



Perfectionism and school engagement: A three-wave longitudinal study[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 June 2016

Received in revised form 22 September 2016

Accepted 25 September 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Perfectionism
School engagement
School students
Adolescents
Age differences
Gender differences
Longitudinal data

ABSTRACT

Although perfectionism is a personality disposition that plays an important role in educational contexts, research on perfectionism and school engagement is limited. School engagement is a key process in predicting educational outcomes in students. Consequently, it is important to know how perfectionism relates to school engagement and whether perfectionism predicts relative changes in school engagement over time. Using a sample of 486 students from 6th–12th grade (54% female) and employing a longitudinal design with three waves spaced 4–5 months apart, the present study investigated whether perfectionism (perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns) predicted relative changes in students' school engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement). Results showed that both perfectionistic strivings and concerns were related to school engagement, but only perfectionistic strivings predicted relative increases in school engagement. Implications for the understanding of how perfectionistic strivings contribute to school students' engagement are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality disposition characterized by exceedingly high standards of performance and concerns about making mistakes and the social consequences of not being perfect, and is therefore best conceptualized as a multidimensional disposition (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Research has shown that different dimensions of perfectionism form two higher-order dimensions: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic strivings capture aspects such as personal standards (i.e., setting exceedingly high personal standards of performance; Frost et al., 1990) and self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., having perfectionistic expectations of oneself; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In contrast, perfectionistic concerns capture aspects such as concern over mistakes and doubts about actions (i.e., over-preoccupation for not making mistakes and uncertainty about actions and beliefs; Frost et al., 1990) and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e.,

perceiving that others have perfectionistic expectations of oneself that one must fulfill; Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

1.2. School engagement

School engagement has received increasing attention in psychological research because it has been shown to predict educational outcomes in school students (Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Wang & Peck, 2013). Like perfectionism, school engagement is best conceptualized as multidimensional (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The most comprehensive multidimensional conceptualization of school engagement comprises three broad dimensions: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005; Fredricks et al., 2004). In this conceptualization, *behavioral engagement* reflects the presence of positive conduct (i.e., following rules, paying attention to class, completing schoolwork on time) and the absence of disruptive behaviors (i.e., getting in trouble, pretending to pay attention in class). *Emotional engagement* reflects the presence of positive school-related emotions such as excitement, fun, and interest and the absence of negative school-related emotions such as boredom. *Cognitive engagement* reflects investment in learning that goes beyond the school requirements, seeking challenges, and showing flexibility in problem solving and hard work as well as effort invested in understanding and mastering knowledge and skills and using metacognitive strategies in one's learning.

The importance of studying school engagement resides in its positive relations with educational outcomes such as academic achievement,

[☆] The research for this article was supported with funds from the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS-UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-1061 awarded to the third author and from the Jacobs Foundation, Zurich, through the ISSBD-JF Mentored Fellowship Program for Early Career Scholars awarded to the first author.

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educational aspiration, and college enrollment (e.g., Wang & Peck, 2013; see Fredricks et al., 2004, for a review). Psychological theories have proposed that school engagement is influenced by culture, community, family, education, and personality (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Fredricks et al., 2004). To date, however, empirical research has focused mostly on educational factors whereas research investigating the role that personality dispositions play in students' school engagement is still scarce.

1.3. Perfectionism and school engagement

Perfectionism is a personality disposition that should play a role in students' school engagement because individual differences in perfectionism are closely linked to motivational processes that have shown to energize, direct, and regulate individuals' attitudes and behaviors (McClelland, 1985). Perfectionistic strivings have shown positive relations with hope of success, performance-approach and mastery goal orientations, and intrinsic motivation whereas perfectionistic concerns have shown positive relations with fear of failure, performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientations, and extrinsic motivation (e.g., Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Băban, 2014; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Stoeber & Rambow, 2007). In addition, research with school students has shown that perfectionism is related to numerous characteristics and processes that are closely linked to school engagement (e.g., effort invested in schoolwork, adaptive study strategies) and predictive of educational success (e.g., academic efficacy, academic achievement; Rice & Slaney, 2002; see also Stoeber, Edbrooke-Childs, & Damian, 2016). In turn, school engagement has shown negative relations with fear of failure and positive relations with mastery goal orientations (e.g., Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006).

