



## The Relation between Happiness, School Satisfaction, and Positive Experiences at School in Secondary School Students \*

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between secondary school students' happiness and school satisfaction and positive experiences at school. The study group consisted of 328 secondary school students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in the provincial center of Çanakkale. Among the students, 153 (47%) were male and 175 (53%) were female, 114 (34.8%) were sixth-graders, 130 (39.6%) were seventh-graders, and 84 (25.6%) were eighth-graders. The data were collected using the School Children's Happiness Inventory, Positive Experiences at School Scale, and Comprehensive School Satisfaction Scale for Children. A significant positive relationship between school satisfaction, positive experiences at school, and happiness was observed. The results of the regression analysis indicated that school satisfaction, persistence, and optimism were significant predictors of the happiness of secondary school students. The findings are discussed in accordance with the literature, and practical suggestions are made.

### Keywords

Happiness  
School satisfaction  
Positive experiences  
Secondary school student

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### Introduction

Happiness and subjective well-being are sometimes used as synonyms in the literature (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009). Happiness is a comprehensive term used to describe the level of well-being people experience in their lives according to their subjective evaluations (Diener & Ryan, 2009). According to Veenhoven (2009), happiness is the degree of positive evaluation of a person's life as a whole. This evaluation is made both cognitively and emotionally (Diener, 1984). Experiencing high life satisfaction and positive emotions as well as low negative emotions has been considered an indicator of happiness (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997). Recent research has shown that people with high levels of happiness not only exhibit positive emotions but also good health and positive social relationships (Diener & Scollon, 2014). Young people with good mental health have low levels of psychopathology, high psychological functioning, and high happiness, whereas those with poor mental health experience lower happiness and many difficulties (Suldo, Frank, Chappel, Albers, & Bateman, 2014).

Many factors affect happiness. One variable closely related to happiness is personality traits. Personal characteristics are among the most important predictors of adult (Doğan, 2013; Garcia &

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Moradi, 2012; Gutiérrez, Jiménez, Hernández, & Puente, 2005; Lu, 1995; Vittersø & Nilsen, 2002) as well as adolescent (Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Eryılmaz & Öğülmüş, 2010; Garcia, 2011; Sharma & Malhotra, 2010) happiness. Self-esteem (Çeçen, 2008; Doğan & Eryılmaz, 2013; Diener & Diener, 1995; Eryılmaz & Atak, 2011; Karatzias, Chouliara, Power, & Vivien, 2006; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004; Vacek, Coyle, & Vera, 2010) and self-efficacy (Caprara, Steca, Gerbino, Paciello, & Vecchio, 2006; Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2008; Strobel, Tumasjan, & Spörle, 2011; Telef & Ergün, 2013) are important personal variables that predict happiness.

Internal locus of control, religiousness, and social support have been found to be associated with happiness among adolescents (Sharma & Malhotra, 2010), and adolescents participating in religious activities show increased happiness (Eryılmaz, 2015a). According to Cheng and Furnham (2002), friendship and self-confidence are associated with happiness in adolescents and are important predictors of happiness. Helping other people and interacting with family, friends, and other important people seem to be positive behavioral strategies that increase happiness in adolescents (Datu & Valdez, 2012). While personal autonomy, stability, good family relationships, and humor are positively associated with subjective well-being, weak stability and family relations are related to depression (Rask, Astedt-Kurki, & Laippala, 2002). Health status, social relationships, tools for self-realization, and school conditions affect happiness in children (Konu, Lintonen, & Rimpela, 2002).

It has been observed that happy adolescents are more motivated for lessons at school (Eryılmaz & Aypay, 2011), receive more support from their family and peers for learning, have better teacher-student relations (Antaramian, Huebner, Hills, & Valois, 2010), are more flexible and creative, can solve problems better (Tamannaifar & Motaghedifard, 2014), and display fewer behavioral problems (DeSantis King, Huebner, Suldo, & Valois, 2006; Engels, Aelterman, Petegem, & Schepens, 2004). High happiness may assist with coping with problems in the secondary or high school years in terms of meeting the school's demands, managing resources, overcoming difficulties, and adopting positive attitudes towards school (Shoshani & Slone, 2013).

