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DO SCHOOL EXPERIENCES PREDICT SUBJECTIVE VITALITY IN TURKISH COLLEGE STUDENTS?

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to examine the predictive role of school experiences on subjective vitality. Participants were 305 college students. In this study, the Perceived School Experiences Scale and the Subjective Vitality Scale were used. The relationships between school experiences and subjective vitality were examined using correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. In correlation analysis, academic press, academic motivation, and school connectedness were found positively related to subjective vitality. According to regression results, academic press, academic motivation, and school connectedness predicted subjective vitality in a positive way. School experiences have explained 44% of the variance in subjective vitality. The results were discussed in the light of the related literature and dependent recommendations to the area were given.

Keywords: *School experiences, subjective vitality, college students*

Traditional approaches of the psychology and education have emphasized to the identification and remediation of psychological deficits in students. Nonetheless 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 well-being (Huebner & Gilman, 2003; Elmore & Huebner, 2010). This change has mandated teachers, administrators, and auxiliary personnel (e.g., psychologists) to present student personality services, to pay more attention to students' satisfaction with their school experiences (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002), and to recognize that academic achievement is not the single outcome of interest (Elmore & Huebner, 2010). Teachers and educational psychologist have considered the important role of the school experiences as beneficial environments in individual's development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

The relationships among students and their teachers and peers almost completely shape their satisfaction level from school experiences and learning. If they are dissatisfied with their learning, they think that their teacher does not care about them and thus they may be less likely to pursue or take an active part in cooperative learning activities and ultimately they are unlikely 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 influence on how students view themselves, on their thoughts and feelings, and have serious implications for their life. For example, negative school experiences cause to students choose to drop out (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996) and contribute to leave students vulnerable to problems such as substance abuse and delinquency while the positive school experiences may contribute to life-affecting decisions such as whether to pursue further schooling (Ding & Hall, 2007).

Evidence has been growing recently that psychological well-being and school experiences are inextricably intertwined—ensuring positive school experiences are central to improving emotional and social well-being (Costante, 2002; Ma, 2007). For instance students who are high in academic

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achievement are also have more sociable behavior and prosocial relationships with others, are accepted by their friends and teachers, and hold leadership positions (Ma, 2007; Masten et al., 1995; Wentzel, 1991; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). In contrary exposure to violence was found related to poor concentration, lack of academic interest, behavioral problems at school, a decline in academic performance, and low academic grades (e.g., Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Landen, 1993). Therefore increasing positive school experiences among students is an effective strategy that educational environments can employ to enhance both psychological and social well-being.

Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, Iachini and Ball (2012) developed a combined model which suggested three salient protective dimensions related to students' school experiences that are of special importance. School connectedness (or school belonging, bonding, connectedness, attachment, etc.), the first dimension, involves students' general perceptions of their relationship to school (Libbey, 2004). School connectedness relate positively to both academic outcomes such as higher improved grades, academic performance, and graduation from high school (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012; Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Klem & Connell, 2004). It also linked to non-academic variables such as fewer suspensions, expulsions, 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) as well as to emotional outcomes such as less likely to experience depression, anxiety, and stress (McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008).

The second dimension, academic press (academic expectations for learning), refers to "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 aspect of effective school and of overall student achievement (Bryk, 2010). Academic press positively impacts middle school students' effort and time spent on academic tasks (Lee & Smith, 1999), self-regulation and self-efficacy for learning in science, math, social studies, and language comprehension (Henderson et al., 2005; Middleton & Midgley, 2002). The third dimension is academic motivation which was defined as students' general engagement, interest, and enjoyment in learning and school (Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch, & Murphy, 2007). Research indicates that academic motivation relate to increased cognitive engagement (Walker & Greene, 2009), improved academic outcomes (Eccles, Wong, & Peck, 2006; Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, & Sene´cal, 2007), and reduced feelings of anxiety and enhanced feelings of competence (Gottfried, 1990).

Studies on school experiences proved that the positive school experiences are related to positively with the indicator of psychological well-being such as positive affect (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002), self-esteem (Huebner & McCullough, 2000; Karatzias, Power, Flemming, Lennan, & Swanson, 2002), hope (Huebner & Gilman, 2006), locus of control (Huebner, Ash, & Laughlin, 2001), global life satisfaction (Huebner, 1994), healthy interpersonal behavior and parent and peer support (DeSantis-King, Huebner, Suldo, & 2006). It was also demonstrated that older and male students tended to feel more negative school experiences than younger and female students (Ding & Hall, 2007).

The importance of school experiences on the psychological adjustment has been underscored and well-established by numerous theorists and researchers. Therefore a lot of studies have focused on the psychological effects of students' perceptions of school experiences (Way & Robinson, 2003). One of the variables affected largely by school experiences of students may be subjective vitality. This concept was introduced first by Ryan and Frederick (1997) and was defined as "one's conscious experience of possessing energy and aliveness" (p. 530). The subjective vitality experience is called by different terms in various cultures such as "chi" in Chinese culture as the sense of being full of internal energy that is source of life (Bostic, Rubio, & Hood, 2000) or "ki" in Japanese culture as the power and energy by which helps a person is to keep his/her physical and psychological health (Ryan & Frederick, 1997).

