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Do School Experiences Predict Life Satisfaction in Turkish College Students?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to examine the predictive role of school experiences on life satisfaction. Participants were 311 college students. In this study, the Perceived School Experiences Scale and the Satisfaction with Life Scale were used. The relationships between school experiences and life satisfaction were examined using correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. In correlation analysis, academic press, academic motivation, and school connectedness were found positively related to life satisfaction. According to regression results, academic press, academic motivation, and school connectedness predicted life satisfaction in a positive way. School experiences have explained 26% of the variance in life satisfaction. The results were discussed in the light of the related literature and dependent recommendations to the area were given.

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Keywords:
School experiences, life satisfaction, college students

Introduction

In 1950's traditional approaches of psychology and education have emphasized on the identification and remediation of psychological deficits in students, while in the last three decades the positive psychology movement has risen to prominence with focusing on the strengths of individuals and on creating optimal environments that improve the well-being (Huebner & Gilman, 2003; Elmore & Huebner, 2010). This fundamental change has mandated teachers, administrators, and other auxiliary educational personnel (e.g., psychologists) to present student personality services, to pay more attention to whether students are satisfied with their school experiences (Verkuyten &Thijs, 2002), and to recognize that academic achievement is not the single outcome of interest (Elmore & Huebner, 2010). With this change the educational staff also be able to aware the important role of the school experiences as beneficial environments in individual's development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

It is well-known that relationships among students, teachers, and peers play crucial role on school experiences. If students are dissatisfied with learning and school, they feel that their teacher does not care about them and thus they may be less likely to take an active part in cooperative learning activities and to receive positive reinforcement or feedback from their teachers, which make them less satisfied with their school experiences and even less motivated (Ding & Hall, 2007). Such a process may result in a negative circle. School experiences also have important impacts on how students perceive themselves as well as on their feelings and thoughts and have serious implications for their life. For example, negative school experiences can cause students to choose to drop out (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996) and to vulnerable to

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problems such as substance abuse and delinquency (Willms, 2003) while the positive ones may contribute to life-affecting decisions such as to pursue further schooling (Ding & Hall, 2007).

Results of the investigations on school experiences have shown that psychological health and school experiences are inextricably intertwined—ensuring positive school experiences are central to improving emotional and social well-being (Costante, 2002; Ma, 2007). Correspondingly, students who have superior academic achievement have also more sociable behavior and prosocial relationships with others, are accepted by their peers, and hold leadership positions (Masten et al., 1995; Wentzel, 1991; Wentzel& Asher, 1995; Ma, 2007). On the other hand students' exposure to both psychological and physical family violence is related to lack of academic interest, poor concentration, and to behavioral problems at school, a decline in academic performance, and to low academic grades (e.g., Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Landen, 1993; Prothrow-Stith & Quady, 1996). Therefore promoting positive school experiences is an effective strategy that schools can employ to enhance psychological and social well-being of students.

Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, Iachini and Ball (2012) proposed three salient protective dimensions linked to students' school experiences that are of special importance. The first dimension is school connectedness and refers to students' general perceptions of their relationship to school (Libbey, 2004). It is relate to both academic outcomes such as higher academic performance, improved grades, and graduation from high school (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012; Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Klem & Connell, 2004; Wentzel, 1995) and non-academic outcomes such as fewer expulsions, suspensions, and disciplinary instances (Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001), reduced absenteeism (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Klem & Connell, 2004), less disruptive behavior in the classroom (Goodenow, 1993), and less engagement in risky behaviors, including violence, substance use, and sexual activity (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006; Resnick et al., 1997; Wilson, 2004). School connectedness is also linked to positive emotional outcomes such as low level of depression, anxiety, and stress (McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008).

