ACADEMIC OPTIMISM OF HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS AND THE SUCCESS OF THEIR STUDENTS

By

UZMA SHAHID

Integrated Studies Final Project Essay (MAIS 700)

Submitted to Dr. Nanci Langford

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts - Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

April, 2013
ABSTRACT

This research aims to add to the literature on Academic Optimism, a composite construct composed of trust in student and teachers, academic emphasis, and collective efficacy and then view it from an interdisciplinary lens. The relationships between student trust in teachers, student perceptions of academic pressure, and student identification with school were examined as well as how they were individually and collectively related to student achievement in the schools. The findings in this study confirm that academic optimism can be best understood if viewed from an interdisciplinary lens. It was also found that the optimistic teachers and the principal can play a very important role in enhancing their student’s success. Finally, academic optimism is a latent construct that enhanced student achievement enabling school structure provided a mechanism to achieve academic optimism.
Introduction

This paper aims to identify academic optimism and the role the principals and teachers can play to enhance students’ achievement. According to Coleman, “only a small part of [student achievement] is the result of school factors, in contrast to family background differences between communities” (cited in McGuigan and Hoy, 2006, p. 203). Usually schools are assumed to have a negligible effect on student performance, and that students more commonly show different results and outcomes because of the differences in their family backgrounds or socio economic status. It is a fact that different students have different mental capabilities, but sometimes some students need extra optimism, motivation, or pressure to reach their full potential.

McGuigan and Hoy (2006) claim that “Academic optimism is a shared belief among faculty that academic achievement is important, that the faculty has the capacity to help students achieve, and that students and parents can be trusted to cooperate with them in this endeavor in brief, a school wide confidence that students will succeed academically” (p.204). Academic optimism is an emergent construct that describes school’s collective confidence that each and every student will be successful despite of the differences between their family backgrounds and socioeconomic factors. Academic optimism also shows that conditions for student achievement exist and student success can be enhanced.

Academic optimism is a complex construct and cannot be understood easily; it can be better understood through an interdisciplinary lens. Klein and Newell define Interdisciplinary studies as “a process of answering a question, solving a problem or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession……IDS draws
on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective” (cited in Taylor, 2012, p.25). Academic optimism is interdisciplinary because it is a complex problem, is lies at the interfaces of disciplines, in this case education and psychology, both education, psychology offer important insights into the problem and either education or psychology will not be able to address the problem in detail.

In order to understand academic optimism properly, we need not only to bring education and psychology together, but we also have to combine and synthesize them to understand and clarify what academic optimism is or how it works. From the psychological point of view if students are trusted, motivated and get positive academic pressure from their teachers or principal they show improvements. Students having high motivation face failures and problems bravely and think them a step towards success in the educational journey. These improvements include an increase in grades, decrease in dropout rates, increase in student engagement, and decrease in bad behavior.

Edmonds (1979) is the first one to refute Coleman’s view and claims that strong principal and teacher leadership can help students improve and succeed. Later, Hoy et al. (2006) argued in support of Edmonds view and claimed that “Good schools were the product of good administrators” (p. 425). Controlling for socio-economic status, prior academic achievement and other demographic characteristics, principal and teachers can be seen to play a very important role in enhancing student outcomes and making a school successful. After spending forty years researching school and teacher properties that are positively related to student achievement, Hoy
et al. (2006) is the first one to introduce the concept of academic optimism. Hoy et al. (2006) claims academic optimism to be “a latent collective property of schools positively connected to student achievement, even after controlling for socio economic status and prior academic achievement” (p. 427).

The question that this paper aims to answer is as follows.

**Q. What is academic optimism and what does current research literature indicate about the relationship between the academic optimism of high school principals and teachers and the success of their students?**

**The research method**

For the purposes of my research paper I will be researching current articles based on academic optimism. Using this literature review I will be defining and describing Academic optimism, its components, and theories related to academic optimism. I will also explore the relation between the academic optimism of high school principals and teachers and the success of their students. This paper will conclude with some future recommendations that are needed on academic optimism.

