
Psychological Well-Being of Students in Estonia: Perspectives of Students, Parents, and Teachers

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Introduction

The environment and the interaction between a person and environment play an important role in well-being. The conceptual model of well-being emphasizes the importance of personal and cultural factors for mental health (Nastasi, Varjas, Sarkar, & Jayasena, 1998). For example, the connection between psychological well-being and academic achievement seems reciprocal, that is, happy pupils with healthy self-esteem learn better, and academically successful pupils are more satisfied with and have higher beliefs in themselves (Cowie, Boardman, Dawkins, & Jennifer, 2004). Thus, identifying culture-specific factors are important to developing interventions in the school environment. Engaging the voice of the child is even more important, as the selected interventions ultimately affect youth's daily functioning in the school (Nastasi, 2014).

The Context of the Study: Estonia

Estonia is a northern European country with 1.3 million people. The majority (70%) are eth-

nic Estonians. The official language is Estonian, although approximately 30% of the population speaks Russian as their native language. The average income in 2012 was € 887 per month, with an unemployment rate of 10.2% (*Statistics Estonia, 2012*). Estonia belongs to the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Estonia ranks high in the human development index (HDI) as it performs highly in measurements of education and life expectancy (UN Development Programme, 2013). For example, on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students, Estonian students performed well in all three areas assessed, that is, reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2013).

The compulsory educational system in Estonia is 9 years of comprehensive schooling for 7–15-year-olds in state, municipal, public, or private institutions. Homeschooling is allowed, but it is rare. The paradox of the Estonian school system is, that although pupils have high study results, students dislike school (Bradshaw et al. 2006) and, according to OECD's teachers survey, TALIS (OECD, 2009), Estonian teachers have low self-efficacy.

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Psychological Well-Being in Estonia

Few studies have focused on the psychological well-being among pupils in Estonia, and those that have analyzed well-being have demonstrated poor results, characterizing Estonia in a negative light. That is, although academic results seem to be highly valued in Estonia, school climate and pupil well-being are not. For instance, researchers from York University gathered information about all European countries to analyze children's welfare (Bradshaw et al., 2006). They concluded that Estonian children showed low individual well-being, characterized by low satisfaction with life, feeling rejected, uncertainty, and loneliness; Estonia was depicted as the lowest on those indicators when compared to other European children. In addition, when compared to schools in other countries, Estonia's schools were rated as being the least well liked (in response to the question, "Do you like school?"). Furthermore, the researchers reported a greater occurrence of school violence in the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, compared to western and northern European countries (Bradshaw et al., 2006). The Saving and Empowering Young Lives (SEYLE) international research project, conducted in 2009–2011 (Lumiste, Värnik, Sisask, & Värnik, 2011), showed that 12% of Estonian students reported low levels of well-being based on the *WHO-5 Well-Being Test*, a brief measure of emotional well-being (Bech, 2004). Estonian girls, compared to boys, reported lower overall well-being and more recent experiences of stress, emotional problems, and anxiety. Further, 12% of students reported having had suicidal thoughts, and 74% of students said they have had been in contact with bullying in school during the past 12 months.

Researchers also have shown that schools' general values and teachers' attitudes toward pupils play the most important role in perceived school climate, pupils' psychological well-being, academic success, and optimism (Ruus et al., 2007). Thus, pupils' psychological well-being might be enhanced when schoolmasters and

teachers recognize and are held accountable for a psychologically healthy school climate.

Schools in Estonia have different programs to improve pupil well-being. There are some programs for decreasing bullying that include trainings for both teachers and pupils, such as the *School Peace Program* (www.lastekaitseliit.ee/koolirahu), *Big Brother/Sister* (www.bbbs.com), and the Thomas Gordon trainings for teachers and parents (www.gordontraining.com). To be effective, programs should involve repetition, long-term implementation, multi-modal instruction, and the involvement of all persons who are important to pupils (e.g., teachers and parents), (Cowie et al., 2004). Although the aforementioned programs in Estonia are beneficial to participants, it is questionable how effective these are for promoting psychological well-being in school. Current programs usually only involve a few participants and are not universal, nor based on student need.

To address the lack of culturally sensitive studies about youth psychological well-being in Estonia, we present data from the PPWBG project (Nastasi & International Psychological Well-Being Team, 2012). These data represent the perspectives of teachers, administrators, pupils, and their parents about psychological well-being of Estonian youth.