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Subjective vitality is derived from an internal source, not from specific threats in the environment, and is not driven or compelled (Bostic et al., 2000). Individuals who have higher level of subjective vitality report being alert and energized, are also have more energy to perform all activities, cope better with stress, and report greater mental health. Research generally showed that subjective vitality is negatively related to a-motivation (Balaguer, Castillo, Duda, & Garcia-Merita, 2011), poor self-control performance (Muraven, Gagne, & Rosman, 2008), anxiety, neuroticism, negative affectivity, physical pain and symptoms, external locus of control (Ryan & Frederick, 2007), internet addiction (Akın, 2012), sleep difficulties, somatic illnesses (Stewart, Hayes, & Ware, 1992), and depressive symptoms (Niemiec, Lynch, & Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). On the other hand, Ryan and Frederick (1997) found that subjective vitality is positively related to positive affectivity, conscientiousness, extraversion, perceived physical ability, self-esteem, satisfaction with life, self-actualization, physical self-presentation confidence, and intrinsic motivation (Balaguer et al., 2011).

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 subjective vitality. Therefore the goal of the present research is to examine the predictive role of positive school experiences on subjective vitality. 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 subjective vitality 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), which in turn influence subjective vitality. Therefore there may be a linear relationship between students' school experiences and their level of subjective vitality. 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 subjective vitality.

Hypothesis 2. Academic motivation will be positively associated with subjective vitality.

Hypothesis 3. School connectedness will be positively associated with subjective vitality.

Method

Participants

Participants were 305 college students enrolled in various colleges at Sakarya, Turkey. Seventy participants were in grade 9 (23%), 85 in grade 10 (28%), 76 in grade 11 (25%), and 74 in grade 12 (24%). 173 participants indicated they were female (57%) and 126 participants reported being male (41%), while the remaining 6 students did not indicate their gender (2%). Their ages ranged from 15 to 19 years old (M= 16.5, SD= .08).

Measures

Perceived School Experiences Scale (PSEC). School experiences were measured by using Perceived 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 score indicate higher level 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

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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).

Subjective Vitality Scale (SVS). Subjective vitality was measured using the Turkish version of the Subjective Vitality Scale (Ryan & Frederick, 1997; Salama-Younes, 2011). The SVS measures vitality (seven items; e.g., In general, I feel alive and vital). Responses were made on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). Turkish adaptation of this scale was done by Akın, Satici, Arslan, Akın and Kayıs (2012). Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the uni-dimensional model was well fit (x^2= 12.17, df= 7, RMSEA=.047, NFI=.99, CFI=1.00, IFI=1.00, RFI=1.00, GFI=.99, and AGFI=.96). The Cronbach alpha coefficient in the Turkish sample .84.

Procedure

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.

Statistical Analysis

In this research, a three level stepwise regression analysis and a Pearson correlation coefficient were used to investigate the relationships between school experiences and subjective vitality. The variables which were entered in 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
Descriptive Statistics, Alphas, and Inter-correlations of the Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Academic press	—			
2. Academic motivation	.63**	—		
3. School connectedness	.47**	.51**	—	
4. Subjective vitality	.49**	.65**	.43**	—
Mean	15,07	22,53	14,56	35,42
Standard deviation	3,47	5,98	3,42	8,08
Alpha	.80	.70	.74	.80

**$p < .01$

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

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. Academic press (r=.49, p<.01), academic motivation (r=.65, p<.01), and school connectedness (r=.43, p<.01) were found positively associated with subjective vitality. There were also significant correlations between dimensions of school experiences.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Before applying regression, assumptions of 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. Outliers are cases that have data values that are very different from the data values for the majority of cases in the data set. Outliers were investigated using Mahalanobis distance. A case is outlier if the probability associated with its D^2 is .001 or less (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Based on this criterion, five data were labeled as outliers and

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they were deleted. 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.

A three level stepwise regression analysis was performed in which the dependent variable was subjective vitality and the independent variables were dimensions of school experiences (Table 2). As predictor variables were dependent on each other, forward stepwise procedure, which includes one new explanatory variable at each step, specifically the most associated with the dependent variable while being, at the same time, independent of the explanatory variables already included in the model. The criteria to include the variables from the regression model were: criterion probability-of-F-to enter <=.05.

