



The Impact of Dispositional Optimism and Social Support on High School Adjustment and Performance

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Objectives

The transition to an institution of higher education is a stressful event as it comprises new academic and social challenges. Previous research has shown that dispositional optimism and social support are important predictors of school/college adjustment and academic performance (e.g., Chemers et al., 2001; Schneider et al., 2008; Rueger et al., 2010; Solberg Nes et al., 2009). However, little is known about the interplay of these two personal resources and their unique effects in predicting adjustment and academic performance.

Therefore, the major aim of the present longitudinal study was to jointly investigate the effects of optimism and social support on the psychosocial adjustment to and the academic performance in the first semester of high school. For a comprehensive understanding of psychosocial adjustment and academic performance, self-reports, teacher-reports as well as grades were collected.

Method

Sample & Procedure

Participants

$N = 495$ children entering high school
Age: 8-11 years, $M = 10$ years, $SD = 0.47$
Gender: 263 girls (47%) and 232 boys (53%)

T1 measurement point

When: At the begin of the first semester in high school
What: Dispositional optimism, perceived social support, physical and emotional well-being, school stress

T2 measurement point

When: At the end of the first semester in high school
What: Physical and emotional well-being, school stress, teacher ratings regarding the social integration, grades in Math and German

Measures

Dispositional Optimism:

Youth Life Orientation Test (YLOT; Ey et al., 2005)

Perceived Social Support

Social Support Appraisal Scale (APP; Dubow & Ullman, 1989)

Psychosocial Adjustment to New School

Questionnaire for Measuring Health-Related Quality of Life in Children and Adolescents (KINDL-R; Ravens-Sieberer & Bullinger, 2000)
Subscales: Physical well-being, emotional well-being, school stress
Ratings obtained from teachers regarding the social integration

Academic Performance

Grades in Math and German received from the school records

Results

Total Effects of Optimism and Social Support on Adjustment and Performance at T2

Correlation Analysis

	Physical well-being ^a	Emotional well-being ^a	School stress ^a	Social integration	Grade ^b in Math	Grade ^b in German
Optimism	.21***	.30***	.13**	.09(*)	-.14*	-.14*
Social support	.11**	.23***	.04	.12*	-.04	-.04

Note. ^a T1-measure was included as a control variable; ^b German grades range between 1 and 6, with 1 being the best and 6 being the worst grade
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$, (*) $p < .10$.

Unique and Common Effects of Optimism and Social Support on Adjustment and Performance at T2

Regression Analysis and Commonality Analysis

	Physical well-being ^a	Emotional well-being ^a	School stress ^a	Social integration	Grade ^b in Math	Grade ^b in German
Optimism	.19***	.25***	.13**	.03	-.17*	-.18*
Social support	.02	.12*	-.02	.11(*)	.06	.07



Note. ^a T1-measure was included as control variable; ^b German grades range between 1 and 6, with 1 being the best and 6 being the worst grade
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$, (*) $p < .10$.

Discussion

The correlation analyses showed that both optimism and social support are prospectively associated with better physical and emotional well-being as well as with better social integration. Further analyses revealed that the unique effects of optimism and social support greatly differ depending on the outcome. Specifically, optimism has a much stronger impact on physical and emotional well-being than social support, while the reverse is true for social integration. In case of physical and emotional well-being, more than 50% of the regression effect is uniquely due to optimism, whereas the unique effect of social support is negligible. Conversely, in case of social integration, the unique effect of optimism is rather small, whereas almost 50% of the regression effect can be attributed to social support. There is also a notable overlap of the two resources in predicting well-being and social integration. Furthermore, the results show that optimism significantly predicts lower levels of school stress and better academic performance in Math and German, while social support is unrelated to these outcomes.

The findings suggest that optimism has a strong unique impact on psychological adjustment and academic performance, while the unique contribution of social support is rather small. Social integration into the new class is better predicted by social support than by optimism. To conclude, both optimism and social support are predictors of better psychosocial adjustment to and academic performance in the first semester of high school, with a overall stronger impact of optimism.

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