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A Correlational Study of Happiness and Self-Determination among Vietnamese Students Across Educational Levels

Lam Huy Phuong[1], Pratchayapong Yasri[2]

[1] HACA International School (HACA), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
[2] Faculty of Science, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand

Correspondence: Pratchayapong Yasri, Faculty of Science, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand. E-mail: pratchayapong.yasr@kmutt.ac.th

Abstract
Available research separately shows the importance of happiness and self-determination in education. However, the effects of student happiness on learning motivation across educational levels is still lacking compelling verifications. This study employed the subjective happiness scale (SHS) and self-determination research to explore each aspect as well as the relevance between these two variables. The findings give insights about current levels of happiness and studying motivations in different educational groups in Vietnam. Applied in all academic levels, there is a statistical correlation between happiness and self-determination: if the students have high levels of happiness at their schools, they are likely to have a stronger positive learning motivation. Analysis of the research results indicates that kindergarten and elementary students have the highest level of happiness as well as the strongest intrinsic motivation for learning. Also high school students, having the lowest level of happiness, might need more support by alternative methods.

Keywords: Happiness, Self-Determination, Kindergarten, Elementary, Secondary, High School, Undergraduate, Postgraduate

1. Introduction

1.1 The value of self-determination for lifelong learning

The growth tendencies of humans are based on their psychological needs. When feeling strongly inspired, human reach for new experiences, enhance themselves, master their competencies and take responsibility (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The powerful behaviors of self-determined people manifest as purposeful plans to achieve preselected goals. (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Additionally, according to Wehmeyer (1997), people with highly self-determined behaviors tend to set goals and evaluate the consequences of their actions, enabling them to attain their goals.

The cognitive motivations that stimulate these positive human potentials are defined in self-determination theory. The motivations of people's behaviors were identified when they believed in a value and thought they could

perform to accomplish it. This was about achieving results rather than an attachment to past reinforcements (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Self-determination is a theory of human motivation that has been developed by American psychologists E. Deci and R. Ryan. The theory introduces a way to classify motives into three types:

- **Amotivation:** is a state of non-desire and non-intention of taking action. People of amotivation are not motivated, and since their actions do not come from subjective will, they do not feel competent and therefore might not achieve the expected results.
- **Extrinsic motivation:** is associated with performing actions to achieve an outcome which is indirectly relevant to the actions. An example is a student who goes to school because he wants to avoid punishment from parents. There are four types of extrinsic motivation:
    - External regulation: the lowest degree of autonomy. In this kind of regulation, acts are performed in response to directives stemming from external factors, in order to achieve a reward or avoid a punishment.
    - Introjected regulation: this controlled regulation is people behaving based on some degree of external pressure.
    - Identified regulation: this motivation occurs when the individual appreciates the behavior being performed, finds its importance and chooses that behavior voluntarily.
    - Integrated regulation: the behavior is performed because it is completely consistent and suitable for the individual's own authentic personal goals.
- **Intrinsic motivation:** is present when people choose to behave or perform because of inherent interests. Individuals doubtlessly act with a sense of enjoyment. An example is a student who goes to school because he enjoys learning new things and making new friends.

Intrinsic motivation is the expression of the human tendency toward learning and creativity. It enhances people's capacities to explore and learn (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This kind of motivation, which comes from intrinsic forces including individual preferences, perspectives, principles and goals, will strengthen personal self-esteem to gain and to keep cognitive consistency (Markus, Kitayama & Heiman, 1996; Waschull, & Kernis, 1996).

Deci & Ryan (2000) suggest thinking of students who are motivated to study because of either promised rewards from parents for having good grades or chastisement for not learning well. These students might gain expected grades in an attitude of displeasure and resentment. Cognitively, their perception of their reward for studying is either receiving money or avoiding punishment. As a result, the education these people receive does not include the experience of exercising free choice to learn what they want. Rather, they just try to do well to achieve a standard that is not their own. On the other hand, students who can define their own desires willingly study hard because of their personal inner values. These students experience high autonomous self-regulation. They grow with behaviors that are the reflections of their own interests. They are likely to spend more time studying without force. They have the freedom to choose what they prefer so they normally get good results for their choices.