**Optimism**

To understand academic optimism it is important to first understand optimism. So the first question I would like to address is “what is optimism?”. It is by no means a simple or clear cut question; it has been debated by numerous scholars. So, I will start with Coleman (2000) who
defines optimism as “a strong emotion and an expectation towards the assumption that everything will be all right against all its difficulties and obstacles” (cited in Ünüvar, Avşaroğlu, & Uslu, 2012. p.140). Next, Scheier and Carver (1992) emphasize that optimism is a process in which individuals hope for the best and expect positive results instead of negative ones in their daily lives” (cited in Ünüvar, Avşaroğlu, & Uslu, 2012, p.140). Finally, Hoy & Kurz (2008) claim optimism to be an antithesis of helplessness, a way to enlarge personal control, and a general positive disposition to life. This general predisposition does not guarantee academic optimism, but I believe such a predisposition should provide a propensity toward academic optimism thus making it easy for us to understand.

**Academic optimism**

The second question that has to be addressed is that of academic optimism. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) identified academic optimism as a collective property of schools that was positively related to student achievement, even after controlling for social economic factors and prior academic achievement. Wu et al. (2013) describe academic optimism as “a collective property of schools that describes school culture in terms of the emphasis on academic achievement, the degree to which the faculty trusts parents and students, and the extent of collective efficacy of the faculty” (p.179). Wagner and Dipaola, (2011) further claim academic optimism as an emergent construct that characterizes a school’s collective level of confidence that all students will succeed. So, academic optimism is a confidence that faculty, student, actually the entire school shares and believes that they will succeed.
Academic optimism was originally studied as a collective construct in the context of the entire school; new research shows that it is also individualistic (Woolfolk Hoy, Hoy, & Kurz, 2008; Beard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2010). Describing academic optimism as an individual construct, Hoy & Kurz (2008) state it to be “a teacher’s positive belief that he or she can make a difference in the academic performance of students by emphasizing academics and learning, by trusting parents and students to cooperate in the process, and by believing in his or her own capacity to overcome difficulties and react to failure with resilience and perseverance” (p.822). To summarize, the above definitions of academic optimism show that it is cognitive in nature as it can be learned, developed, and nurtured by teachers and principal in the schools.

Academic optimism is not only optimism, confidence, hope, but is a process - a route - that is shared by an entire school. It is such a journey in which students, teachers or principal cooperate without the fear of failure and with a hope of success and achievement in the end. From an educational point of view students who are optimistic are more energetic, hard-working and persistent even in the face of difficulties and failures. Similarly, from psychological points, students who are optimistic think positively, they are never scared of difficulties and actually see difficulties as part of the way. They believe that these difficulties can lead them to success.

Components of academic optimism
Now that we have looked briefly at optimism and academic optimism, we turn our attention to how academic optimism is built or formed. Academic optimism grew out of the interplay among three collective properties: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students (cited in Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy, 2006, p.431). These properties were found to be interrelated and to reinforce one another (Beard et al., 2010). Academic optimism is “a triadic set of interactions with each element functionally dependent on the others” (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006). These collective properties are actually based upon three concepts: academic emphasis as part of the organizational health of schools (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000), collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and trust (Coleman, 1990). It has roots in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and Bandura’s social cognitive and self-efficacy theories (Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk, 2000). So, the three components of academic optimism are interrelated and support each other. If we want to understand academic optimism properly we have to understand these components thoroughly and from both educational and psychological perspective. Leaving or ignoring any one perspective and studying the other one will not clarify academic optimism for us.

Self-efficacy

Let’s start with the first component of academic optimism, self-efficacy. Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk, (2000) note that the first component of academic optimism is based upon Bandura’s work on self-efficacy. Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy is personal and is the result of a cognitive process in which individuals or groups construct beliefs about their ability to perform at a given level of aptitude. These beliefs influence people’s behavior as to how much effort they will put in to overcome difficulties, how persistent they will be, how flexible they are
in dealing with failures and how much pressure they experience in coping with demanding situations (cited in Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk, 2000). Student achievement and self-efficacy are related. Researchers have found positive associations between student achievement and both teachers' collective efficacy beliefs about the school (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000) and individual self-efficacy beliefs of teachers (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

**Collective efficacy**

Collective efficacy can be defined as “the judgment of the teachers that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute actions required to have a positive effect on students(Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004)” (cited in McGuigan and Hoy, 2006, p.207). Beard, Hoy & Hoy (2010) quote Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy’s (1998) definition of teachers’ sense of efficacy as a “judgment of his or her capability to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (n/p). If teachers are confident that they can affect student learning, they set higher expectations, use more effort and are more flexible in facing difficult situations (Beard, Hoy & Hoy (2010). This shows that teacher sense of efficacy is positively related to the student’s achievement.