Methods

This research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were used. Questions were developed by the PPWBG team and then translated to Estonian with the help of an English philologist, using a back-and-forward translation method (see Chap. 2, this volume). This section provides descriptions of the context, participants, researcher roles, and data collection procedures.

Table 4.1 Break down of student, parent, and teacher participants by age (in years) and gender of students

Student age (in years)	Students		Parents	Teachers
	Female	Male		
9–11	8	8	3	7
12–14	6	5	6	6
15–17	7	6	7	7
Total	21	19	16	20

Parents and teachers were grouped by the respective age of their children/students

Study Context

The study was conducted in one school in the county of central Estonia. The county has long tradition of agricultural production, low population rates, and low crime rates. The participating school has an enrollment of about 300 students, with boys and girls together in all classes. All pupils were native Estonian. In addition, Estonian was the primary language for the majority of pupils (with the exception of a few whose primary language was Russian). The families of most students are of average economic background. Results of 2013 final exams placed this school in the middle of the range for Estonian schools, with an average score for the school of 60 on a 100-point scale (Postimees, 2013).

Participants

Participants were 40 students (aged 9–17 years¹), 16 parents, 20 teachers, 5 school administrators, and 5 health support staff members. The breakdown of participants by age and gender of the student is presented in Table 4.1 (parents and teachers were selected on the basis of the age of the respective child/pupil).

Researcher Roles

Interviews were organized and conducted by authors of this chapter who are both of Estonian

origin, and one worked as a school psychologist in the participating school. The authors also were responsible for data transcription and analysis. An English teacher, from the participating school, who was trained as an English philologist by education, assisted with translation.

Data Collection Procedures

Pilot interviews were conducted with two 8-year-old students, to ensure that questions were understandable for elementary school students. On the basis of the pilot, the description of procedures and interview questions were adjusted for comprehension. Adjustments were minor, for example, questions were shortened.

Twelve focus group interviews were conducted with 40 students (aged 9–17 years), 16 parents, and 20 teachers. All groups had 6–8 members, with the exception of one parent group with three members. Individual interviews were conducted with five school administrators and five health support staff. Focus group and individual interviews were 45–60 min in duration. Sessions were taped with participants' consent. In addition to responding to focus group interview questions, students were asked to draw an ecomap and write a story about one stressful and one supportive relationship in their lives. All procedures are detailed in Chap. 2.

Findings

Data were analyzed using the procedures outlined in Chap. 2. This section presents findings from all informants, that is, students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Unless otherwise

¹ The sample reported in this chapter is restricted to 9–17-year-olds from a single school. Data from younger students (ages 6–8 years) from a second school are not included in these analyses.

indicated, the findings reflect consensus (agreement) among informant groups. We first summarize findings related to definitions of psychological well-being and strategies for fostering well-being from the perspectives of school administrators and support staff. We then present findings based on the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers on cultural expectations, stressors, reactions to stress, and coping strategies.

Administrator and Support Staff Perspectives

School administrators and health support staff responded to questions about the definition of psychological well-being and ways in which the school can facilitate the development of well-being. Responses to the question, "What is psychological well-being?" yielded four main categories: (a) positive relationship with self, (b) optimism and perceived capability, (c) satisfaction with relationships, and (d) resilience. When asked how schools could enhance students' psychological well-being, administrative and support staff generated the following ideas: (a) supporting youth initiative and informal learning, (b) having active mental health support staff in school, (c) supporting greater home-school cooperation, (d) better teacher training on communication skills, and (e) organizing events to raise school unity.

Student, Teacher, and Parent Perspectives

Using focus groups, we sought perspectives of students, parents, and teachers about cultural expectations (culturally valued competencies) and sources of stress for children. In this section, we report findings across the respondent groups and note any differences in perspectives across adults and children.

Cultural Expectations According to students, teachers, and parents, culturally valued competencies of a schoolchild are learning skills, social skills, and being active in the learning process.

All focus groups agreed on the importance of good learning skills, described as being diligent and self-leading, and getting good grades. A good student also has good social skills, characterized by qualities such as being polite, kind, sharing knowledge, and getting along with classmates. The expectations were similar across age and gender groups, with the exception of "being active," which was mentioned only by boys and girls aged 15–17 years. Parents and teachers described being active as expressing an opinion about learning a subject or actively participating in the study process. For younger students, the emphasis was on being polite, conscientious, and getting good grades.

