

Quality of School Life and Student Outcomes in Europe

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Quality of school life (QSL) reflects the attitudinal or emotional climate at school in terms of students' perceptions of well-being and satisfaction, determined by school-related factors and by their educational experiences. Building on the social-structural perspective of the quality of school life and the PISA framework on well-being, the study offers a structured model for measuring the quality of school life, focusing on students' sense of opportunity and achievement, the quality of their interpersonal relationships with their teachers, their exposure to a safe and cooperative learning environment, and their overall sense of belonging to the school and school community. The QSL has been found to have a significant positive impact on academic results of EU students even after controlling for student gender and socioeconomic background. It also appears that improvement of students' perceptions of safety, achievement and teachers' support has the most substantial potential to improve their overall academic performance in most EU countries.

Research has provided consistent evidence that student perceptions of the quality of their life at school may influence powerfully their motivation to learn, improve their behaviour and self-regulation, develop identity and positive attitudes towards success, enhance empathy and respect for diversity, contribute to better engagement in learning, improve academic performance and achievement, and prevent dropout (Epstein & McPartland, 1976; Finn, 1989; Ainley et al., 1991; Linnakylä, 1996; Suldo et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2015; Havik & Westergård, 2019). Yet, there is little research offering consistent estimates of the QSL aspects across EU education systems and analysing their predictive value for different outcomes of schooling.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK BEHIND THE QUALITY OF SCHOOL LIFE MEASUREMENT MODEL

Four major societal expectations about schooling are considered to determine the students' perceptions related to the quality of their school life (Williams & Batten, 1981; Williams & Roey, 1997). First, students' reactions depend on whether schools are perceived to provide relevant competencies that offer opportunities for their future career and lives as adults. Second, schools are expected to provide learning that facilitates and enhances the personal development of students. This is related to students' perceptions of self-efficacy in learning and rewarding achievement and their awareness of the academic and socio-emotional support, received by their teachers. Third, schools are expected to enhance socialisation and support the social integration of students. Their socialisation is successful when they experience strong social ties, feel liked and accepted by their peers, and have a sense of belongingness to the school and the community. Fourth, schools are expected to nurture and foster student's sense of social responsibility and to encourage their respect of social norms and values. This

could be explored through the lenses of students' experience of bullying as opposed to the emotional and physical safety of the school environment.

Building on this social-structural perspective and using EU students' individual data from OECD's PISA 2018 assessment cycle, the developed analytical model consists of six specific QSL scales:

- 1/ Opportunity scale, measuring the perceived importance of schoolwork for future education and job prospects;
- 2/ Achievement scale, measuring students' perceptions of self-efficacy in learning and rewarding achievement;
- 3/ Teachers scale, measuring students' awareness of the support, attention, understanding, encouragement and inspiration received by their teachers;
- 4/ Belongingness scale, measuring students' sense of social bonding, connectedness to school, of being part of and accepted by the school community; or alienation, isolation, loneliness;
- 5/ Cooperation scale, measuring cooperative learning spirit, perceived importance and value of the social learning interactions at school;
- 6/ Safety scale, measuring perceived emotional and physical safety of the school environment.

HOW DO 15-YEAR-OLD EU STUDENTS EVALUATE THE QUALITY OF LIFE AT THEIR SCHOOLS? Across Europe, satisfaction with the quality of school life appears to be generally more common than dissatisfaction. The students across Europe perceive their safety at school, associated with lower exposure to bullying, as rather high. Overall, between 50% and 78% of students perceive a high quality of school bonding, connectedness, attachment and acceptance, and feel like an important part of their school community.

Between 70% and 90% of students across EU countries deem the relevance of school for their future lives to be high. At the same time, in some countries, the two QSL aspects related to interpersonal interactions – student-teacher relations and cooperation in learning – generate notable, negative subjective reactions and may be considered a source of concern. Almost every fourth student from the Czech Republic and France, and every fifth student from Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland and Luxembourg, give rather low subjective assessment of the quality of their interactions with their teachers. In addition, large number of adolescents from Bulgaria, France, the Czech Republic, Italy and Slovakia perceive a low level of acknowledgement of the importance and value of cooperation and experience limited cooperative learning practices at their schools.

Boys and girls seem to perceive their life at school differently.

Across Europe, girls experience a higher sense of opportunity and achievement, and a higher quality of teachers' emotional and academic support. Boys tend to experience a stronger sense of belongingness, but are more likely to become victims of bullying at school.

In most countries advantaged students generally experience more positive subjective well-being at school than their peers coming from more disadvantaged families. In many countries, the most substantial differences have been registered with regard to students' sense of being accepted and embedded in the classroom and school community, their feelings of being secure and their self-rated ability to cope with tasks and to achieve satisfactory results.