Furthermore, key research findings from Lin, Wu & Cheng (2015) stated that students who made choices of majors based on individual interests experienced less career uncertainty. Other research from Tien et al. (2005) also confirmed the significant role of self-adjustment in decreasing career uncertainty, as self-adjusted students were able to explore their interests, capabilities, purposes and desires. The National Career Development Association in the United States (NCDA) reported that the foundation of success in a student's future career was growth in self awareness of his or her individual capabilities, interests, values and purposes (Lazarus & Ihuoma, 2011).

Preliminary decisions about career choice are made at the exploration stage of high school. Without motivation to learn and choose suitable courses in high school, students are likely to become misfit graduates. This has been the key factor affecting the unemployment rate (Pascual, 2014). Thus, education has an important role in helping high school students to experience and prepare for their career choices (Lent et al., 1994; Turner and Lapan, 2002; Tang, Pan, Newmeyer, 2008).

1.2 Happiness & the future

In recent years, many countries have discovered a new level of concern for students' happiness, as a result of high levels of mental health problems among students. Educational systems at all levels have had to face major ramifications of the lack of in-school happiness (Guilherme and de Freitas, 2017; Salavera et al. 2017). Happiness is essential for students' motivation to learn in school (Datu et al. 2016; Frey and Stutzer 2010; Moos et al. 2005; Oreopoulos 2007; Soleimani and Tebyanian 2011). Recent research into happiness also supports the notion that individuals who are happier show more initiative to collaborate with peers (Post, 2005; Veenhoven, 2008).

Life span is an important influence on happiness. Hirvonen and Mangeloja (2007) indicated that older people seem to be less happy than younger ones. Other research from Frijters & Beatton (2012) defined the u-shaped correlation of happiness with age among people from 18 to 90 year of age. The research showed a decrease in happiness level after age 18, then a significant increase in happiness at around age 60, after which there was a decline past age 70.

In kindergarten, emotion and, specifically, happiness is a significant factor for development of cognitive and social skills, as well as classroom engagement among children (Garner and Waajid, 2012). Relatively, happy students tend to have more readiness for school development. From the longitudinal research of Ladd et al. (2000), the unhappiness of kindergarten students might result in social disconnection behaviors and lower school performance. Happiness should be built in early childhood because its presence or absence has a strong and foundational effect on the development of social and emotional skills; the lifelong personality of a person will also be established during this childhood period (Mahon et al., 2010; Parker and Asher, 1989). The roots of adult happiness are established during childhood (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 1995). Depression during puberty and afterwards is reduced by 50 percent in persons who have been taught about optimistic thinking skills during their childhood, compared to those who have not received such education. This can be understood to mean that skills which 3-5 year old kindergarten students are taught, with practice, in a happy environment, can affect their lives as 10-19 years old students, as well as later on throughout life (O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010).

The research in elementary education has shown a significant positive correlation between measures of student happiness and academic achievement (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Happy students tend to have a stronger emotional intelligence, enabling them to manage stress and avoid depression. Additionally, they are confident in learning when they are happy. Students can also strengthen their potentiality and improve enthusiasm by studying in a happy school environment (Fatemeh & Mahmoud, 2011).

Remarkably, academic transitions from primary to secondary school tend to pose potential risks of decreased learning motivation and educational attainment (Eccles, 2004). Acknowledgement of the possibility that sensitive academic transitions can cause a student to disengage, and prevention of such disengagement, is essential to that student's achievement of success in higher education and their future career (Upadyaya and Salmela-Aro, 2013). A study by Kiuru et al. (2020) indicated the improvement of secondary students' happiness in school would lead to higher academic achievement and better interpersonal relationship with peers, teachers and parents. Happy secondary students might evolve toward success through the exercise of their moral standards and personality strengths (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005).