Students described valued competencies for the roles of friend, citizen, and parent. They described a friend as a person who is helpful, loyal, protective, honest, and friendly. A good friend is someone who is there when you need him/her and listens to and understands you. A good citizen is polite, helpful, friendly, loyal to the country, and respects the law. A good parent is helpful, loving, caring, and should talk things over instead of physical punishment. Younger students indicated that a good parent has time to play with his or her child, and older students described the good parent as being interested in the child's life, understanding the child, and setting rules for the child.

Teachers and parents both reported the home as the most important factor in the development of the child. The parental role was described as guiding and encouraging the child to grow up as self-dependent. The roles of schools and educators were described as guiding, supporting, and encouraging pupils; helping them develop their abilities. Teachers stressed that both home and school are responsible for developing social skills, and that school should teach traditional values and rules.

Stressors Most stressors, mentioned across the informant groups, were associated with interpersonal relationships. Students, teachers, and parents all agreed that the most common stressor for children is problematic relationships with friends, parents, or teachers. Teachers and parents also referred to overloaded work demands as a

source of stress for children. Students mentioned several types of stressors. The most common was bullying at school. Other stressors identified by students included: (a) being tired and overloaded with school or homework; (b) being afraid of performing badly in tests; (c) difficult relationships with parents, friends, or teachers; (d) death and illness; (e) academic difficulties; and (f) being in contact with an accident. Older students (ages 15–17 years) mentioned being overloaded with obligations or not having enough time as typical stressors. In addition, older students mentioned financial difficulties and being addicted to drugs as stressors for their age group.

Student Ecomaps

On the ecomaps, students identified relationships as being supportive, stressful, or ambivalent (both stressful and supportive; see e.g., of ecomap in Fig. 4.1). The distribution of relationship types across age and gender is depicted in Table 4.2. The percentage of supportive relationships for *boys* ranged from 56% (ages 15–17 years) to 73% (ages 9–11 years), suggesting a progression toward more supportive relationships as boys approach adolescence. Boys also reported an increase in ambivalent (combination of stressful and supportive) relationships as they approached adolescence, with 25% at ages 9–11 years and 42% aged 15–17 years. Boys in all age groups reported a low percentage (2–3%) of stressful relationships. For *girls*, supportive relationships ranged from 48 to 58%, with minimal variations across age groups. The percentage of stressful relationships, in contrast, varied across age groups. Girls aged 9–11 years reported 11% of relationships as stressful, compared to 52% at ages 12–14 years and 0% at ages 15–17 years. Girls also evidenced variations by age for ambivalent (combination of stressful and supportive) relationships, reporting 38 and 42% at ages 9–11 and 15–17 years, respectively, but no (0%) ambivalent relationships at ages 12–14 years.

Students also described the reasons for labeling relationships as supportive and stressful, that is, what makes the relationship supportive or

stressful. For boys, aged 9–11 years, descriptions of “supportive” relationships included getting attention from a caring relative and doing something fun with the family. Girls, aged 9–11 years, described supportive relationships as ones in which they receive care and help from a parent or sibling, or receive a surprise from a friend. Boys, aged 12–14 years, described supportive interactions as ones in which a friend or sibling shows understanding or opportunities to share interests with another person. Girls, aged 12–14 years, described supportive relationships as an understanding and caring parent or trustworthy friend. Adolescent boys, aged 15–17 years, described a supportive relationship (with (girl)friend or relative) as characterized by shared interest, trust, and caring. Adolescent girls, aged 15–17 years, talked about friends you can trust or caring relationships with parent or other relative.

With regard to “stressful” relationships, young boys (aged 9–11 years) described bullying, being lonely, and having difficult relationships with siblings or parents. Young girls, aged 9–11 years, talked about friends doing something “bad” and sharing things with siblings as stressful. Boys, aged 12–14, described teachers who do not understand them as “stressful.” Girls, aged 12–14 years, provided several descriptors related to relationship with family, friends, and teachers; these included parents not keeping promises, siblings refusing to share or treating them badly, friends who make one scared for them, and teachers who remove the student from the classroom. For adolescents (aged 15–17 years), both boys and girls described stressors related to family relationships. For example, boys talked of a brother who bullies, a father who is strict, or losing contact with a parent. Girls talked of losing trust in a parent, having conflict with parents, being bullied by a brother, or having a parent with drinking problem.