Da Costa & Riordan, (1996), claim that the second component of academic optimism, teacher efficacy is strongly correlated to trust. According to Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, (1999) faculty trust includes trusting parents and students as one concept. Trust in relation to academic optimism is described as a “willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk, 2006, p. 429). Beard, Hoy and Woolfolk (2010) claim that research shows “When teachers create a safe and trusting environment, students feel comfortable to take chances and learn from their
mistakes, and parents come to believe that teachers are motivated by the best interests of their children (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, Flutter, 2006 and Flutter, 2007)(n/p). As a result of this trusting relationship with teacher, students “show themselves great,” find their voice, and apply themselves to learning (Flutter, 2007)”(n/p). In addition, Hoy, Tarter & Woolfolk Hoy (2006) assert that schools with highly trusting teachers often have more enjoyable learning, which as a consequence builds efficacy.

**Academic pressure**

Let’s move to the third or final component of academic optimism, academic pressure. Beard et al. (2010) and Hoy et al. (2006) claim the third component of academic optimism, academic emphasis, as a pressure for academic achievement. It is under such pressure, where teachers find ways to engage students in appropriate, academic tasks, set high, but attainable goals for students, maintain serious learning environment where students feel motivated to learn and achieve these goals. It is related to other components of academic optimism because academic emphasis is strongest when collective efficacy is high (Hoy et al., 2006). Beard, Hoy& Hoy (2010) also assert that research shows that academic emphasis and academic pressure have been related to student achievement in a number of countries, including the U.S. (Griffith, 2002, Henderson et al., 2005 and Roney et al., 2007), Israel (Gaziel, 1997), and Slovene (Lepsuscek & Zupancic, 2009).

For the above three components, Hoy and his colleagues conclude that “collective efficacy reflects the thoughts and beliefs of the group; faculty trust adds an affective dimension, and academic emphasis captures the behavioral enactment of efficacy and trust” (p. 14).
Academic optimism paints a rich picture of human agency that explains collective behavior in terms of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions” (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006, p. 431).

**Theoretical Background**

As academic optimism grew out of the interplay among three collective properties based upon three theories, it is important to understand those theories first.

**Self-efficacy theory**

Self-efficacy theory, which grew out of social cognitive theory, explained how individuals exercise control and agency over their lives (Bevel and Mitchell, 2012). Self-efficacy is a belief made up of mechanisms for efficacy expectations and outcome expectations that underlie all behaviors (Arsalan, 2012). According to Bandura, Efficacy expectations can be defined as one’s belief in being able to adapt certain behavior required to achieve certain results in a successful manner and outcome expectations can be defined as predicting that a particular behavior can lead to certain results (cited in Arsalan, 2012). Self-efficacy is one’s belief in one’s self that he/she will be able to succeed in a particular task. These beliefs show how people think, feel or behave. Thus self-efficacy can affects one’s psychological state and plays a very important role in how goals, tasks, and challenges can be approached. Self-efficacy beliefs are related to one’s individual motivation. As individuals are motivated by their thoughts, either they will succeed or they will fail. Individuals with a sense of high self-efficacy believe that they will succeed and feel motivated by this thought. On the other hand students with a low sense of self-efficacy are doubtful of their success and hence are less motivated.
In relation to students, self-efficacy can affect students’ motivation towards learning. A student with low self-efficacy is less willing to learn, less willing to experiment or research, less persistent, does not want to face difficulties or does not want even to make an effort to overcome these difficulties. On the other hand a student with high self-efficacy is always optimistic, persistent and considers failures or difficulties a way towards success. Arsalan (2012) claims that student’s self-efficacy beliefs for learning could be improved as long as “one has a clear idea about the sources of their self-efficacy beliefs and to what extent these sources influence their self-efficacy beliefs” (p.1915). It is important to train and teach students high efficacy beliefs at a very young age, so that they will be able to handle and face problems and difficulties in later life more optimistically.

According to Bandura, students’ self-efficacy beliefs have four sources: performance accomplishments (mastery experiences), vicarious experiences, verbal (social) persuasion and, psychological states.

1. Performance accomplishments: refers to the consequences of student performance in their learning environment. If they are successful in their task their self-efficacy strengthens and on the other side their failure results in weakening of their self-efficacy.