The research of high school students in 32 countries from Kirkcaldy et al. (2004) showed the positive correlations between happiness scores and scholastic achievements in mathematical literacy, reading literacy, scientific literacy and IQ score. Another study also reported that greater learning results and superior life achievement were the outcomes of students who attended schools that prioritized the well-being of learners (Layard and Hagell, 2015). Chan et al. (2005) revealed that happy undergraduate students could be predicted to perform better schoolwork, have valuable social relationships and manage appropriate timelines. Moreover, students with high levels of happiness also have less social anxiety and depression (Öztürk and Mutlu, 2010). Undergraduate students with high levels of happiness tend to excel in social and family relationships with peers and parents. As a result, they also have an optimistic and healthy mind (Deb et al., 2020). Consciousness of the need of undergraduate students to experience happiness in the school environment is crucial to improve their positive thinking and fuel academic

curiosity. Moreover, happy students are likely to to be high achievers, giving rise to positive academic and social results (Picton et al., 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2017).

In fact, reaching for student happiness optimizes students' improvement of both present academic achievement and future work and life.

1.3 Research questions

Studies exploring students across educational levels in relation to happiness and self-determination are still scarce. We will examine data from a study testing the correlation (or lack thereof) between happiness and self-determination in students taken from a broad spectrum of educational levels in Vietnam. This research allows for the direct examination of the following questions in different academic levels:

- What are the levels of happiness perceived by the student participants?
- What are the levels of self-determination by the student participants??
- What (if any) is the correlation that exists between happiness and self-determination?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

There were three aspects of this study:

- Firstly, the study was aimed to investigate levels of happiness of Vietnamese students across educational groups.
- Secondly, the study explored levels of self-determination from these students
- Thirdly, the study examined the correlation between these two variables.

To evaluate, twenty-two items were adapted from the subjective happiness scale (Chinini, 2014) and the self-determination scale (Deci & Ryan, 2000) for research in this study: four items for happiness, eighteen items for self-determination. All answers were collected under a 7-point Likert scale anchored (Joshi et al., 2015) by 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), combined with a hedonic face scale illustration (Chen et all., 1996) to support the understanding of participants under 18 years old.

The meanings of the specific questionnaire items were explained to the students, and it was emphasized to them that there were no right or wrong answers to any item, and their own perceptions should be reflected in chosen answers. All participants were also offered the option to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequence. Additionally, the questionnaire was given to school representatives for approval before implementation. No students refused to participate. The time to complete the survey was about 15 minutes on average. No personal data was collected and thus all participants were kept anonymous.

2.2 Sampling procedure

All participants were volunteers for this research and fully had the right to withdraw their participation at any time. The data collection was implemented under considerable care and guidance of teachers for students under 18 years old. The teachers did not have any motive to influence the students' answers. For confidentiality, all participant's identity and private information including their responses will not be disclosed.

Participants of the studies were 352 students, in the age range of 5 - 48 years old (with the mean of 16, standard deviation of 8.3). They were from Kindergarten, Elementary, Secondary, High school, Undergraduate and Postgraduate without specification of genders.

Participants of the studies were from 4 cities of Vietnam, including 1 big city (Ho Chi Minh) and 3 provinces (Binh Phuoc, Dong Thap, An Giang). All data collection was taken during one month in 2022.

Table 1: Numbers of students and schools across educational levels in this research

Grade	Schools	Students
1 Kindergarten	3	60
2 Elementary	2	60
3 Secondary	2	60
4 High School	2	60
5 Undergraduate	6	60
6 Postgraduate	5	52
Grand Total	**15**	**352**

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)

The approach was evolved by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) by researching 2,500 participants across 14 studies. This is used to measure global happiness by a questionnaire of 4-items. These items will ask respondents to:

- Indicate their happiness using elective ratings
- Characterize their ratings relative to peers
- Measure their happiness as comparing to very happy persons
- Compare their happiness to not very happy persons

2.3.2 Self-determination

An 18-item questionnaire was adapted from previous scales of self-determination Deci & Ryan (2000) to assess students' motivation in learning.

Example questionnaire items are: I go to school but it is a waste of my time (amotivation - non regulation), I go to school because I want to get good grades (external regulation), I go to school because I want the teacher to think I'm a good student (introjected regulation), I go to school because I think it is important to understand lessons (identified regulation), I go to school because I want to make new friends (integrated regulation), I go to school because I enjoy learning new things (intrinsic regulation).

2.3 3. Scope & Limitation of the Study

- Scope: the study focuses on examining levels of happiness and self-determination as well as their statistical correlation across educational levels from kindergarten, elementary, secondary, undergraduate and postgraduate in Vietnam.
- Limitation: although the research is based on global verification of validity among applied methods, the participants of this research are from Vietnam so applicable results for other countries across the world may need further research.