Table 2

Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Variable Predicting Subjective Vitality

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficents	t	R	R^2	F
	B	SE_B	β				
Step 1							
Academic motivation	.88	.06	.65	14.85	.65	.42	220,417*
Step 2							
Academic motivation	.79	.07	.58	11.55	.66	.43	115.295*
School connectedness	.30	.12	.13	2.51			
Step 3							
Academic motivation	.70	.08	.52	8.90			
School connectedness	.25	.12	.10	2.03	.67	.44	79.010*
Academic press	.27	.13	.12	2.02			

*p<.001

According to the results, summarized in Table 2, academic motivation entered the equation first, accounting for 42% of the variance in predicting subjective vitality (R^2=.42, adjusted R^2= .41, F(1, 303)= 220,417, p<.01). School connectedness entered on the second step accounting for an additional 1% variance (R^2= .43, ΔR^2= .01, adjusted R^2= .42, F(2, 302)= 115,295, p<.01). Academic press entered last, accounting for an additional 1% variance (R^2= .44, ΔR^2= .01, adjusted R^2= .43, F(3, 301)= 79,010, p<.01). The last regression models has included academic motivation, school connectedness, and academic press as predictors of subjective vitality and accounted for 44% of the variance. The standardized beta coefficients indicated the relative influence of the variables in last model with academic motivation (β= .52, p<.01), school connectedness, (β= .10, p<.01), and academic press (β= .12, p<.01) all significantly influencing subjective vitality and academic motivation was strongest predictor.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the predictive role of positive school experiences on subjective vitality. To my knowledge, this is the first study investigating the relationships between school experiences and subjective vitality. As expected academic press and expectation, academic motivation, and school connectedness –positive school experiences- predicted subjective vitality positively. These findings showed the importance of positive school experiences in the subjective vitality level of students. Therefore it can be suggested that positive school experiences and interpersonal relationships that exist within a school environment not only effect college students' academic achievement and ideals but also their subjective vitality level directly and influence their psychological and social well-being indirectly.

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Few existing research have focused on school experiences of adolescents as they affect psychological health. Nonetheless the findings of the present study are consistent with both McLellan, Rissel, Donnelly, and Bauman's (1999) research which found that students who have positive school experiences and perceived their teachers as supportive have also better psychological health, even after adjustment for student characteristics (gender, age, and average weekly allowance). Also Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995) found that students who experience more positive school experiences and feel 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 in line with the research that has shown that subjective vitality is closely associated with the indices of psychological adjustment such as positive affectivity, extraversion, self-esteem, satisfaction with life, self-actualization, and intrinsic motivation (Balaguer et al., 2011; Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Furthermore findings of the current research are also consistent with the literature which demonstrated that perceived positive school experiences are related the psychological strengths such as low level of depression, anxiety, and stress and high level of positive affect, self-esteem, hope, and global life satisfaction (Huebner, 1994; Huebner & Gilman, 2006; Huebner et al., 2001; Huebner & McCullough, 2000; Karatzias et al., 2002; McGraw et al., 2008; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). These results showed that both positive school experiences and subjective vitality are key factors for individuals to be able to have psychological health. And that although positive school experiences and subjective vitality 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 feel themselves more vital. Also subjective vitality related to (and also facilitate) experience of possessing aliveness and greater mental health that people experience when they have positive school climate. Supporting this idea Noddings (2003) proposed that happiness, in the form of 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 subjective happiness is best evolves when the school experiences of students are positive. In addition, in her "broaden and build" model of positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001) proposed that students who are satisfied with school and have more positive school experiences will exhibit adaptive coping behaviors, earning them increasing academic and interpersonal resources and rewards, which in turn enhance upward spirals of school success and ultimately make feel them more vital (Elmore & Huebner, 2010).

There are several limitations of this study that should be considered when evaluating the findings; (a) 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 in order to generate a more solid relationship among the constructs examined in this study, because generalization of the results is somewhat limited, (b) as correlational statistics were utilized, no definitive statements can be made about causality, and (c) the data reported here for school experiences and subjective vitality are limited to self-reported data.

Considered together, positive school experiences that include school connectedness, academic press, and academic motivation are three critical dimensions of students' experiences in schools and these experiences are essential in promoting positive youth development by influencing their subjective vitality level. Teachers, parents, and other personnel in schools may create environments and psychological counselors may develop school-wide intervention strategies that enhance students' positive experiences in schools. For this aim, they need to pay attention to the properties of various social groups in their student body and risk factors that decreasing positive school experiences. They may organize regular meetings with students and so may develop their sense of belonging to the school. Regular discussions within students on issues, such as mutual recognition and a reduction in risky behaviors, help not only to eliminate negative elements of the group but also to introduce or

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reinforce positive elements within the group. Teachers and parents may help students to have high academic achievement which make them to experience positive school climate by academic press and expectation. However teachers and parents listen to the concerns of students and behave them with kindness and respect when applying high 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).

Consequently, the present research provides important information about the predictors of subjective vitality. An increment in positive school experiences will increase subjective vitality. This research also suggests that improvement of positive school experiences could be highly beneficial for subjective vitality. Clearly, however, more research needs to be done to understand how positive school experiences are linked to subjective vitality.

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