2. Vicarious experiences: is the information students get by observing and comparing their self with other fellows. If a student is performing better than his/her fellows, his/her self-efficacy increases. On the other side, if a student feels his performance is lower than his/her fellows, his/her self-efficacy is weakened.

3. Verbal (social) persuasion: is when students are encouraged by their parents, colleagues or teachers that they can do it or they have capabilities to succeed, students feel more optimistic.
4. Psychological states: refers to the positive effects on student’s self-efficacy in a motivating and encouraging environment. On the other side student’s self-efficacy will be affected negatively if he/she has to face humiliating or discouraging environment.

According to Bandura the strangest source of self-efficacy is performance accomplishments (cited in Arsalan, 2012).

**Positive psychology**

Positive psychology is an investigation of human behavior that moves the focus from the negative to the positive, from what’s wrong to what’s right (Hoy, W. K., & Tarter, 2011). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) define positive psychology as “A science of positive, subjective experience, positive individual traits and positive institutions promises to improve the quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless” (p.428). Hoy, W. K., & Tarter (2011) claim that positive psychology “is the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and what goes right in life. Its interest is in discovering what works, what is right, and what is improving, not what fails, what is wrong, and what is declining” (p.429). Peterson, (2006); Sheldon & King, (2001) claim that positive psychology asks “what is the nature of the effectively functioning individual or organization, which successfully adapts and learns?” (cited in Hoy, W. K., & Tarter, 2011, p.429). Claiming in the favour of positive psychology, Chemers, Watson, (2000) cite Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver’s, (1986) argument is that “Optimists are better able to cope with stressors that arise on the path to successful performance” (p.268).

**Trust**
Trust in regard to academic optimism is defined as a “willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy, 2006, p. 429). High levels of trust are associated with student achievement (Hoy, 2002), and Hoy attributes this relationship to the cooperative nature of learning, and the fact that cooperation requires a degree of trust. If students feel that their teacher trusts them they also in return start to trust their teacher and try their best to maintain this trust. Students who enjoy high-trust relationships with their teachers show better result than those who are not trusted. In addition lack of trust can also lead to student’s bad behavior. Trust actually fosters more constructive attitudes on the part of students and thus results in the success of the students.

The above three components of academic optimism can be better understood if viewed from a psychological perspective along with an educational view. Self-efficacy, positive psychology and trust all are related to each other and all effect, actually, enhance each other. Academic optimism motivates students; it energizes them to continue and to be persistent in their struggle.

Student Performance

Previous Research shows that there is a positive connection between school performance and academic optimism (Hoy et al., 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007). Kirby and DiPaola, (2011) performed a research study to examine the relationships among academic optimism, community engagement, and student achievement in urban elementary schools across 35 urban elementary schools in one district. They tested Hoy et al., (2006), 2007; Kirby and DiPaola, (2009); McGuigan, (2005); Smith and Hoy, (2007); Wagner, (2008)’s findings and
collected data from 35 urban elementary schools. The measurement of academic optimism at the school level by Kirby and DiPaola, (2011) consisted of three parts. Starting with the measure of the sense of collective efficacy, followed by the faculty’s trust in students and parents, and finalized by the school's academic emphasis. Combining the measures of these three components, they created an index of school academic optimism. Kirby and DiPaola, (2011) agreed that the survival of a school depends upon its environment and on the interactions between its component parts. In this study, community engagement was strongly correlated with academic optimism, controlling for student social economic status. They found that in schools where the faculty is optimistic their students can succeed despite the obstacle of low socioeconomic status and where the community is engaged, students are more likely to achieve at higher levels. Findings from Kirby and DiPaola’s (2011) study also supported that community engagement; collective efficacy, trust, and academic pressure do act as predictors to collectively influence student achievement.

Bevel and Mitchell (2012) also carried out a research study to explore the relationship among academic optimism and elementary reading achievement. They performed this research study to extend the work of Hoy et al. (2006) by examining the relationship between three organizational properties: academic emphasis, trust, self-efficacy and student achievement. Bevel and Mitchell (2012) researched the usefulness of academic optimism in predicting academic achievement in elementary schools and found that academic optimism positively correlated with and was predictive of Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT) reading achievement after controlling for social economic status.