3. Results

3.1 Self-determination

The self-determination factors in different educational levels are firstly demonstrated to see the dominant elements affecting students' motivation learnings.

Table 2 & Table 3 show the means and p-value of the means from the self-determination factors in different educational levels. Kindergarten, elementary and high school data show one of the key self-determination factors

to be intrinsic motivation, along with identified regulation and integrated regulation. The mean for intrinsic regulation in kindergarten students is $\bar{x} = 6.4$, elementary is $\bar{x} = 6.5$ and high school is $\bar{x} = 5.4$. Statistically in Table 4, the high school score for intrinsic motivation is significantly lower than both kindergarten and elementary ($p < 0.05$). Even in higher levels of education, students at graduate and postgraduate levels cannot achieve the intrinsic motivation score that the children have at kindergarten and elementary. The mean of intrinsic motivation from undergraduate students is $\bar{x} = 5.4$ and postgraduate students is $\bar{x} = 5.6$, these means are significantly lower than kindergarten and elementary ($p < 0.05$).

When scores from secondary and undergraduate students were examined, it was found that secondary and undergraduate students are predominantly led by identified regulation. The identified regulation mean for secondary is $\bar{x} = 6.2$ and for undergraduate is $\bar{x} = 5.7$. Postgraduate students are directed by both identified regulation ($\bar{x} = 5.8$) & intrinsic motivation ($\bar{x} = 5.6$).

Table 2: The means of the self-determination factors in different educational levels

Mean	Amotivation	External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Integrated Regulation	Intrinsic Motivation
Kindergarten	2.2	4.2	4.3	6.2	6.2	6.4
Elementary	1.9	3.8	3.4	6.5	6.3	6.5
Secondary	2.2	4.0	3.2	6.2	5.7	5.8
High School	2.9	3.6	3.4	5.4	5.3	5.4
Undergraduate	3.0	3.3	3.2	5.7	5.2	5.4
Postgraduate	2.6	2.6	2.8	5.8	5.1	5.6

Table 3: P-value of the means from the self-determination factors in different educational levels

	P-value	Amotivation	External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Integrated Regulation	Intrinsic Motivation
Kindergarten	Amotivation	1.0					
	External Regulation	0.0	1.0				
	Introjected Regulation	0.0	0.7	1.0			
	Identified Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0		
	Integrated Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	1.0	
	Intrinsic Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	1.0
Elementary	Amotivation	1.0					
	External Regulation	0.0	1.0				
	Introjected Regulation	0.0	0.2	1.0			
	Identified Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0		
	Integrated Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	1.0	
	Intrinsic Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.1	1.0
Secondary	Amotivation	1.0					
	External Regulation	0.0	1.0				
	Introjected Regulation	0.0	0.0	1.0			
	Identified Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0		
	Integrated Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	

	P-value	Amotivation	External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Integrated Regulation	Intrinsic Motivation
	Intrinsic Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.6	1.0
High School	Amotivation	1.0					
	External Regulation	0.0	1.0				
	Introjected Regulation	0.0	0.6	1.0			
	Identified Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0		
	Integrated Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	1.0	
	Intrinsic Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.6	1.0
Undergraduate	Amotivation	1.0					
	External Regulation	0.2	1.0				
	Introjected Regulation	0.4	0.8	1.0			
	Identified Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0		
	Integrated Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	
	Intrinsic Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3	1.0
Postgraduate	Amotivation	1.0					
	External Regulation	0.9	1.0				
	Introjected Regulation	0.3	0.4	1.0			
	Identified Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0		
	Integrated Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	
	Intrinsic Regulation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	1.0

Table 4: P-value of intrinsic regulation across educational levels

P-value (Intrinsic Motivation)	*Kindergarten*	*Elementary*	*Secondary*	*High School*	*Undergraduate*	*Postgraduate*
Kindergarten	1.0					
Elementary	0.4	1.0				
Secondary	0.0	0.0	1.0			
High School	0.0	0.0	0.1	1.0		
Undergraduate	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.9	1.0	
Postgraduate	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.3	0.4	1.0

n=352

Students with higher levels in education are less likely to be motivated by external regulation. Results from Table 1 and Table 5 indicate that the value of external regulation in kindergarten ($\bar{x} = 4.2$, $p < 0.05$) is significantly higher than elementary ($\bar{x} = 3.8$), secondary ($\bar{x} = 4.0$) and high school ($\bar{x} = 3.6$). After that, the scores statistically significantly decreased at undergraduate ($\bar{x} = 3.3$, $p < 0.05$) and then postgraduate ($\bar{x} = 2.6$, $p < 0.05$) levels.

