



# The upward spiral of adolescents' positive school experiences and happiness: Investigating reciprocal effects over time



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 11 July 2011

Received in revised form 5 December 2012

Accepted 5 December 2012

### Keywords:

School experiences

Subjective well-being

Happiness

Broaden-and-build theory

Self-determination theory

Longitudinal

## ABSTRACT

In line with self-determination theory and Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, this study adopts a positive perspective on students' school experiences and their general psychological functioning. The reciprocal effects of positive school experiences and happiness, a dimension of affective well-being, are examined over the course of an academic year. Data were collected from 215 secondary school students at 5 measurement occasions. The results of longitudinal cross-lagged structural equation modeling support the notion of an upward spiral of positive school experiences and happiness over time. Positive school experiences had a stable lagged effect on happiness, and, in turn, happiness had a lagged effect on future positive school experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

The recent shift from a focus on problems and deficits to a more positive perspective, with an emphasis on strengths and resilience, has also become increasingly popular in educational research (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2012; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). In addition to looking at diverse objectionable consequences of negative school experiences, such as the involvement in school violence or bullying (Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Kasen, Berenson, Cohen, & Johnson, 2004), the development of depressive symptoms (Loukas & Murphy, 2007) or various addictive behaviors (Nutbeam, Smith, Moore, & Bauman, 1993; Sellström & Bremberg, 2006), school psychologists have increasingly begun to adopt a more positive view and acknowledge potential desirable outcomes of *positive* school experiences (Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGuseppe, 2004).

Most of this "positively oriented" research has focused on the effects of students' positive school experiences on academic outcomes, such as school engagement and academic achievement (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Samdal, Wold, & Bronis, 1999; Sellström & Bremberg, 2006). However, research on the relevance of positive school experiences for students' *general* adjustment is far less prevalent. Moreover, although some authors have linked positive school experiences to higher levels of resilience or subjective well-being (Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003; Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009; You,

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ACTION EDITOR: Andrew Roach.

Furlong, Felix, Sharkey, & Tanigawa, 2008), the temporal sequence of effects remains ambiguous due to the predominance of cross-sectional study designs. It is not clear whether positive school experiences promote positive subjective well-being or whether students with higher levels of positive subjective well-being evaluate their school environment more positively.

The present study contributes to current positive research efforts in school psychology by examining the longitudinal relation between positive school experiences and subjective well-being as an indicator of general psychological functioning. Based on Deci and Ryan's (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) self-determination theory and Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, it is investigated whether positive school experiences and happiness – an aspect of subjective well-being – are reciprocally connected and create an “upward spiral” over time, in a way that positive school experiences lay the foundation for future happiness, which, in turn, facilitates future positive school experiences.

### 1.1. Positive school experiences and subjective well-being

The concept of *school experiences* is rather elusive and has been defined and measured in manifold ways (cf. Baker et al., 2003; Libbey, 2004; Suldo, Riley, & Shaffer, 2006). Some authors take a rather broad view by assessing either school satisfaction (Rask, Astedt-Kurki, Tarkka, & Laippala, 2002; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998) or an aggregate of several school-related factors that define, for example, school ethos (Rutter, 1983), school culture (Hargreaves, 1995), school climate (Loukas & Murphy, 2007), school connectedness (You et al., 2008), or school well-being (Konu & Rimpelae, 2002). Others address more specific dimensions of school experiences, such as teacher–student relationships (Baker, 1999), social support at school (Patrick et al., 2007), sense of community (Battistich & Hom, 1997), or perceived academic performance or competence (Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Although there is no consensus regarding the precise definition and measurement of school experiences, most authors agree that students' experiences in school mediate the actual effects of the school environment on various outcomes (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Roeser et al., 1998), such as subjective well-being.

*Subjective well-being* is an important aspect of general psychological functioning and consists of two major components (Diener, 1994; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996): a cognitive and an affective component. The cognitive component represents an individual's cognitive–evaluative judgment of his or her life as a whole (e.g., life satisfaction), whereas the affective component reflects an individual's feelings and moods. The latter, affective well-being, includes two distinct aspects emphasizing either the positive or negative dimension of affect (Diener, Napa Scollon, & Lucas, 2003; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), indicated by the absence of unpleasant (e.g., emotional distress) or the presence of pleasant emotions (e.g., happiness).

There are few studies linking subjective well-being to indicators of *positive* school experiences. For example, happiness, an indicator of affective well-being, has been linked to perceived social support at school (Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnström, 2003). You et al. (2008) also reported a significant positive relation between adolescents' life satisfaction, an indicator of cognitive well-being, and school connectedness (e.g., feeling fairly treated by teachers or feeling close to classmates). Similar positive relations with different measures of cognitive well-being have been identified for perceived academic self-efficacy (Suldo & Huebner, 2006), perceived academic competence (Huebner, Gilman, & Laughlin, 1999), perceived academic performance (Leung, McBride-Chang, & Lai, 2004), perceived social support from teachers and classmates (Suldo & Huebner, 2006), and also overall satisfaction with school (Danielsen et al., 2009; Rask et al., 2002). In line with these results, Vieno, Santinello, Galbiati, and Mirandola (2004) identified teacher and classmate support as important antecedents of adolescents' satisfaction with school, which, in turn, was related to subjective well-being. Similarly, a large international study on juvenile health behavior attributed adolescents' life satisfaction to school adjustment (perceived academic performance and positive feelings about school) and to the social climate at school (Ravens-Sieberer, Freeman, Kokonyei, Thomas, & Erhart, 2009).

On the whole, overall evaluations of school experiences (e.g., general school satisfaction) and specific dimensions of school experiences (e.g., social support at school) seem to be mutually related to subjective well-being. However, as most studies used a cross-sectional research design, the interpretation of the direction of these effects is questionable. It is not clear whether positive school experiences promote positive subjective well-being or, rather, whether students with higher levels of positive subjective well-being evaluate and experience school more positively. To clarify the temporal sequence of positive school experiences and positive subjective well-being, longitudinal studies are necessary. However, such studies are scarce and, if available, usually have a deficit perspective: for example, in a longitudinal study on perceived school climate and general psychological adjustment, Loukas and Murphy (2007) used adjustment problems, such as depressive symptoms, as the main outcome measures. Even Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998, who found that school perceptions and experiences predicted emotional functioning over time, did not adopt an entirely positive perspective, because they operationalized emotional functioning as lack of emotional distress.

Moreover, existing results on the relation between positive school experiences and subjective well-being almost exclusively refer to the cognitive component of well-being, whereas affective well-being has been somewhat neglected. The lack of research on affective well-being from a positive perspective is rather unfortunate, because affective well-being is more variable than cognitive well-being and, as such, likely to be more strongly affected by variations in school experiences (cf. Diener et al., 2003). Furthermore, affective well-being and cognitive well-being, despite being significantly associated, are often linked to markedly different causes and consequences (cf. Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Schimmack, Schupp, & Wagner, 2008). For example, negative life events such as bereavement or the unexpected loss of employment have a stronger effect on cognitive well-being, whereas other life events such as childbirth primarily lead to an increase in the affective component of well-being (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). The present study therefore examines the pattern of the relation between positive school experiences and positive affective well-being (i.e., happiness), in a longitudinal design.

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