Tschannen-Moran, Bankole, Mitchell, & Moore (2013) performed a research study to examine the relationships between student trust in teachers, student perceptions of academic
pressure, and student identification with their school. They also observed how trust, academic pressure and student identification with the school were individually and collectively related to student achievement in 49 elementary, middle, and high schools in one urban district. The measures used included the Student Trust in Teachers Survey (Adams and Forsyth), the Identification with School Questionnaire (Voelkl), and an adaptation of academic pressure (Hoy, Hannum and Tschannen-Moran). They employed confirmatory factor analysis to explore whether these three observed variables would form a latent variable called Student Academic Optimism. Finally, they found that strong and significant relationships were found between all three of the observed variables, thus proving that academic optimism is related to student success.

Wu, Hoy, & Tarter, (2013) used structural equation modeling for a twofold purpose: to test a theory of academic optimism in Taiwan elementary schools and to expand the theory by adding new variables, collective responsibility and enabling school structure, to the model of academic optimism. This research was conducted in elementary schools within Hualien County and Taiwan, in both reading and writing. Wu, Hoy, & Tarter, (2013) used Questionnaire items to measure academic optimism, trust, academic emphasis or academic pressure. They concluded that the emerging theory of academic optimism was supported in Taiwan culture, a setting quite different from that of the USA, which suggests the general robustness of the theory. They claimed that “academic optimism is central in an organizational model of school achievement” (p.188). Arguing that academic optimism is a rich concept they claimed that academic optimism brings together and synthesizes three important ingredients of success: efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis. They also found that a strong synergy created by the interactions of collective efficacy, collective trust, and academic emphasis. Wu, Hoy, & Tarter, (2013) assert
that “Just as learned optimism can move individuals to overcome learned pessimism, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that at the school level, a culture of academic optimism can overcome a sense of futility and hopelessness that permeates low performing schools. They found that in every iteration and test of the theory, the path to student success runs through academic optimism. In some respects it is surprising that collective responsibility and enabling structures are only secondary factors that influence achievement, but when academic optimism is included in the network of relations, it quickly becomes apparent that it is the dominant force fostering student achievement” (p. 189).

Next, Smith and Hoy (2007) performed a research study with the aim that is two-fold: to demonstrate a general construct of schools called academic optimism and to show its relation to student achievement in urban elementary schools, even controlling for socioeconomic factors, and school size. The data was collected from 99 urban elementary schools in Texas and multiple regression and factor analyses were used to test a series of hypotheses guiding the inquiry. Claiming that academic emphasis, collective efficacy beliefs, and faculty trust shape the normative and behavioral environment of the school, Smith and Hoy (2007) hypothesized that academic optimism can affect students achievement. First component, the academic emphasis was comprised of five Likert items scored on a five-point scale. Second component, collective efficacy was measured using the 12-item collective efficacy scale (Goddard et al., 2000). The items were scored on a six-point Likert scale. Third component, Faculty trust was measured by the Omnibus Trust Scale (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The items were scored on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The reliability and construct validity of the scale have been supported in several factor-analytic studies for all above
components. The alpha coefficient of reliability for the items in this study was also calculated. In addition, school size and socio economic status was also measured. The results supported Coleman’s social capital theory, Bandura's social cognitive theory, Hoy and Tarter's work on organizational climate. The result also demonstrated the existence of a cultural property of schools called academic optimism. These findings have practical implications for developing strategies to improve the academic performance of urban schools.

Conclusion

Researchers have shown that there is a positive connection between school performance and academic optimism (Hoy et al., 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007). Hoy et al., (2006) found that academic optimism showed an improvement in reading, social studies and writing achievement in 96 high schools. (McGuigan and Hoy, (2006) found the same positive effects on mathematics and reading achievement in 40 elementary schools. Similarly Smith and Hoy, 2007) found it predictive of mathematics achievement in 99 urban elementary schools. Finally, Bevel, & Mitchell, (2012) find a similar relationship between academic optimism and reading achievement in the elementary schools.

The term academic optimism is new and still needs more practical research. There are many questions that need answers such as: Are students more satisfied in an optimistic school? Does academic optimism have any effect upon student engagement? What are the drawbacks of academic optimism? Can it be dangerous to be extra optimistic? Does the current hierarchal education system facilitate or hinder the application of academic optimism in schools? Tough
there is lots of theoretical and practical work done on academic optimism; it still needs more practical research in schools.
References