Table 5: P-value of external regulation across educational levels

P-value (External Regulation)	*Kindergarten*	*Elementary*	*Secondary*	*High School*	*Undergraduate*	*Postgraduate*
Kindergarten	1.0					
Elementary	0.0	1.0				
Secondary	0.2	0.4	1.0			
High School	0.0	0.5	0.2	1.0		
Undergraduate	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	1.0	
Postgraduate	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0

n=352

3.2 Happiness

When total mean scores from happiness were examined, it can be seen in table 6 & table 7 that kindergarten has the highest level of happiness ($\bar{x}$ = 6.1, SD = 0.7, $p < 0.05$), the second top runner of happiness level is elementary ($\bar{x}$ = 5.4, SD = 1.1, $p < 0.05$), lowest level of happiness is high school ($\bar{x}$ = 4.3, SD = 1.2, $p < 0.05$). Secondary ($\bar{x}$ = 5.2, SD = 1.2), undergraduate ($\bar{x}$ = 4.8, SD = 1.2) and postgraduate ($\bar{x}$ = 4.9, SD = 1.0) students tend to have higher levels of happiness than high school students. However, their happiness scores are statistically lower than the children in this study in elementary school or kindergarten ($p < 0.05$).

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of happiness across educational levels

Happiness Groups	*Mean*	*SD*	*Kurtosis*	*Skewness*
Kindergarten	6.1	0.7	-0.1	-0.7
Elementary	5.4	1.1	0.7	-0.9
Secondary	5.2	1.2	-0.4	-0.5
High School	4.3	1.2	0.2	-0.3
Undergraduate	4.8	1.2	1.0	-0.6
Postgraduate	4.9	1.0	-0.1	-0.4

n= 352, $p < 0.05$, F=19, F critical = 2.2

Table 7: P-value of happiness across educational levels

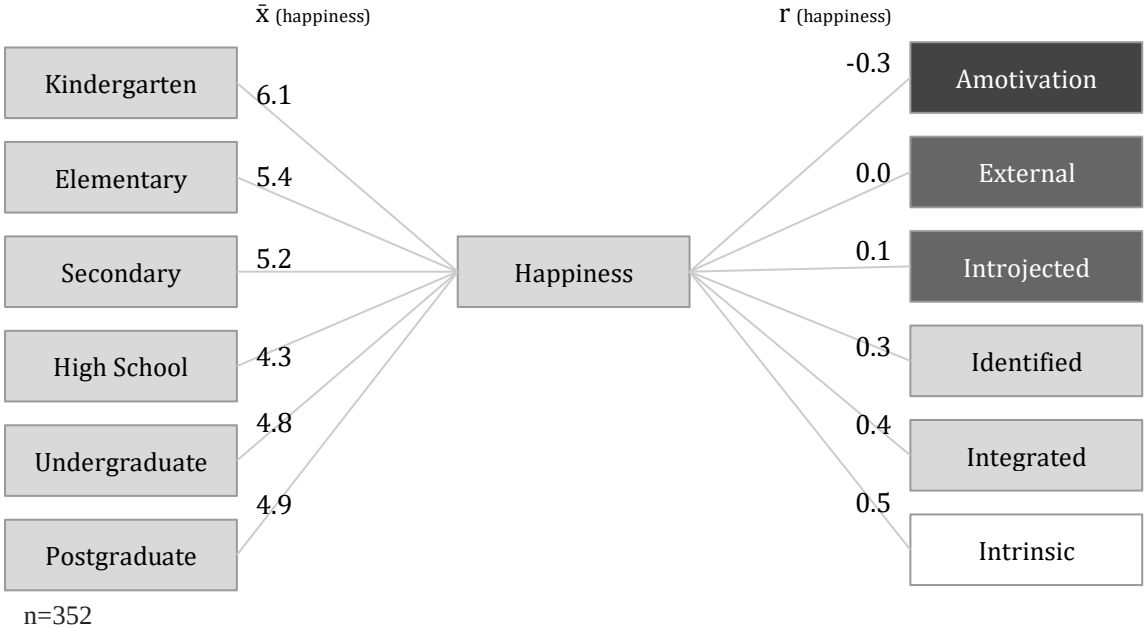
P-value (Happiness)	*Kindergarten*	*Elementary*	*Secondary*	*High School*	*Undergraduate*	*Postgraduate*
Kindergarten	1.0					
Elementary	0.0	1.0				
Secondary	0.0	0.4	1.0			
High School	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0		
Undergraduate	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	1.0	
Postgraduate	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.7	1.0

