, there is widespread agreement that it refers to students' positive affect toward and identification with school, and it is considered a part of the multifaceted construct of student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Wang & Degol, 2014). Identification with school includes the appreciation of the value of school as both a social institution and a means for facilitating personal success (Finn, 1989). In other words, students feel that learning in school is essential and interesting and that school education is instrumental in achieving personal goals (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1997). Valuing school-related outcomes, in particular, has been found to be related to positive youth development (Wang & Peck, 2013).

Increasingly, researchers have begun to conceptualize and measure engagement and disengagement as existing on separate scales (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Recent psychometric work suggests that the positive and negative features of emotional engagement are both consequential and structurally distinguishable (Skinner et al., 2008). For example, Skinner et al. (2008) found differential associations among engagement (e.g., effort, interest, persistence) and disaffection (e.g., withdrawal, boredom, frustration), particularly in regard to the emotional aspects of both measures, indicating that although similar, engagement and disaffection are not completely overlapping constructs. Thus, disengagement is not considered to solely reflect the absence of engagement, but rather, it is a separate and distinct psychological process that makes unique contributions to student outcomes in school settings.

Researchers have used the construct of school burnout to measure Finnish students' exhaustion, cynicism about the value of school, and feeling of inadequacy to be successful, all of which are

critical indicators of emotional disengagement (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, & Nurmi, 2010; Salmela-Aro, Savolainen, & Holopainen, 2009). School burnout has been studied as a continuous process that influences Finnish students' engagement with schoolwork, well-being, and adjustment (Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2012). The negative emotional processes measured in the construct of school burnout conceptually mirror those of positive emotional engagement and align well with the concept of emotional disengagement in school, which influences academic and psychological functioning. In this study, we use the constructs of emotional engagement and school burnout to differentiate the adaptive features of positive emotional processes from the maladaptive characteristics of negative emotional processes. Emotional engagement specifically refers to the positive emotional processes of enjoying and valuing both school and schoolwork. School burnout refers to feeling overwhelmed and a lack of enjoyment and valuing in learning. We examine school burnout as a single concept consisting of the three dimensions of school burnout instead of differentiating the three dimensions of school burnout in the present study.

3. Emotional engagement and school burnout in Finnish adolescents

The educational reform of the 1970s established hallmark characteristics of Finnish schools and classrooms. Among the hallmark characteristics is students' transition from comprehensive school to high school, which occurs in the 10th grade (when they are 15 or 16 years old), and is their first main school transition (Sahlberg, 2011). Upon transitioning to high school, Finnish adolescents choose to pursue an academic or vocational track. Students in both tracks enjoy a continuation of the small class sizes they had in their basic education, so that many high school classes are capped at 20 students (Abrams, 2011). In the classroom, high school students play a hands-on role in their education, often working with their teachers on a teacher-cum-student-planned curriculum to create a customized learning experience (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Valijarvi, 2003). Finns also employ heterogeneous grouping, the practice of keeping students of all ability levels in the same classroom (Aho, Pitkanen, & Sahlberg, 2006). This method has been shown to have significant benefits for low performing students and is often attributed to the fact that in Finland, there is very little disparity between the highest- and lowest-performing students (Cavanagh, 2005; Valijarvi, 2003). Furthermore, Finnish culture values education and academic achievement, and "Finnish students have a clear idea of how to work and succeed at school" (Linnakyla & Malin, 2008, p. 584). Indeed, since the overhaul of their education system, equality within and across schools has increased, performance gaps have decreased, and student achievement has improved overall (Savolainen, 2009) with students earning top scores on the international assessment by OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]; Abrams, 2011).

Despite the well-known academic success of Finnish students, we know less about their trajectories of emotional engagement and school burnout and the effects of emotional engagement and burnout on academic and psychological adolescent outcomes. Stage-environment fit theorists posit that students' motivation and engagement are largely determined by the extent to which secondary schools provide educational and social environments that meet adolescents' needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Eccles et al., 1993). Fulfilling adolescents' social and emotional needs can lead to an increase in their emotional engagement (Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempachat, & Li, 2012) and positively influence their academic achievement and learning (Skinner et al., 2008). In the case of Finnish students, research suggests that students' emotional engagement is linked to

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