

## TO HEALTHY GROWTH: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE OF ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

Several researchers argue that the school, while place of discovery and promotion of development, should not limit the object of evaluation/intervention to knowledge, but also have to give relief to the domain of skills, attitudes and values. In that sense, we can have a school that motivates for lifelong learning and contributes to prevention of emotional and behavioural problems. It is therefore essential to study the school as an institution that promotes human development as a whole. The present study was aimed at examining the relationships between adolescents' positive and negative perceptions about some aspects of school environment promoters of favourable or unfavourable development, sense of belonging and acknowledgment of the school's ability to provide students with opportunities for achievement of objectives and personal goals. More specifically, we intended to understand the students' perceptions of school's importance assuming a developmental perspective. The sample consists of 184 participants (63% female) from High School in Portugal, with ages ranging from 15 to 21 years old. Students completed the *Questionário de percepções acerca da escola* [Questionnaire of perceptions about school] specially devised for this study. The confirmatory factor analysis of the instrument revealed four factors that explained 45,9% of the total variance (positive and negative perceptions about some aspects of school environment; sense of belonging; and achievement of objectives and personal goals). It was possible to conclude that there is a positive and strong relation between positive perception and sense of belonging related to school. We also concluded that there is a positive and median relation between sense of belonging and achievement of objectives/personal goals, and between this last one and positive perception. In addition, there were statistically significant differences according to gender, school failure, area of study, private or public school, and rural or urban schools. Assuming that a positive perception and sense of belonging to school are important to the development and academic success of students, our findings provide relevant information for planning and implementing school intervention programs.

**Keywords:** adolescents; school; positive and negative perceptions; personal goals; Positive Youth Development.

**INTRODUCTION**

The importance of school in cognitive, social, moral and emotional development has been, in recent decades, object of study. Several researchers argue that school is a place of discovery and promotion of development, that should not limit the object of evaluation/intervention to knowledge. Thus, school should be also seen as a place that emphasizes mastery skills, attitudes and values (Eccles, & Roeser, 2011a, 2011b; Skaalvik, & Federici, 2014; Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2013). In that sense, these researchers say that school drives for lifelong learning and can effectively contribute to the prevention of emotional and behavioral problems (Geldhof, Bowers, Gestsdóttir, Napolitano, & Lerner, 2015; Holsen, Geldhof, Larsen, & Aardal, 2016; Lerner et al., 2010; Napolitano, Bowers, Gestsdóttir, & Chase, 2011; Schmid, Phelps, & Lerner, 2011). Therefore, it is essential to study schools as an institution that promotes human development as a whole (Årdal, Holsen, Diseth, & Larsen, 2018; Larsen, 2016; Lerner, 2017; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015; Lerner et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2009).

However, according to Taborda-Simões and col. (Taborda Simões, Fonseca, Formosinho, Vale-Dias, & Lopes, 2008; Taborda Simões, Fonseca, & Lopes, 2011; Taborda-Simões, Formosinho, & Fonseca, 2007; Sanches, & Taborda Simões, 2006), the expectations about the power of school to contribute to the overall development of the student is not always confirmed, since this is often the scene of problematic situations. So, this work reflects a concern with the fact that school has an important role in facilitating or inhibiting a successful development in adolescence. Understanding how adolescents live school, make decisions and react to this reality is a major challenge to the development of appropriate policies.

**OBJECTIVES**

The present study was aimed at examining the relationships between adolescents' positive and negative perceptions about some aspects of school environment promoters of favourable or unfavourable development, sense of belonging and acknowledgment of the school's ability to provide students with opportunities for achievement of objectives and personal goals.

This study also aimed to evaluate the existence of statistically significant differences in some variables (e.g., positive or negative perception about the role of school, sense of belonging and goals achievement) by gender, school failure, area of study, private/public schools and rural/urban schools.

More specifically, we intended to understand the students' perceptions of school's importance assuming a developmental perspective.

**PARTICIPANTS**

The sample consists of 184 participants (63% female and 33,7% male; 3,3% not specified) from High School in Portugal, with ages ranging from 15 to 21 years old (M=16,85, SD=1,314). Table 1 shows the distribution of subjects by school year.

*Table 1. Distribution of subjects according to the variable school year (N=184).*

	N	%
School Year		
10th grade	84	45,7
11th grade	89	48,4
12th grade	11	6,0
Total	184	100

Among the subjects constituting the sample, the majority never failed a school year [118 (64.1%)]. It was found that 29 (15.8%) subjects failed once, 21 (11.4%) twice, 11 (6%) three times, 2 (1.1%) five times. It was not possible to ascertain the number of failures of 3 (1.6%) of the interviewed subjects.

## INSTRUMENT

Students completed the *Questionnaire of perceptions about school* [*Questionário de percepções acerca da escola*] specially devised for this study. The first section addresses socio-demographic data. The second presents 37 items, with a five-point Likert scale (from 1-Totally Agree to 5-Totally Disagree).

The construct validity of the questionnaire was tested by confirmatory factor analysis, which revealed four factors explaining 45,9% of the total variance: *Positive Perception* (*Cronbach's alpha*=.866) about some aspects of school environment; *Negative Perception* ( =.649); *Sense of Belonging* ( =.855); and *Achievement of Objectives and Personal Goals* ( =.778).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of variables under study by gender, area of study and school failure (N=184).