Academic press and academic expectations for learning, the second dimension, is a "normative emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement" which teachers and students experience (Lee & Smith, 1999, p. 912) and is a key factor for effective school learning and for academic achievement (Bryk, 2010). Academic press positively impacts middle school students' effort and time spent on academic tasks (Lee & Smith, 1999), their self-regulation and self-efficacy for learning in science, math, and language comprehension (Henderson et al., 2005; Middleton & Midgley, 2002). The third dimension, academic motivation, is defined as students' general engagement, interest, and enjoyment in learning and school (Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch, & Murphy, 2007). A plethora of studies have proved that academic motivation relate to increased cognitive engagement (Walker & Greene, 2009), improved academic outcomes (Anderson & Keith, 1997), and reduced feelings of anxiety and enhanced feelings of competence (Gottfried, 1990). Studies demonstrated that overall positive school experiences are associated positively with the indicator of psychological well-being such as locus of control (Huebner, Ash, & Laughlin, 2001), positive affect (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002), self-esteem (Huebner & McCullough, 2000), hope (Huebner & Gilman, 2006), healthy interpersonal behavior and parent and peer support (DeSantis-King, Huebner, Suldo, & Valois, 2006). It was also demonstrated that both older and male students tended to feel more negative school experience than younger and female students (Ding & Hall, 2007).

The importance of school experiences on the psychological and social adjustment has been underscored by numerous theorists and researchers. Therefore a lot of research has focused on the psychological effects of students' perceptions of school experiences (Way & Robinson, 2003). One of the variables which related to school experiences of students may be life satisfaction that has gained more importance with the positive psychology trend. In recent years psychologists became more interested in positive feelings and emotions of well-being instead of being interested in negative or unpleasant emotional constructs such as depression and anxiety. Subjective well-being has been defined as an individual's experience or evaluation of the positive qualities in his or her life (Diener, 1984) and has been considered as 'a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction' (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, p. 277).

Life satisfaction involves the cognitive appraisal of one's quality of life and depends on one's cognitive and subjective evaluation (Gilman & Huebner, 2003). It was defined by Frisch (2000) as "excellence or

goodness in aspects of life that go beyond mere subsistence, survival, and longevity" (p. 208). Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2000) suggested that life satisfaction is the extent to how much a person's life is satisfying her/his physical and psychological desires that can be reflected in many different aspects of life such as family, work, friends, and school (Rostami & Abedi, 2012). Hence, the question of how well people are doing in lives is very important to them when they judge their life satisfaction (Caldwell, 2009).

Studies demonstrated that life satisfaction act as a protective factor against the development of psychopathology (Suldo& Huebner, 2004) and individuals who have greater life satisfaction are more likely to experience better mental and physical health (Siahpush, Spittal, & Singh, 2008). In these research life satisfaction was found positively related to adaptive constructs such as happiness and optimism (Sapmaz & Doğan, 2012), healthy identity (Özgüngör, 2009), emotional intelligence (Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2001), self-esteem (Yiğit, 2012), parental support (Suldo & Huebner, 2006), perceived social support (Edwards & Lopez 2006), hope (Bailey et al., 2007), marital adjustment (Çelik&Tümkaya, 2012), positive affectivity (Busseri et al., 2007), ego strength, and positivism (Diener, Napa-Scollon, Oishi, Dzoketo, & Suh, 2000). On the other hand, negative associations were found between life satisfaction and perceived stress (Extremera et al., 2009), negative automatic thoughts (Bulut, 2007), loneliness (Goodwin, Cook, & Yung, 2001), and depression (Wong & Lim 2009).

The present study

Although numerous research conducted with the school experiences is encouraging, to date, however, no empirical research has examined whether school experiences predict life satisfaction. Therefore the goal of the present research is to examine the predictive role of positive school experiences on life satisfaction. College students are in an adolescent stage characterized by risk and testing their limits to find out who they are, living in a relatively unregulated environment surrounded by same age peers (Arnett, 1999). Most of the adolescents suffer serious psychological, emotional, social, and behavioral problems (Steinberg, 1993). Since college students spend most of their daily time in school interacting with their peers, teachers, and administrators, their school experiences should have impact on their life satisfaction level. These experiences are important because they help students to construct positive social bonds with school, whereas negative experiences of school often lead to alienation and disengagement from school (Noddings, 1984; Pianta, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999), which in turn influence life satisfaction. Therefore there may be a linear relationship between school experiences and satisfaction with life. Based on the above impacts of school experiences, in the current research, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Academic press and expectations for learning will be positively associated with life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2. Academic motivation will be positively associated with life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3. School connectedness will be positively associated with life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 311 college students enrolled in various colleges at Sakarya, Turkey. 75 participants were in grade 9 (24%), 81 in grade 10 (26%), 73 in grade 11 (23%), and 82 in grade 12 (27%). Additionally, 160 participants indicated they were female (51%) and 143 participants reported being male (46%), while the remaining 8 students did not indicate their gender (3%). Their ages ranged from 15 to 19 years old (M = 16.8, SD = .08).

