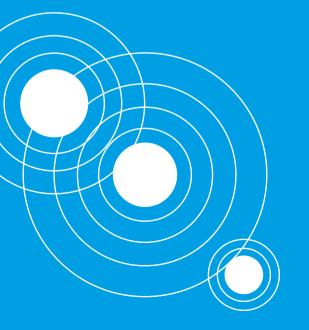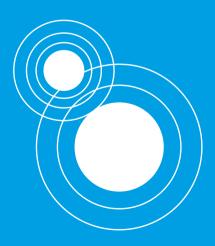SUPSI

Well-being in Education Systems

Conference Abstract Book
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What are the functions of positive emotions in fostering school engagement in primary school (and how to deal with it)?

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Introduction

The main goal of teachers is without doubt helping students to learn and succeed. Previous research has shown that negative (sadness, frustration) as well as positive (happiness, pride) emotions are frequent in the school context and affect school engagement, which plays a key role in successful learning.

It is well established that school engagement is particularly important for achievement (e.g., Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014). It is also associated with academic motivation and prevents school dropout (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engagement is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of actions, emotions and thoughts. The most recent attempt to develop a comprehensive approach of this concept has empirically distinguished three dimensions in school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004): behavioural, emotional and cognitive.

Behavioural engagement refers to behaviours such as following the school and the class rules (e.g. not skipping school or getting into trouble, homework), making effort and persisting in academic achievement (e.g., focusing and asking questions) and non-academic school-related activities (e.g., participation in athletics or school governance).

Emotional engagement relates to students' positive and negative reactions in the classroom; these reactions (e.g., interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety) are supposed to engage or disengage students.

Finally, cognitive engagement focuses on psychological investment in learning, a desire to go beyond the requirements of the teacher, and a preference for challenge.

Regarding the factors related to engagement, Pekrun, Goetz, Frenzel, Barchfeld, and Perry (2011) found higher correlations between intrinsic motivation (including school engagement) and positive emotions than between intrinsic motivation and negative emotions. Similarly, Malmivuori (2001) showed that perseverance is almost independent from anxiety but strongly correlated with positive emotions. Therefore, positive emotions in the classroom seem to play a more important contribution to students' engagement than the inhibitory role of anxiety.

In an attempt to clarify the underlying mechanisms of engagement, some researchers proposed that positive emotions lead students to focus more on the task (Meinhardt & Pekrun, 2003) and increase perseverance (Rodríguez, Plax, & Kearney, 1996). Moreover, a virtuous circle can be described. Positive attitudes imply better results, which in turn leads students to perceive their learning even more positively (Hagenauer & Hascher, 2014). Research has also shown that positive emotions can broaden the scope of attention (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Indeed, positive emotions play a role in complex problem-solving skills by helping to approach the learning situation with divergent and creative solutions (Fredrickson, 2001).

Interestingly, positive emotions are essential to psychological well-being (Seligman, 2011; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Ryff, 1989) as defined by Diener et al. (1999) as "a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction" (p. 277). Thus, what some people call a good life may be a life where good (positive) experiences play an important role and at school, this may be characterized by pleasant work as well as good relationships with classmates and teachers. We propose to use the term positive feelings (of students) to more precisely define the subjective emotional experience component of emotion and thus avoid considering other aspects of emotions such as physiological changes (Scherer, 2005).

In this context, positive feelings related to school and teachers as well as more general well-being and positive emotions play a crucial role in school engagement. However, it is important to clarify what kind of positive feelings and in which context they can foster school engagement. In this context, it could be very helpful for teachers to better know how and when feeling good can have an impact on their students' engagements.

Research question and aims
The aim of this study is to better understand which types of positive feelings are related to engagement with pupils between 8 and 12 years in the school context. Insight into these associations may lead to promotion of good practices on what a teacher can do to increase students' engagement, which is known for predicting academic achievement.

Methodology and methods
A total of 146 children (66 females) between 8 and 12 years old (m=9.61, sd=1.15) completed the following questionnaires:
- The KidScreen (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2008) with the five subscales Physical Well-Being (4 items, α=.63), Psychological Well-Being (3 items, α=.55), Peers and Social Support (4 items, α=.82), School Environment (4 items, α=.80) and social acceptance (3 items, α=.77).
- The school engagement measure (SEM; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005; French validation: Bernet, Karsenti, & Roy, 2014) with three dimensions: behavioural engagement (4 items, α=.61), emotional engagement (6 items, α=.81) and cognitive engagement (7 items, α=.71).

Analyses and results
Correlational analyses revealed that both school environment's positive feelings and physical well-being are positively related to the three dimensions of school engagement. Psycho-

What are the functions of positive emotions in fostering school engagement in primary school (and how to deal with it)?

255

logical well-being is positively related to behavioral and affective engagement, and social support is positively related to affective engagement.

Multiple regression analyses including gender, age and the five dimensions of the KidScreen as independent variables revealed the following significant results, each presented by order of magnitude of the standardized beta (β):

- Behavioural engagement was predicted by School Environment (β = .487; p. < .001), physical well-being (β = .199; p. < .05) and gender (β = -.158; p. < .05; indicating that girls obtained higher scores than boys).
- Emotional engagement was predicted by School Environment (β = .585; p. < .001).
- Cognitive engagement was predicted by School Environment (β = .289; p. < .001) and age (β = -.183; p. < .001).

Discussion

In accordance with previous results and suggestions, the present study emphasizes that positive feelings about school and teachers are important to promote students' engagement, which could ultimately lead to learning and achievement. The results showed that feeling good in school and getting along with teachers are related to the three forms of school engagement whereas physical well-being is also a significant predictor of behavioural engagement.

While psychological well-being is positively correlated with affective and behavioural engagement, these relations disappear when other dimensions of the kidscreen are controlled for. This indicates that a positive feeling specifically related to school context is more important than general dimensions of well-being to improve these two forms of engagement.

Several approaches have shown to be efficient at adaptively increasing positive emotions and well-being in school as well as to developing a positive climate in the classroom and foster students' academic performance (for a review, see e.g., Waters, 2011). For instance, interventions in positive psychology, such as gratitude, mindfulness or strengths-based approaches could be of interest. In this context, the present study may lead to such projects' implementation in schools underlining that interventions addressing the positive climate are crucial not only for feeling good but also for academic achievement.

Limitations and perspectives

Despite promising results, several limitations should be mentioned. The correlational nature of the present study precludes any causal inferences about the relations; the use of questionnaires may have different biases; finally, the dimensions of positive emotions and well-being should be more developed and with measurement of fine-grained. Thus, future studies should use a longitudinal design, direct observations (e.g., dropout or perseverance in different tasks for engagement) as well as distinguishing different forms of positive and negative school climates (e.g., authoritarian vs democratic).

In conclusion, giving time to positive emotions and school climate is important if teachers aim to increase school engagement in their pupils.

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This book collects the contributions presented at the 2nd International Conference on Well-being in Education Systems, held in Locarno on 12-13-14 November 2019 and organized by the *Competence centre for Innovation and Research on Education Systems* (CIRSE). The 49 contributions are research papers, theoretical dissertations and field interventions of academic researchers and practitioners from 10 countries around the world. They cover four areas: student well-being, burnout and teacher well-being, well-being promotion and well-being and academic achievement.

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