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Emotionality, Emotion Regulation, and School Performance in Middle School Children

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This research investigated the connections of middle school students' emotional dispositions and academic-related affect with their school performance. One hundred three 6th–8th grade students completed three self-rated assessments regarding: (a) their academic competency; (b) affective tendencies (both mood and emotion regulation); and (c) negative emotions experienced during school-related tasks. Teachers assessed students' positive and negative moods, and schools provided achievement test results and student grades as measures of cognitive ability/achievement and school performance, respectively. Results indicated that although students' emotion regulation, general affective dispositions, and academic affect were related to each other, each of these variables also made a unique significant contribution to students' GPA, over and above the influence of other cognitive contributors. Overall, these results provide support for the role of socio-emotional factors in students' school performance, while also clarifying some of the uniquely affective contributors (rather than relationships or goals) to that performance.

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There is a growing awareness that social and emotional factors play an important role in students' academic success. Research has shown that students who have more prosocial, socially responsible goals (Wentzel, 1996, 1999) or more positive relationships with adults (teachers and parents; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta, 1999) than their peers subsequently perform better in academic contexts. For example, Hamre and Pianta (2001) recently found that, controlling for cognitive ability, children who had negative conflicted relationships with their kindergarten teachers had lower grades and worse work habits in 8th grade.

In one model of the processes underlying these connections (Ford, 1992), academic motivation is explained "in terms of three inter-related

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processes: personal goals, personal agency beliefs, and emotional arousal.... According to this model, an individual will pursue a goal to the extent emotions and personal agency beliefs are associated with the goal and will support efforts to achieve one's goals" (Wentzel, 1999, p. 78). To date, however, much of the work on socio-emotional contributors to academic performance has focused on personal goals ("do I want to do well in school?"), agency beliefs ("will I be able to if I try?"), and/or student-teacher relationships ("how do I feel about my teacher?"). In contrast, much less is known about how students' emotions, per se, support academic performance ("how do I feel about schoolwork?").¹

The research on the affective contributors to achievement that does exist has largely been confined to the role of test anxiety on test performance (e.g., Musch & Broeder, 1999; and see McDonald, 2001 for a review of research involving children). In general, it appears that worry interferes with the test performance of highly anxious students because it distracts attention from the task at hand. Vail (1981) recognized that for some students, however, the anxiety and frustrations associated with more everyday school tasks could also be problematic. Some children and adolescents may have difficulties with their emotional arousal during routine homework and classroom activities that have little to do with test anxiety, per se. Consequently, the present study was designed to examine the connections between young adolescents' academically related emotions and their academic performance. It was expected that, overall, students who report more negative emotions during academic tasks would have lower levels of school performance (as assessed by their grade point averages).

In addition to examining the connection between negative academic affect and school performance, two other issues were addressed in this research. One is whether academically related affect is just a reflection of students' more general affective dispositions, and consequently, whether it is necessary to distinguish academic affect from more general affective contributors to school performance (see below). A second issue is whether academic affect is mostly a reflection of students' underlying cognitive abilities and their perceived competence regarding their abilities. Although Ford's (1992) model makes a theoretical distinction between personal

¹ Although there is extensive research on how broad aspects of students' affective and behavioral tendencies are related to their school performance (e.g., aggression, peer rejection, and school failure), most of that work does not differentiate specifically *affective* components of behavior from other socio-emotional components such as peer and adult relationships. By contrast, the literature on social competence has shown that the connections between children's and adolescents' emotion dispositions and abilities and their social behaviors are often more complex, and in need of empirical verification, than is typically assumed (e.g., Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Denham, 1999).

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