Measures

Perceived School Experiences Scale (PSEC). School experiences were measured by using middleandhighschoolversion of thePerceived School Experiences Scale (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012). Turkish adaptation of this scale had been done by Akın et al., 2013. PSEC is a 14-item self-report measurement and consists of three sub-scales; academic press and expectations for learning, academic motivation, and school connectedness. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ("1"= strongly disagree to "5"= strongly agree). A sum of all score yields a total score ranges from 14 to 70 and higher scores indicate

higher levels of positive school experiences. The internal consistency coefficients of the scale were .67, .67, and .69 for three subscales, respectively and .83 for overall scale. The results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the three-dimensional model was well fit (x^2= 137,11, df= 70, RMSEA= .054, CFI= .93, GFI= .94, IFI= .94, SRMR= .053).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS consists of five items (e.g., In most ways my life is close to my ideal) using a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sum of all scores yields a total score that ranges from 5 to 35; a higher score indicates a higher life satisfaction level. Turkish adaptation of this scale had been done by Durak, Senol-Durak, and Gencoz (2010). They found that internal consistency coefficient was .81 and the corrected item total correlations ranged from .55 to .63. Results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the model was well fit. The goodness of fit index values of the model were: x^2/df= 2.026, IFI= .99, TLI= .99, CFI= .99, SRMR= .020, RMSEA= .043.

Procedure and Statistical Analysis

Permission for participation of students was obtained from related chief departments and students voluntarily participated in research. Completion of the scales was anonymous and there was a guarantee of confidentiality. The scales were administered to the students in groups in the classrooms. The measures were counterbalanced in administration. Prior to administration of measures, all participants were told about purposes of the study. In this research, multiple linear regression analysis and Pearson correlation coefficient were used to investigate the relationships between school experiences and life satisfaction. The variables which were entered in multiple regression analysis were measured by summing the items of each scale and subscales. These analyses were carried out via SPSS 11.5.

Results

Descriptive data and inter-correlations

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, inter-correlations, and internal consistency coefficients of the variables used.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, alphas, and inter-correlations of the variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Academic press	—			
2. Academic motivation	.53**	—		
3. School connectedness	.39**	.48**	—	
4. Life satisfaction	.38**	.45**	.38**	—
Mean	15,28	23,46	14,79	23,15
Standard deviation	3,10	4,40	3,30	6,10
Alpha	.77	.73	.79	.84

**p<.01

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. Academic press (r= .38, p<.01), academic motivation (r= .45, p<.01), and school connectedness (r= .38, p<.01) were found positively associated with life satisfaction. There were also significant correlations between dimensions of school experiences.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Before applying regression, assumptions of multiple regression were checked. The data were examined for normality by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated normality of distributions of test scores for all tests in the current study (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Multi-collinearity was checked by the variance inflation factors (VIF). All the VIF values were less than 10 (Tabachnick &

Fidell, 2001), which indicated that there was no multi-collinearity. Multiple regression analysis was performed in which the dependent variable was life satisfaction and the independent variables were dimensions of school experiences (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of multiple regression analysis for variable predicting life satisfaction

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficents	*t*	R	R^2	*F*
	B	SEB	*β*				
Model 1							
Academic motivation	.62	.07	.45	8.72	.45	.20	76.088*
Model 2							
Academic motivation	.48	.08	.34	6.01	.49	.24	47.174*
School connectedness	.41	.11	.22	3.84			
Model 3							
Academic motivation	.38	.09	.27	4.39			
School connectedness	.35	.11	.19	3.30	.51	.26	34.447*
Academic press	.31	.12	.16	2.66			

