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## **Wellness and Academic Performance of Elementary Students**

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### **Introduction**

Wellness is a framework within which children develop a productive and enjoyable life, much of which is developed within the parameters of their education process. A non-experimental study was conducted to examine the relationship between multiple dimensions of wellness (defined as a state of the totality of a person's life as mind, body, and spirit interact with the environmental contexts) as measured by the Five Factor Wellness Lifestyle Inventory for Elementary Children (5F-WEL-E) and academic performance of elementary students as measured by reading, language, and mathematics scores of the 2006-2007 school year administration of the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT), which is Mississippi's annual state test to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The specific model of wellness used in this study was the indivisible self.

This study included a public school based sample of 634 children in third through fifth grades and examined whether differences in wellness component scores were associated with differences in academic performance. Results of this study supported a relationship between performance on all three academic tests and scores on Social Self, Physical Self, and Coping Self wellness composites. Results of the study were inconclusive on a relationship between the wellness composites of Essential Self, Creative Self, and the Life Contexts. This study provided support for identification of the dimensions of wellness that relate to academic performance that could enhance intervention efforts during the formative education years.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Academic achievement is important for elementary age children as a tool for successful life as an adult. Academic achievement is also a crucial mandate for schools across the United States under the NCLB. Wellness is a construct in which the individual as an indivisible being attains a positive state of integration of mind, body, and spirit with

the environmental contexts. Academic achievement for children occurs within the construct of wellness, as there is mutual influence between academic factors and non-academic factors for a child.

Several wellness models exist which include multiple components for an individual. These models are National Wellness Institute (Hettler, 1977), Wellness Continuum (Ryan & Travis, 1981), Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), High Level Wellness (Ardell, 1986), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. Congress, 2004), and The Indivisible Self (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). A synthesis of the models defines wellness as a state of the totality of a person's life as mind, body, and spirit interact with the environmental contexts. Throughout life, an individual moves along a continuum from illness to wellness through personal choices and action. Common dimensions across the models are social, occupational (which could be considered school work for children), spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and environmental contexts. The Individual Self model offers both empirical support for application and a comprehensive foundation of multiple dimensions across the life of an individual and was the specific model of wellness used in this study.

### **Current Efforts**

Despite on-site school efforts to improve academic achievement, students still have both satisfactory and unsatisfactory progress. This study examined specific identification of comprehensive wellness differences between children who have satisfactory academic achievement and children who have unsatisfactory academic achievement. Results of this study supported a relationship between performance on all three academic tests and scores on social, physical, and coping wellness composites.

#### *Social Self*

The social self includes a continuum of the components of friendship and love (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Previous research has indicated that social influences such as family and peer relationships were a source of both positive and negative influence on other areas of wellness to include academic achievement. This study did not examine specific sources of social influence such as family relationships (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Keith, 1991; Sun & Li, 2001) or peer relationships (Gest, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2005; O'Brien & Jones, 1999). Results did support a relationship between the social self composite and academic achievement. Study results showed that the distribution of high academic scores in reading, language, and math was with the students who had high scores in their social self pattern on the 5F-WEL-E and the distribution of low academic scores in reading, language, and math was with the students who had low scores in their social self pattern on the 5F-WEL-E.

#### *Physical Self*

The physical self includes exercise and nutrition (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Increased promotion of physical exercise and nutrition within the school setting and a positive relationship between nutrition and academic achievement has been identified by

researchers. A study conducted by Taras (2005) indicated that a relationship was not substantiated between academic achievement and physical activity. Kleinman et al. (2002) found that participation in a school free breakfast program was associated with improvement in grades in math. Results of this study supported a relationship between the physical self composite and academic achievement. Study results showed that the distribution of high academic scores in reading, language, and math was with the students who had high scores in their Physical Self pattern on the 5F-WEL-E and the distribution of low academic scores in reading, language, and math was with the students who had low scores in their Physical Self pattern on the 5F-WEL-E.

### *Coping Self*

The coping self includes those components with which the individual manages challenges and stresses of life and moves beyond any negative effects of these (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Components of the coping self are Leisure, Stress Management, Self Worth, and Realistic Beliefs. Research has indicated positive relationship in areas such as wellness promotion and stress levels (Clarke, 2006; Omizo, Omizo, & D'Andrea, 1992) and a correlation between academic success, self-concept, and self-esteem (Gose, Wooden, & Muller, 2001). Results of this study supported a relationship between the coping self composite and academic achievement. Study results showed that the distribution of high academic scores in reading, language, and math was with the students who had high scores in their coping self pattern on the 5F-WEL-E and the distribution of low academic scores in reading, language, and math was with the students who had low scores in their coping self pattern on the 5F-WEL-E.

Results of this study indicated nonsignificant correlations for a relationship between academic achievement and the wellness composites of essential self, creative self, and the life contexts. Distribution of academic scores was observed across the range of scores in all of these wellness composites. This failed to support relationship of influence on these wellness areas on academic achievement of children.