School satisfaction is one of the most important areas of satisfaction to ensure that students are happy in their lives (Casas, Bello, González, & Aligué, 2013; Telef, Arslan, Mert, & Kalafat, 2015). School satisfaction is measured by the subjective and cognitive assessment of one's school life (Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003). School satisfaction is argued to be important in order to assess, implement, develop, observe, and understand students' school experiences (DeSantis King et al., 2006). According to a study carried out in the USA, 10% of students defined their school experiences as "terrible," while 22.8% indicated that they had low school satisfaction (Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000). According to Whitley, Huebner, Hills, and Valois (2012), high levels of dissatisfaction with school are troubling, as children who experience school dissatisfaction tend to display behavioral problems, academic concerns, and various adaptation problems in interpersonal relationships (Whitley et al., 2012). A literature review revealed that adolescent happiness increases as their interest in school increases and vice versa (Aypay & Eryılmaz, 2011; Doğan & Çelik, 2014; Elmore & Huebner, 2010).

School experiences also have an important role in student happiness (Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnstrøm, 2003). Students are exposed to many experiences, both positive and negative, in the school environment. Research has focused more on negative school experiences such as academic failure (Needham, Crosnoe, & Muller, 2004), school absenteeism (Balkis, Arslan, & Duru, 2016), mental health problems (Bor, Dean, Najman, & Hayatbakhsh, 2014), and bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). However, researchers have also started to focus on positive characteristics in recent years. Furlong, You, Renshaw, O'Malley, and Rebelez (2013) put forth a model to assess positive school experiences. The model includes, in order, gratitude, zest, optimism, and persistence. Gratitude is being thankful for

good things and being aware of this (Park & Peterson, 2006). Persistence is a person assiduously working in order to realize his/her objectives by maintaining his/her interest when encountered with difficulties and failure (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Zest refers to living life energetically and breathtakingly (Park & Peterson, 2006). Finally, optimism is a belief that good things rather than bad things will happen in a person's life (Scheier & Carver, 1993). Students' positive experiences at school increase their commitment to school (Renshaw, 2016; Wilkins, Boman, & Mergler, 2015). Moreover, rejection of school is decreased with increased school security (Furlong et al., 2013). A positive relationship between positive experiences at school and student happiness was identified in the studies conducted by Furlong et al. (2013) and Pennell, Boman, and Mergler (2015).

Studies on happiness have increased in the national and international literature with the developments in positive psychology. A review of the literature related to happiness in Turkey indicates that there are many studies on adults (Eryılmaz, 2014; Eryılmaz, 2015b), university students (Akın, 2015; Doğan & Eryılmaz, 2013; İlhan & Özbay, 2010; Özbay, Palancı, Kandemir, & Çakır, 2012; Sapmaz & Doğan, 2012; Tuzgöl-Dost, 2007), and high school students (Doğan & Çelik, 2014; Eryılmaz, 2015a; Eryılmaz & Atak, 2011; Eryılmaz & Öğülmüş, 2010). Although many studies have investigated the factors affecting the happiness of university and high school students, few studies have looked at the factors affecting the happiness of secondary school students (Bender, 1997). However, the factors that affect students' happiness may differ in the secondary school years, which reflect the transition period from childhood to adolescence (Holder & Coleman, 2008). Conducting research on what makes students happy may enable the development of strategies for increasing the happiness of schoolchildren (O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010). Such results carry importance in terms of their contribution to understanding the factors that affect the happiness of secondary school students.

The objective of this research was to investigate the relation between secondary school students' happiness, school satisfaction, and positive experiences at school. The answers to the following questions were sought in order to achieve this aim:

- (1) Are there significant relationships between secondary school students' happiness, school satisfaction, and positive experiences at school?
- (2) Do school satisfaction and positive experiences at school predict the happiness of secondary school students?