According to the results of multiple regression analysis, summarized in Table 2, academic motivation entered the equation first, accounting for 20% of the variance in predicting life satisfaction (R2= .20, adjusted R2= .20, F(1, 309)= 76,088, p<.01). School connectedness entered secondly, accounting for an additional 4% variance (R2= .24, ΔR2= .4, adjusted R2= .23, F(2, 308)= 47,174, p<.01). Academic press entered last, accounting for an additional 2% variance (R2= .26, ΔR2= .02, adjusted R2= .25, F(3, 307)= 34,447, p<.01). The last regression model includes academic motivation, school connectedness, and academic press as predictors of life satisfaction and accounted for 26% of the variance. The standardized beta coefficients indicated the relative influence of the variables in last model with academic motivation (β= .27, p<.01), school connectedness, (β= .19, p<.01), and academic press (β= .16, p<.01) all significantly influencing life satisfaction and academic motivation was strongest predictor.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to investigate the predictive role of positive school experiences on life satisfaction. As hypothesized academic press and expectation, academic motivation, and school connectedness –positive school experiences- predicted life satisfaction positively. These results showed the importance of positive school experiences for satisfaction with life. Therefore it can be suggested that positive school experiences and functional interpersonal relationships within a school and classroom not only influence college students' academic achievement but also their perception of life satisfaction directly and psychological and social well-being indirectly.

Only few studies examined whether school experiences of students have impact on their psychological health. The findings of the current study are consistent with McLellan, Rissel, Donnelly, and Bauman's (1999) research which found that students with positive school experiences have better psychological health, even after adjustment for student characteristics (gender, age, and average weekly allowance). Similarly, Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995) found that students who experience high levels of positive school experiences and view the school as a community are more likely to feel committed to the school's goals and those values which also embrace positive mental health.

Findings of the present study are also in line with the research (Bailey et al., 2007; Busseri et al., 2007; Sapmaz & Doğan, 2012; Yiğit, 2012) which has shown that life satisfaction is closely associated with the indices of psychological adjustment such as happiness, optimism, self-esteem, hope, and positive affectivity. Furthermore research demonstrated that perceived positive school experiences are related the psychological strengths such as low levels of anxiety, depression, and stress and high levels of hope, self-esteem, and positive affect (Huebner & Gilman, 2006; Huebner et al., 2001; Huebner & McCullough, 2000; McGraw et al., 2008; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Thus it may be suggested that both positive school experiences and life satisfaction are key factors for individuals to be able to have psychological health. Although positive school

experiences and life satisfaction experienced differently at the phenomenological level they interact so as to mutually enhance and engender one another. So individuals who high in academic press and expectation, academic motivation, and school connectedness can experience more life satisfaction.

Also life satisfaction related to (and also facilitate) greater mental health that people experience when they have positive school climate. About this issue Noddings (2003) argued that positive school satisfaction and education are inextricably intertwined. She also asserted that "children learn best when they are happy" and ". . . happy people are rarely mean, cruel, or violent" (p. 2), which indicates that life satisfaction is best evolves when the school experiences of students are positive. In addition, in her "broaden and build" model of positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001) suggested that students who are satisfied with school will have more adaptive coping behaviors, earning them increasing academic and interpersonal resources and rewards, which in turn enhance upward spirals of school success and ultimately make have them more life satisfaction (Elmore&Huebner, 2010).

There are several limitations of this study that should be taken into account when evaluating the findings. First participants were college students and replication of this study for targeting other student populations such as elementary, middle, or high school students should be made to produce more solid relationships among the constructs investigated in this study, because generalization of the results is somewhat limited. Second as correlational statistics were utilized, no definitive statements can be made about causality. And third the data reported here for school experiences and life satisfaction are limited to self-reported data.

Also some implications can be drawn. Positive school experiences that include school connectedness, academic press, and academic motivation are essential in promoting positive youth development by influencing their life satisfaction level. Teachers, psychological counselors, and other staff in schools may create environments and develop school-wide intervention strategies that promote students' positive experiences in schools. For that purpose, they need to pay more attention to the properties of various social groups in their student body and risk factors that decreasing positive school experiences. Regular meetings with students may be organize to develop their sense of belonging to the school. Also teachers and parents may help students to have high academic achievement by academic press and expectation which make them to experience positive school climate. But teachers and parents listen to the concerns of students and behave them with kindness and respect when applying academic pressure and they must not forget that this kind of pressure and expectation on academic work is likely to increase the related stress levels of students, which may lead to a state of helplessness (see Wehlage, 1989). Therefore, teachers, parents, and other staff must set students appropriate and achievable academic goals and be prepared to help students with any academic difficulties (Ma, 2007).

As a result the present research provides important information about the predictors of life satisfaction and shows that an increment in positive school experiences will increase life satisfaction. This research also suggests that improvement of positive school experiences could be highly beneficial for life satisfaction. Clearly, however, more research needs to be done to understand how positive school experiences are linked to life satisfaction.

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