Students’ Reactions to Stressors: Coping Strategies and Social Supports

During focus group interviews, students described their reactions to stressors. Responses

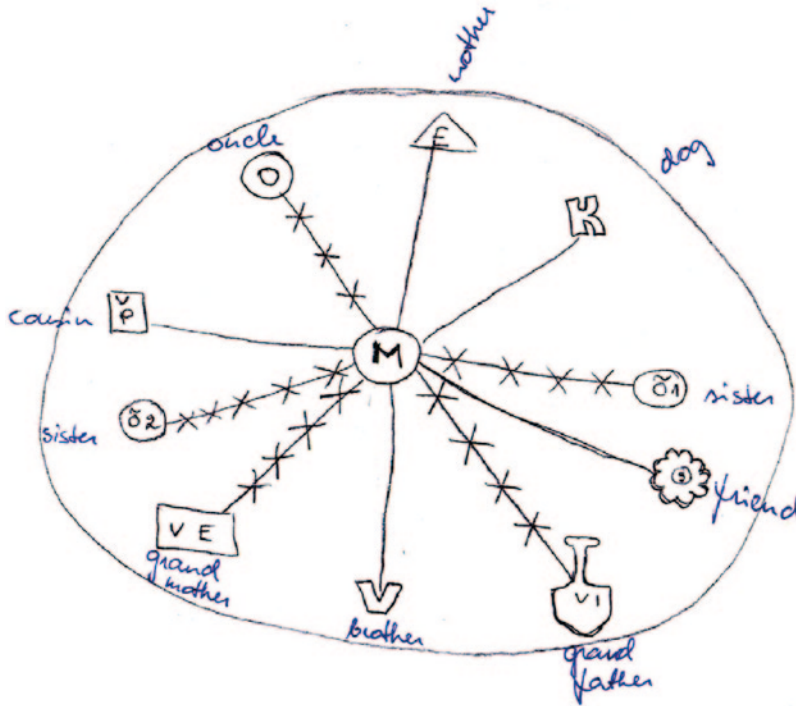


Fig. 4.1 Example of Estonian student ecomap. Supportive relationships are denoted with *straight line* (—), stressful with *x's* (xxx), and ambivalent with both (xxx). Age variations were evident in the percentage of *parental relationships* characterized as stressful or ambivalent (i.e., involving some stress); 33% of children aged 9–11 years

described one or both parents as stressful/ambivalent, compared to 73% of those aged 12–14 years, and 85% of those aged 15–17 years. The pattern of stressful parental relationships suggests increasingly stressful parent–child relationships as children approach adolescence

Table 4.2 Number and percentage of supportive, ambivalent, and stressful relationships depicted in ecomaps by gender and age

Gender by age group (n)	Supportive # (%)	Ambivalent # (%)	Stressful # (%)	Total #
Boys, 9–11 (7)	44 (73)	15 (25)	1 (2)	60
Girls, 9–11 (8)	29 (52)	21 (38)	6 (11)	56
Boys, 12–14 (5)	18 (60)	11 (37)	1 (3)	30
Girls, 12–14 (6)	27 (48)	0 (0)	29 (52)	56
Boys, 15–17 (6)	24 (56)	18 (42)	1 (2)	43
Girls, 15–17 (7)	40 (58)	29 (42)	0 (0)	69

indicated the use of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, avoidance, and use of social supports. Emotion-focused coping is exemplified by the following examples: I would cry, get mad, or let my emotions burst out; or try to calm myself. Problem-focused coping was characterized as problem analysis (analyze the problem), staying calm (try to calm myself), taking action (doing something to solve the problem), or seeking help from someone else. Students talked of seeking

help from family and relatives, health specialists, friends, teachers, the Internet, and God. Friends, in particular, were seen as helpers by girls aged 12–14 years and adolescent boys and girls (aged 15–17 years). The avoidance strategies, mostly reported by boys, included ignoring someone, changing the topic, or running away from home.