## **Method**

### *The Model of the Study*

This study was conducted based on the relational screening model. According to Karasar (2012), the aim of this model is to understand the existence or degree of change between two or more variables.

### *Participants*

The study group consisted of 328 secondary school students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in the provincial center of Çanakkale. The schools were selected based on the unbiased-random method. Of the students, 153 (47%) were males and 175 (53%) were females, and there were 114 (34.8%) sixth-graders, 130 (39.6%) seventh-graders, and 84 (25.6%) eighth-graders. The students' ages varied between 12 and 14 years (mean 13.09, standard deviation .78).

### *Instruments*

**School Children's Happiness Inventory:** The School Children's Happiness Inventory is a measurement tool developed by Ivens (2007) to determine the factors affecting the happiness of schoolchildren, and it can be applied to children between the ages of 8 and 15 individually or in groups.

The inventory consists of 30 items, 15 positive (e.g., I felt that school was a safe place) and 15 negative (e.g., I felt upset). The total score is obtained by reverse scoring the 15 negative items. Each item on the scale is given a score between 1 and 4 points. The adaptation of the inventory into Turkish was carried out by Telef (2014a) with 358 children and adolescents studying in the fourth to eighth grades. The exploratory factor analysis revealed that the total explained variance was 39%. The factor loadings of the items in the inventory varied between 0.45 and 0.68. The confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the fit indices of the model were RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.05, NFI = 0.93, RFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.96, and IFI = 0.96. Criterion-related validity shows significant negative relations between schoolchildren's happiness and depression and negative experiences, as well as significant positive relations between their happiness and positive experiences. The reliability analysis found Cronbach's alpha to be 0.92. In this study, the fit indices obtained from confirmatory factor analysis were acceptable (RMSEA = 0.05, GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94). Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.88. Obtaining a high score on the inventory indicates a high level of happiness.

**Comprehensive School Satisfaction Scale for Children:** The Comprehensive School Satisfaction Scale for Children was developed to evaluate the comprehensive school satisfaction of primary school students (Randolph, Kangas, & Ruokamo, 2009). The scale consists of six items (e.g., "School is fun") and one dimension. The items of the scale are given scores between 1 and 5; thus, possible scores range from 6 to 30. The adaptation study of the scale into Turkish was conducted by Telef (2014b) with 582 primary and secondary school students. Exploratory factor analysis identified that the scale consisted of one factor, as in the original one, and the total explained variance was 65%. The factor loadings of the scale items were calculated to be between 0.77 and 0.82. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the fit indices of the evaluation instrument were RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.01, GFI = 0.98, NFI = 0.99, RFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99, and IFI = 0.99. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated as 0.89. In this study, the fit indices obtained from confirmatory factor analysis were acceptable (RMSEA = 0.07, GFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99). Cronbach's alpha was 0.87. Higher scores indicate high school satisfaction.

**Positive Experiences at School Scale:** The Positive Experiences at School Scale was developed by Furlong et al. (2013) to measure the school-based positive psychological features of primary school children. The original scale consists of 16 items and four sub-dimensions: gratitude (e.g., "I am lucky to go to my school"), zest (e.g., "I get excited when I learn something new at school"), optimism (e.g., "I expect good things to happen at my school"), and persistence (e.g., "When I get a bad grade, I try even harder the next time"). The items of the scale are given scores between 1 and 4. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that the variance explained by the four dimensions was 43%. The factor loadings of the items on the scale varied between 0.32 and 0.66. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the fit indices of the model were CFI = 0.94, SRMR = 0.03, and RMSEA = 0.04. Reliability analysis indicated that Cronbach's alpha was 0.70 for gratitude, 0.75 for zest, 0.66 for optimism, 0.76 for persistence, and 0.88 for the overall scale. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Telef (2016). Exploratory factor analysis showed that two items were excluded from the scale due to overlap. After excluding the two items (items 4 and 9), the variance explained by the 14 items and four sub-dimensions was 60%. The factor loadings of the items varied between 0.60 and 0.79. Confirmatory factor analysis showed fit indices of RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.03, GFI = 0.96, NFI = 0.95, RFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.96, and IFI = 0.96. Cronbach's alpha was 0.70 for gratitude, 0.80 for zest, 0.63 for optimism, 0.73 for persistence, and 0.86 for the overall scale. In this study, the fit indices obtained from confirmatory factor analysis were acceptable (RMSEA = 0.06, GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94). Cronbach's alpha was 0.74 for gratitude, 0.80 for zest, 0.65 for optimism and 0.76 for persistence, and 0.81 for the overall scale.