As regards perfectionism and school engagement, two studies with school students have been conducted. Results showed different relations of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns with school engagement. The first study (Shih, 2011) found that perfectionistic strivings showed positive relations with indicators of behavioral engagement (effort and persistence), emotional engagement (positive academic emotions such as curiosity and enjoyment), and cognitive engagement (approach-oriented behaviors in the face of academic difficulties). Furthermore, perfectionistic strivings showed negative relations with self-handicapping strategies and emotional disengagement (negative academic emotions such as anxiety and boredom). In contrast, perfectionistic concerns showed positive relations with self-handicapping and emotional disengagement. The second study (Shih, 2012) found that perfectionistic strivings showed positive relations with schoolwork engagement (vigor, dedication, absorption) and negative relations with academic burnout. In contrast, perfectionistic concerns showed negative relations with engagement and positive relations with burnout.

1.4. The present study

Whereas Shih's (2011, 2012) studies make an important contribution to our understanding of the relations between perfectionism and school engagement, they have two important limitations. First, the studies examined 8th graders (mean age 13.5 years). Consequently, it is unclear whether the relations the studies found also apply to younger or older school students. Second, the studies were cross-sectional. Consequently, it is unclear whether perfectionism is a mere correlate of school engagement, or whether interindividual differences in perfectionism also predict interindividual changes (relative increases/decreases) in school engagement longitudinally.

Against this background, the present study represents the first investigation of the longitudinal role of perfectionism in students' school engagement. The study examined a large sample of school students attending 6th–12th grade and employed a longitudinal design with three

waves spaced four to five months. Based on previous research (see 1.3), we expected that perfectionistic strivings would show positive relations with and predict relative increases in students' school engagement, whereas perfectionistic concerns would show negative relations with and predict relative decreases.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of students attending 6th–12th grade of two secondary schools (combining middle and high school) in north-western Romania was recruited for a longitudinal study with three time points over three academic semesters. Data collection for Time 1 took place at the end of the second semester of the academic year, for Time 2 five months later in the first semester of the next academic year (after a summer break of three months), and for Time 3 four months later in the second semester (after a winter break of three weeks). The total sample comprised 486 students (54% female) of whom 44% were early-to-middle adolescents (age 12–15 years) and 56% middle-to-late adolescents (age 16–19 years). All students were White and of Romanian ethnicity. Mean age of students at Time 1 was 15.9 years ($SD = 1.8$). Across time points, students completed the same paper-and-pencil questionnaire in the classroom during school hours, but some students did not complete all time points (386 students completed the questionnaire at Time 1, 369 at Time 2, and 351 at Time 3). Students received no compensation for participating in the study. Participation was voluntary. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the first author's university and by the schools' principals.

2.2. Measures

To measure perfectionism, we used the Child–Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (Flett et al., 2016) capturing self-oriented perfectionism (12 items; e.g., “I try to be perfect in everything I do”) and socially prescribed perfectionism (10 items; “Other people think that I have failed if I do not do my very best all the time”). In addition, we used three subscales from the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990) capturing personal standards (7 items; e.g., “I have extremely high goals”), concern over mistakes (9 items; “I should be upset if I make a mistake”), and doubts about actions (4 items; “I usually have doubts about the simple everyday things I do”). All scales have demonstrated reliability and validity in numerous studies with school students (e.g., Damian et al., 2014; Soenens et al., 2008). To obtain the two higher-order dimensions of perfectionism, we followed previous studies (e.g., Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000) combining (a) self-oriented perfectionism and personal standards to capture perfectionistic strivings and (b) socially prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, and doubts about actions to capture perfectionistic concerns.

To measure the three dimensions of school engagement, we used the School Engagement Measure–MacArthur (SEM–MacArthur; Fredricks et al., 2005) capturing behavioral engagement (5 items; e.g., “I pay attention in class”), emotional engagement (6 items; “I feel excited by my work at school”), and cognitive engagement (8 items; “I read extra books to learn more about things we do in school”). The measure has been used in previous studies with school students where it has demonstrated reliability and validity (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2005; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008).

All measures were translated into Romanian following standard back-translation procedures as recommended by Brislin (1986) using two independent translators. A third person then finalized the Romanian version. Participants responded to all items on a scale from 1 (*always false for me*) to 5 (*always true for me*).

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