Parents and teachers responded to questions about how they might help a child who has a problem. Strategies they identified included:

taking time to listen; trying to understand; trying to make the child speak more about the problem; seeking help from a specialist, friend, colleague, or relative; and trying to stay calm as they calm down the child. Teachers of students, aged 9–11 and 12–14 years, reported that they often solved problems “right away” and saw problem solving as a normal part of their work.

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings from the Estonia site of the PPWBG project. Focus group interviews with students (aged 9–17 years) and their teachers and parents yielded qualitative data about culturally valued competencies and stressors. Student ecomaps, in combination with focus group interviews, yielded qualitative data about stressors and supports in their social networks and reactions to stressors (e.g., coping, use of social support). In addition, individual interviews with school administrators and support staff yielded data about definitions of the construct, psychological well-being, and suggestions for promotion of psychological well-being of the school-age population.

Psychological Well-Being

School administrators and support staff responded to questions about the definition of the construct of psychological well-being. Their responses yielded four categories, including a positive relationship with the self, optimism and self-perceptions of capability, satisfaction with one’s relationships, and resilience. Such findings can provide a starting point for discussions about how schools can support the development of these qualities.

Culturally Valued Competencies

Students, teachers, and parents agreed that a good student has good learning and social skills. Teacher groups described a good student as being active. They also stressed the importance of com-

munication skills, suggesting that teachers have expectations for students to be active in discussions about academic topics. Adolescent boys (aged 15–17 years) similarly described good students as diligent and active rather than necessarily academically successful; this was not the case for younger students or adolescent girls. It is possible that adolescent boys are given greater recognition for being active, for example, in sports, thus explaining their perspective. However, the teachers’ valuing of active communication in class discussion may suggest that adolescent boys not only recognize this but also are rewarded by teachers for such behavior.

Stressors

Students, teachers, and parents agreed that the primary stressors for children and adolescents are problematic relationships and academic difficulties. The most common stressors reported by students were those related to relationship difficulties with parents, relatives, teachers, and friends. In addition, younger students stressed academic difficulties, and older students stressed being overloaded with obligations. The results of this study were consistent with existing research and confirmed that poor interpersonal relationships and bullying as common problems among Estonian school pupils (Lumiste et al., 2011), in addition to academic difficulties.

Social Networks

The ecomap data (Table 4.2) revealed age and gender variations in perceived stress and support within ego-centered social networks. These variations have implications for schools’ efforts in schools when designing intervention or prevention programs related to stress and coping and accessing social supports. The specific needs at different development levels for boys and girls should guide program development. The findings also suggest assessing social networks as part of program designs (e.g., administering ecomaps to determine needs of students within a specific school and then designing programs accordingly).

Fostering Psychological Well-Being

Interviews with school administrators and support staff yielded suggestions for supporting development of student psychological well-being. These suggestions, in conjunction with findings from interviews with students, teachers, and parents, provide guidance for future actions. Administrators and support staff are the school personnel who work at a systemic level, and thus can be expected to take a global view of the school as an organization. They suggested efforts such as the following to foster student psychological well-being: (a) youth initiatives and opportunities for informal learning, (b) availability of school-based mental health support staff, (c) greater home-school collaboration, (d) teacher professional development in communication, and (e) events to foster a sense of unity or community in the school. Such initiatives are consistent with findings from students, teachers, and parents about culturally valued competencies, stressors, and importance of social supports for coping with stress.

Future Directions

Although the study's findings suggest some future directions for practice, we also suggest subsequent steps for more complete understanding of the issues and mechanisms for change. We thus make recommendations for additional research to inform practice and policy. First, findings from this study, including actual responses, could be used to develop questionnaires for students and adult informants. This would provide methods to gather data from a broader population and assess psychological well-being for a broader range of students. Second, study findings could be used for planning effective intervention at schools and in neighborhoods in cooperation with youth centers and local authorities. The *participatory culture-specific intervention model (PCSIM; Nastasi et al., 1998)*, which has been applied across cultures and contexts, could be used in the target community to bring together teachers, parents, school administrators, local policy makers, and local

youth workers to identify common goals and explore different approaches and opportunities to reach students and families in need. Furthermore, this study searched for initial solutions and ideas for promoting psychological well-being in only one Estonian school. A participatory approach to data collection with a broader population could generate more generalizable findings for Estonian schools, which would be beneficial for planning interventions on a broader scale within the various Estonian school systems.

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