n=352

3.3 Correlation

Findings from Chart 1 below show that when individual happiness is increased, there is a growth in psychological motivation toward actions, and this effect manifests across educational levels. The sign of the correlation value is positive between happiness and self-determination. In addition, happiness level of students is inversely correlated with amotivation. So in summary, the greater the happiness of a student, the higher level of self-determination that student can gain, reaching more toward the ideal of intrinsic motivation, and the lower the degree of amotivation that student need to manage.

Chart 1: Correlation values between happiness and self-determination factors in different levels of education



4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings from this study show a close relationship between two factors: happiness and self-determination. This opens opportunities for educators to further research and find solutions to improve the happiness level of learners, which positively affect inner learning motivation, especially during the sensitive period in high school. The degree to which students possess more happiness or less is crucial in learning given the solid evidence of positive correlation with the desirable outcome of intrinsic motivation. Importantly, students in high school should have the choice to learn things they are interested in, and a strong understanding that learning leads to a bright future. However, we can see that current high school students explored in this research got low scores for both happiness and intrinsic motivation compared to students in junior years. Therefore, this is a risk for themselves and also a potential social burden in the future. This issue has been raised in the literature by a number of scholars as shown in Psacoe et al. (2019) whose review indicates that students in secondary school environments confront a variety of persistent pressures connected to academic requirements which can potentially lead to lower academic performance, diminished motivation, and the possibility that they will drop out of school altogether. This scenario should be addressed since it might have long-term consequences, such as a lower likelihood of long-term employment for these individuals. This problem collectively costs governments billions of dollars yearly. The decrease in happiness and intrinsic motivation after elementary years highlights the need to refine our understanding of teachers' educational perspectives and the barriers teachers face with regard to enhancing students' interests in learning. Although various causes may be attributed to such decreased happiness, it is well within the responsibility of educators and teachers to promote positive classroom environments where students can feel comfortable expressing their ideas, taking chances, posing questions and tackling learning problems.

Analyzing factors to enhance self-determination in schools, Karvonen et al. (2004) and Eisenman et al. (2001)

reported perceptions and interventions of teachers and parents were significant for promoting self-determination in students, together with effective support from counselors and administrators. According to self-determination theory, we all have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Our motivation is more independent when our social settings, especially schools, are more supportive of these psychological needs. In the educational context, if these needs are not addressed, students require more outside motivation to regulate them, potentially making them even less happy to engage with school tasks. Many studies have revealed that when students are more autonomously driven, they are more likely to attain their goals over time.

Researchers have explored the degree to which this kind of knowledge about students' self-determination has actually been applied in pedagogical contexts. Wehmeyer, et al. (2000) indicated that 60% of teachers from the sample of 1,219 teachers studied, understood the importance of self-determination. These teachers highly rated the value of self-determination in supporting students' success in school and in their future career. However, 31% of the teachers reported that students did not have individualized educational goals based on self-determination and 33% of the teachers shared that there was no involvement of students in educational planning. Other researchers also share similar points, indicating that there is a gap between knowledge about self-determination and actual application of pathways to students' self-determination by teachers and school systems (Grigal et al., 2003; Thoma, et al., 2002). Further research is necessary to understand the teachers' perspectives so that we may fully understand and develop collaborative solutions.

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