QUALITY OF SCHOOL LIFE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

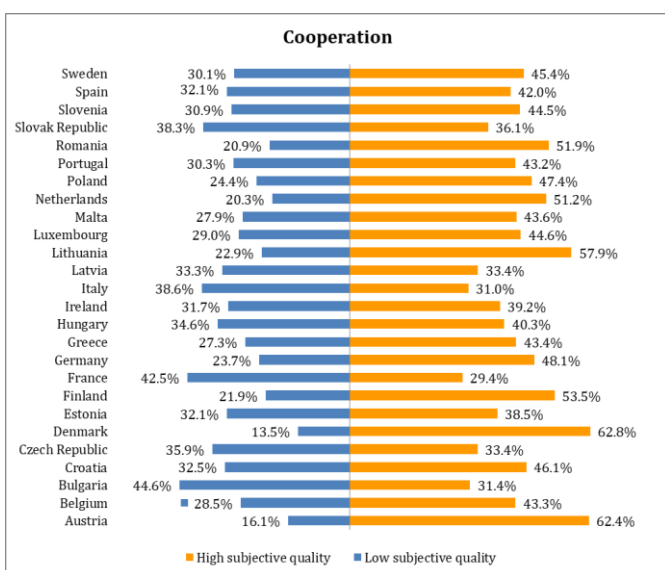
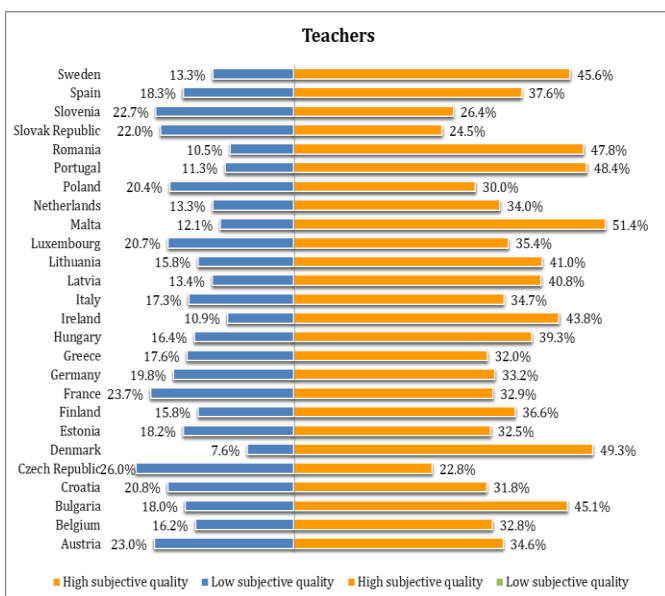
The QSL was found to have a substantial positive impact on the academic results even after controlling for student gender and socioeconomic background. Students who have more positive feelings of being accepted and liked by the rest of the group, who experience more supportive, understanding and encouraging teaching styles, who are exposed to a more cooperative learning environment, who find school more relevant for their future education and career, who feel safe in their classrooms and believe in their ability to cope with schoolwork, tend to have higher academic achievement, irrespective of their gender and family circumstances. Different patterns of these influences have been observed in different countries, and this probably reflects the cultural differences between the countries and between their school systems. But it also appears that improvement of students' perceptions of safety, achievement and teachers' support has the most significant potential to improve their overall academic performance in most EU countries.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Given the positive impact of QSL on academic achievement, it seems necessary for decision-makers to consider promoting the quality of school life as part of educational policies at both the national and EU levels. Well-designed and implemented policy interventions to enhance different QSL aspects could bring lasting improvement in the effectiveness of school education across Europe.

Promoting the use of cooperative-learning instructional practices at schools seem important for fostering students' communication and students' interactions through shared activities, building better relationships between students, developing crucial social and emotional skills and improving the subjectively viewed quality of school life.

Educators may consider different formative assessment strategies to reinforce the quality of teacher-student interactions and to improve students' sense of achievement. The later may require the implementation of comprehensive



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support systems addressing learning difficulties, supporting students with special learning needs, etc. Motivating students to get involved in cooperative extracurricular activities is another possibility to nurture a sense of belongingness and better interpersonal relationships.

Policy initiatives aiming at enhancing civic knowledge and developing citizenship skills could contribute to creating a school ethos of mutual respect and collaboration. That could foster students' sense of belonging and perceptions of social and emotional security, and improve interpersonal relationships and an overall sense of cohesion of school community. Supporting initiatives that encourage students' participation in the decision-making process at their schools could also contribute to addressing alienation, enhancing students' sense of relatedness to school and improving teacher-student relationships.

Provision of pre-service and in-service training for teachers in monitoring student emotions, identifying and addressing destructive behavioural patterns, and promoting constructive interactions between students could contribute to a better subjective view of the QSL. Various programmes might be considered to improve teacher self-efficacy in:

1/ classroom management, including teachers' ability to create a positive classroom environment supportive to learning, to boost students' positive emotions and to successfully manage students' behaviour.

2/ teaching, including building up teacher confidence in using a variety of instructional and assessment practices and strategies that contribute to progress in learning;

3/ engaging students, including the development of teacher competencies to provide effective emotional and cognitive support to their students, to increase their motivation and to encourage their engagement in learning; and

4/ working in a multicultural environment, including the development of teacher competencies to adopt and successfully implement inclusive and participatory education practices.

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