### Data Analysis

Before data analysis, values entered incorrectly were corrected and assignment was conducted for the missing data. Mahalanobis distance was used to determine whether there were any extreme values on the study variables. The data of 15 individuals were excluded as a result. Determining whether there are multicollinearities between variables in multiple regression is important to ensure that interpretations are accurate. The simplest way to understand this is to examine the binary correlations between independent variables. A correlation over .80 indicates potential multicollinearity. As the correlations between variables were lower than .80, multicollinearity does not appear to be an issue. To investigate this more carefully, variance inflation factor (VIF), tolerance, and condition index (CI) were assessed. VIF should be less than 10, tolerance should be higher than .20, and the condition index should be less than 30 (Büyüköztürk, 2010). The present data satisfied these conditions.

Pearson product-moment correlations and multiple linear regression analysis were used in the analysis. The relations between secondary school students' happiness and school satisfaction, gratitude, zest, optimism, and persistence were analyzed using the correlation method. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine whether school satisfaction and positive experiences at school predict happiness. Data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0.

### Results

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis showing the relations between secondary school students' happiness and school satisfaction and positive experiences at school are shown in Table 1. Significant positive relations were found between secondary school students' happiness and school satisfaction ( $r = .44, p < 0.01$ ), gratitude ( $r = .34, p < 0.01$ ), zest ( $r = .35, p < 0.01$ ), optimism ( $r = .23, p < 0.01$ ), and persistence ( $r = .38, p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 1.** Relations between Secondary School Students' Happiness, School Satisfaction, and Positive Experiences at School

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>1- Happiness</b>	-					
<b>2- School satisfaction</b>	.44**	-				
<b>3- Gratitude</b>	.34**	.62**	-			
<b>4- Zest</b>	.35**	.66**	.55**	-		
<b>5- Optimism</b>	.23**	.18**	.29**	.22**	-	
<b>6- Persistence</b>	.38**	.52**	.56**	.58**	.23**	-
M	86.41	22.66	9.99	10.13	10.03	12.02
SD	17.15	5.84	2.21	3.27	3.03	2.88

\*\* $p < 0.01$

Regression analysis results on predicting the happiness of secondary school students by school satisfaction and positive experiences at school are shown in Table 2. The multiple linear regression analysis revealed that school satisfaction, gratitude, zest, optimism, and persistence accounted for 24% of secondary school students' happiness.

**Table 2.** Results of Multiple Regression Analysis on School Satisfaction and Positive Experiences at School as Predictors of Secondary School Students' Happiness

Predictor	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	44.590	4.572		9.753	.000
School satisfaction	.963	.211	.329	4.570	.000
Gratitude	.003	.527	.000	.006	.995
Zest	.065	.372	.012	.174	.862
Optimism	.742	.288	.132	2.580	.010
Persistence	1.101	.385	.185	2.857	.005

R= 0.49, R<sup>2</sup>= .24, F<sub>(5,319)</sub>= 20.48, P= .00

When beta values were examined, it was seen that school satisfaction ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was the strongest predictor of secondary school students' happiness followed by persistence ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and optimism ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Gratitude ( $\beta = .00$ ,  $p > .01$ ) and zest ( $\beta = .01$ ,  $p > .01$ ) did not significantly predict the happiness of secondary school students.

### Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

The results indicated that there were significant positive relations between the happiness of secondary school students and school satisfaction, gratitude, zest, optimism, and persistence. School satisfaction, persistence, and optimism were significant predictors of happiness in secondary school students. However, gratitude and zest did not predict happiness.

The findings showed that school satisfaction was a powerful predictor of student happiness. This finding shows consistency with the results of previous studies (Park & Huebner, 2005; McGrath, Brennan, Dolan, & Barnett, 2009; Telef et al., 2015). It has also been found that school satisfaction significantly contributes to the well-being of adolescents (Tian, Chen, & Huebner, 2014). Students who obey school rules, do their homework, know what is expected of them and their responsibilities, and act accordingly are happier at school (Dös, 2013). According to Park and Huebner (2005), adolescents who are successful at school may receive more support and feedback from their families and friends, which may lead them to become happier.

Although gratitude, zest, optimism, and persistence, among the positive experiences at school, were positively related to the happiness of secondary school students, only persistence and optimism were significant predictors of student happiness. A literature review revealed that happiness is positively associated with gratitude (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009; Sun & Kong, 2013), optimism (Afzal, Malik, & Atta, 2014; Ben-Zur, 2003; Eryılmaz & Atak, 2011; Karademas, Kafetsios, & Sideridis, 2007; Mahon & Yarcheski, 2002; O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010; Shogren, Lopez, Wehmeyer, Little, & Pressgrove, 2006; Vacek et al., 2010), persistence (Garcia, 2011; Garcia & Moradi, 2012; Garcia, Kerekes, & Archer, 2012; Garcia, Nima, & Archer, 2013; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Sheldon et al., 2010), and zest (Kabakçı, 2013; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson et al., 2007; Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011; Shogren et al., 2006).

Positive school experiences positively affect happiness (Akın, 2015; Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Stiglbauer, Gnambs, Gamsjäger, & Batinic, 2013). For example, optimism contributes to the well-being of adolescents by building healthy behaviors, developing active coping, and protecting from the effects of stress (Ben-Zur, 2003). According to Eryılmaz (2011), the subjective well-being levels of adolescents with positive expectations of the future also increase significantly. Further, persistence leads to subjective well-being by maintaining objectives concerning need satisfaction (Garcia, Kerekes, & Archer, 2012; Sheldon et al., 2010). Positive expectations of the future and persistence in maintaining school studies may lead to students feeling happier. In studies conducted with university students (Park

et al., 2004; Peterson et al., 2007; Proctor et al., 2011) and high school students (Gillham et al., 2011; Kabakçı, 2013; Telef & Furlong, 2017), gratitude and zest were significant predictors of happiness. However, they did not predict the happiness of the secondary school students in this study. This might be because of the cognitive developments of children in the pre-adolescence period. As zest and gratitude are abstract concepts for children, they may not contribute significantly to their happiness.

In sum, the findings showed that school satisfaction, persistence, and optimism are important factors in the happiness of secondary school students. In evaluating these findings, some limitations should be considered. The data were only collected from three secondary schools in Çanakkale province. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire country of Turkey. More comprehensive studies can be carried out in the future by taking samples from schools in different provinces to increase generalizability. The fact that the data were collected using the self-report method is another important limitation. Factors related to the happiness of schoolchildren can be investigated using qualitative methods alongside quantitative methods. Educational practices for developing positive teacher–student and peer relations, creating a positive social environment, developing self-regulation and autonomy senses have been reported to increase school satisfaction and make positive contributions to the development of happiness (see Baker et al., 2003; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Further, it appears that positive psychological interventions can increase happiness (see Bolier et al., 2013; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Park & Peterson, 2006; Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In this context, including activities related to optimism and persistence in intervention programs for increasing happiness in secondary school students may help to increase student happiness.

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