



Wellbeing, academic buoyancy and educational achievement in primary school students



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ABSTRACT

The study explored the relationship between student wellbeing and academic achievement among 7–11 years old students and whether the relationship was moderated by gender and deprivation. 1081 students in Northern Ireland participated in a cross-sectional survey that captured data on academic achievement and a range of wellbeing indicators. Findings suggested the existence of an underlying wellbeing factor, which was positively related to achievement. The relationship was not moderated by gender and/or deprivation. Findings were explored using a model of 'academic buoyancy'. There was no evidence that suggested efforts to improve achievement that focus on wellbeing should be targeted specifically at students in economically deprived areas or be modified in terms of gender.

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1. Introduction

This paper reports the findings from a large scale cross sectional survey that examined the relationship between student wellbeing and educational achievement in a sample of 7–11 years old primary school students. The paper begins with an overview of the student wellbeing literature and a discussion of some of the limitations of the current conceptualisations of wellbeing. Despite the wealth of research surrounding student wellbeing, it remains a complex and multi-dimensional concept with no universally accepted definition (Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2009; Coleman, 2009; Columbo, 1986; Gutman & Levy, 1982). Much of the research in the area is empirical and lacking a theoretical framework by which to fully understand the role of student wellbeing in relation to improving academic outcomes. With this in mind, and in the context of the findings presented from this study, the notion of academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2006, 2008) is suggested as a useful way to better understand and conceptualise the wellbeing of students in an educational context. Findings from the current study are located within a framework of academic buoyancy and data are used to confirm and extend the theory insofar as it relates to academic achievement, as well as explore whether wellbeing is moderated by gender and socioeconomic deprivation.

2. Wellbeing and educational achievement

Over recent years there has been increasing interest in the notion of wellbeing and how this relates to positive outcomes in education. Wellbeing is a general term related to the social and emotional health and development of students. It has

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become the main social-construct by which teachers, psychologists, counsellors, parents and researchers measure and compare the affective development of students. However, research in the last decade has reported inconsistent relationships between various aspects of wellbeing and academic achievement (e.g. Berger, Alcalay, Torretti, & Milicic, 2011; Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Nicholson, Lucas, Berthelsen, & Wake, 2012; Saab & Klinger, 2011; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Heckman et al. (2006), for example, used data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (participants aged 14–22 years old) to demonstrate that non-cognitive traits, in this case self esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and locus of control (Rotter, 1966), can be a more powerful predictor of school and life success than cognitive traits such as IQ. Similarly, a cross-sectional survey of 674 Chilean students aged nine to 11 years old found that self esteem predicted academic achievement (grade average). It was also reported that wellbeing measured by a 52 item Chilean wellbeing scale (Arab, 2009), social integration, classroom social climate and peer social networks were not predictors of academic achievement (Berger et al., 2011). In a sample of 349 ten to 16 year olds Suldo and Shaffer (2008) measured wellbeing using the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991) and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children (Laurent et al., 1999). Interestingly they reported that wellbeing alone was not a sufficient condition for academic success (measured by grade point average and standardised test scores) but instead needed to be present together with low psychopathology to facilitate better academic functioning. Furthermore, in a randomised controlled trial of peer tutoring involving 168, 10–11 years old students, it was noted that improvements in self esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) were driven upwards by enhancements in belief and confidence (Miller, Topping, & Thurston, 2010).

In addition to the evidence suggesting that wellbeing is related to academic achievement, there is also evidence to suggest that students from areas of disadvantage report poorer wellbeing outcomes (as well as poorer educational outcomes) than their more affluent peers. As Nicholson et al. (2012) observe: '*Exposure to socioeconomic disadvantage in childhood impairs student's wellbeing with adverse effects persisting into adulthood*' (p. 81). Saab and Klinger (2011) measured wellbeing using an un-validated Canada-specific scale in a sample of 6126 students aged 11–16 from 134 schools. They found that greater family wealth and better wellbeing were both significantly associated with academic achievement, although no details of the measure used for academic achievement were provided.

Similar relationships have also been reported for younger students. Nicholson et al. (2012) used data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) ($n = 5000$) to show that socio-economic disadvantage was significantly associated with poorer wellbeing outcomes in a sample of 4–5 years old students. Data were captured by a variety of measures including the Brief Infant Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment Competence Scale and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Data indicated poorer vocabulary and emergent literacy skills (measured using standardised tests including the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Scale, PPVT III) in students from lower socio-economical homes. This effect was most marked for the older students in the sample. While Farmer and Hanratty (2012) did not look at educational achievement they did explore the relationship between wellbeing, low income and substance use. Wellbeing was measured using the UK national indicator questions: 'Has one or more good friends'; 'I can talk to my parents'; 'I can talk to my friends'; 'I can talk to an adult who is not my parent'; as well as the question 'I feel happy about life'. The sample included 3903 students aged between 10 and 15 years and the authors reported that students who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) – a proxy for low income and approximately 20% of the sample – were more likely to report that they were unhappy compared to students who were not eligible for FSM (33.2% compared with 27.2%). Furthermore, students who reported feeling happy were one-third less likely to report having tried smoking, using alcohol or drugs than those who were less happy. However, the low number of scaled items and the large variance in sub-sample size make definitive conclusions problematic.

This relationship between wellbeing, deprivation and achievement has led to an emphasis within some educational intervention programmes on building particular aspects of wellbeing among students, such as social emotional skills and prosocial behaviour, as a means of improving educational outcomes. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger's (2011) meta-analysis of 213 school-based social and emotional learning programmes suggests that such interventions improve academic achievement (as measured by standardised test scores and grade point averages) by a mean effect size of 0.27. Only a subset of the 213 studies measured achievement and were included in this analysis, nevertheless the pooled sample size was large ($n = 135,396$). However, it is not clear from the review which of the 213 studies measured academic achievement and what the characteristics of the interventions were that contributed to improvements in this particular outcome.

The evidence that such programmes also improve academic outcomes may be more equivocal than is suggested by Durlak and colleagues. For example, Positive Action is a programme which aims to promote social emotional skills, character development, academic achievement and to reduce problem behaviour. Flay, Acock, Vuchinich, and Beets (2006) evaluated this programme using a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design involving 20 schools and 2666 students aged nine to 11 years. The authors reported that in addition to improved behavioural outcomes (including reduced suspension rates, use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs) the intervention group also demonstrated improved grade retention rates compared to the control group, however there was no measurable impact on state standardised test scores of academic achievement.

Similarly, the Caring School Community programme (formerly the Child Development Project) aims to improve core values, prosocial behaviour and a feeling of community within the school for students aged 5–12 years. An RCT evaluation involving over 600 students in six schools demonstrated that students who took part in the programme reported improved prosocial behaviour however there were no measurable benefits of the programme in academic achievement, as measured by standardised tests (Battistich, 2003). Conversely however the findings from evaluations of a programme called Early

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