### *Essential Self*

The essential self was defined by Myers and Sweeney (2005) as a composition of four components which are central to holism and wellness and through which life experiences are filtered and with which the individual acts to live long and well. These four components are Spirituality, Gender Identity, Cultural Identity, and Self-Care. Research had begun in examination of the influence of these components on the lives of children (Douglass & Wong, 1977; Garrett, 1999; Olive, 2005) but without indication of the depth and breadth of these influences. In this study, patterns between academic achievement and the essential self composite scores showed variance across all three academic scores, in that both high and low academic scores were observed across the range of essential self scores. As the results indicated a nonsignificant correlation, meaningful prediction could not be made between wellness areas within the essential self and academic achievement. This indicates a continuing need for further study as to depth and breadth of these wellness influences.

### *Creative Self*

The Creative Self is a combination of attributes formed by the individual to make a unique social place among others (Myers & Sweeney, 2005) and include the components of Thinking, Emotions, Control, Work, and Positive Humor. Research had indicated some relationship between components of thinking and emotions with work at school. Results of this study did not negate relationship of factors such as intelligence (Raapport, Denney, Chung, & Hustace, 2001) or participation in student enrichment projects (Baum et al., 1994). However, in this study, patterns between academic achievement and creative self composite scores showed that low academic performers in all three subject areas scored high on the creative self and high academic performers in all three subject areas scored lows on the creative self. These patterns were aligned with earlier research, which showed no evidence for self-concept in a particular achievement domain to moderate a self-fulfilling prophecy (Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997) as well as the failure of a single personal characteristic or cluster of characteristics to serve as a predictor for academic achievement (Robbins, Spence, & Clark, 1991). As the results indicated a nonsignificant correlation, meaningful prediction could not be made between wellness areas within the creative self and academic achievement. This indicates a continuing need for further study as to depth and breadth of these wellness influences.

### *Contexts*

The indivisible self wellness model includes contexts as those systems in which we live (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). This study included a local context as the systems which children live in the most often such as families and communities. A second context was a combination of institutions such as school and government, global influences such as the world environment, and the dimension of time through which there is perpetual growth and change. Previous research has indicated that life contexts such as socioeconomic disadvantage (Felner et al., 1995; White, 1982) and exposure to violence (Schwartz & Gorman, 2003) influenced academic achievement. Results of this study did not support such relationships. Thus, further study of negative influences on wellness areas in life should include academic achievement. Previous research on the institutional context of the school had indicated that school quality factors such as school climate and teacher-student teamwork influenced academic achievement (Daley et al., 2005; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Ross & Nunnery, 2005). In this study, patterns between the criterion set of academic achievement and the life context scores showed variance across all three academic scores, in both high and low scores were observed across the range of local context scores and combined (Institutional, Global, and Chronometical) context scores. Although results of this study did not negate suggested influence of life contexts, there is a need to examine more specifically the relationship of academic achievement with life context influences.

### *Total Wellness*

Total Wellness is a sum of the five composites and life contexts and is considered to be a measurement of general well-being (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Previous research indicated that the education community has begun to address wellness and academic

achievement, but with a focus that is still limited to only some of the components of wellness and a lack of attention to wellness as a multifaceted composite (Towey & Fleming, 2003; U.S. Congress, 2004). Previous research indicated that a lifestyle of wellness could either contribute to attainment of academic achievement or undermine academic achievement (Cowen, 1991). In comparison to other countries, the United States has presence of wellness influences that contribute negative influence on academic achievement (Action for Healthy Kids, 2004; ASCD, 2007; United Nations Children's Fund, 2007). Study results support a continuing focus on the relationship between total wellness and academic achievement within the realm of education for children.

### **Implications for Action**

While research has provided information on non-academic influences on academic performance of children, this study has found a relationship to exist for participant students between wellness composites of coping, social, physical, and total wellness and academic achievement. Identification of the relationship between coping wellness and academic achievement provides a foundation to further study relationship for children between academic achievement and life areas of leisure, stress management, self-worth, and realistic beliefs. Identification of the relationship between social wellness and academic achievement provides a foundation to further study relationship for children between academic achievement and life areas of friendship and love. Identification of the relationship between physical wellness and academic achievement provides a foundation to further study relationship for children between academic achievement and life areas of nutrition and exercise. Identification of the relationship between total wellness and academic achievement provides a foundation to further study relationship of wellness and academic achievement and to also conduct research on wellness interventions in coping, social, and physical self to assess for causal inferences.

While this study did indicate a nonsignificant relationship with academic achievement of participant students for some wellness composites, examination of these can encourage continuing study on the nature of relationship with academic achievement for such life areas as thinking, emotions, control, positive humor, spirituality, gender identity, cultural identity, and self-care. Examination of the life contexts for children can also encourage continuing study of contexts such as neighborhoods, communities, schools, politics, culture, global events, and movement and change over the dimension of time.

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