Variables	Gender				Area of study				School failure			
	Female		Male		Technology/ Professional		Science/ Humanities		Never		Once or more	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Positive perception</i>	1,94	0,51	2,27	0,71	2,10	0,60	2,04	0,65	2,04	0,61	2,08	0,58
<i>Sense of belonging</i>	2,23	0,62	2,60	0,82	2,41	0,70	2,32	0,75	2,33	0,71	2,24	0,61
<i>Achievement of objectives/ personal goals</i>	1,70	0,34	2,77	0,60	1,74	0,49	1,96	0,55	1,85	0,46	1,87	0,54
<i>Negative perception</i>	2,60	0,56	2,52	0,61	2,46	0,52	2,68	0,61	2,59	0,56	2,53	0,56

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of variables under study by type of school and school location (N=184).

Variables	Type of school				School location			
	Private		Public		Rural area		Urban area	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Positive perception</i>	1,78	0,49	2,18	0,64	2,12	0,61	2,04	0,63
<i>Sense of belonging</i>	2,16	0,76	2,44	0,69	2,41	0,65	2,34	0,77
<i>Achievement of objectives/ personal goals</i>	1,97	0,62	1,81	0,43	1,88	0,46	1,83	0,51
<i>Negative perception</i>	2,92	0,54	2,44	0,54	2,38	0,51	2,70	0,59

**Correlation analysis**

Through the analysis of *Pearson's correlation coefficients*, it was possible to conclude that there is a positive and strong relation between *Positive perception* and *Sense of belonging* related to school ( $r=0,717$ ,  $n=177$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ). We also concluded that there is a positive and median relation between *Sense of belonging* and *Achievement of objectives/personal goals* ( $r=0,419$ ,  $n=176$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ), and between this last one and *Positive perception* ( $r=0,393$ ,  $n=175$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ) (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlation matrix of variables under study.

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. <i>Positive perception</i>	_____	0,717**	0,393**	-0,116
2. <i>Sense of belonging</i>	0,717**	_____	0,419**	-0,104
3. <i>Achievement of objectives/personal goals</i>	0,393**	0,419**	_____	-0,038
4. <i>Negative perception</i>	-0,116	-0,104	0,038	_____

\*\*  $p < 0,001$

**Analysis of variance (ANOVA)**

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that there were some statistically significant differences in the variables under study according to gender, school failure, area of study, type of school (private or public school), and rural or urban schools (Table 5).

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 5, we found statistically significant differences regarding gender in the following variables: *Positive perception*,  $F(1, 172) = 12,242$ ,  $p = 0,001$ ; *Sense of belonging*,  $F(1, 173) = 11,175$ ,  $p = 0,001$ ; and *Achievement of objectives/personal goals*,  $F(1, 171) = 11,175$ ,  $p = 0,001$ . Male subjects presented higher results.

The results allow to confirm the existence of statistically significant differences in the variables *Achievement of objectives/personal goals*,  $F(1, 177) = 10,108$ ,  $p = 0,002$ , and *Negative perception*,  $F(1, 180) = 6,602$ ,  $p = 0,011$ , in function of the variable *Area of study*. The area of Science/Humanities shows higher means in these dimensions.

The variable *Sense of belonging* presented statistically significant differences according to the variable *School failure*,  $F(2, 178) = 5,515$ ,  $p = 0,005$ . Students who never failed presented a better *Sense of belonging*.

It should also be noted that the results confirm the existence of statistically significant differences depending on the variable *Type of school*, Public or Private education, in all the variables under study: *Positive perception*,  $F(1, 178) = 14,802$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ; *Sense of belonging*,  $F(1, 179) = 5,662$ ,  $p = 0,018$ ; *Achievement of objectives/personal goals*,  $F(1, 177) = 4,026$ ,  $p = 0,046$ ; and *Negative perception* about school,  $F(1, 180) = 28,044$ ,  $p < 0,001$ . The students from public schools referred higher *Positive perception* and *Sense of belonging*. In private schools, students showed higher results in the perception of *Achievement of objectives/personal goals* but also presented a more *Negative perception* about school.

Finally, statistically significant differences were found in the variable *Negative perception* about school,  $F(1, 180) = 14,095$ ,  $p = 0,001$ , in function of the *School location*, with the Urban area presenting a more *Negative perception* of school.

Table 5. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) according to gender, school failure, area of study, private or public school, and rural or urban schools (N=184).

Variables	Df	Ms	F
<i>Positive perception</i>			
Gender	1	4,263	12,242**
Area of study	1	0,174	0,447
School failure	2	0,276	0,707
Private/ public schools	1	5,347	14,802**
Rural/ urban schools	1	0,291	0,746
<i>Sense of belonging</i>			
Gender	1	5,518	11,175**
Area of study	1	0,312	0,602
School failure	2	2,721	5,515**
Private/ public schools	1	2,859	5,662*
Rural/ urban schools	1	0,270	0,519
<i>Achievement obj/personal goals</i>			
Gender	1	5,340	26,987**
Area of study	1	3,325	10,108**
School failure	2	0,12	0,48
Private/ public schools	1	0,957	4,026*
Rural/ urban schools	1	0,112	0,461
<i>Negative Perception</i>			
Gender	1	0,250	0,752
Area of study	1	2,146	6,602*
School failure	2	0,70	0,208
Private/ public schools	1	8,171	28,044**
Rural/ urban schools	1	4,402	14,095**

\*  $p < 0,05$ \*\*  $p < 0,01$

### DISCUSSION

The results revealed that the students who perceive a school climate characterized by the promotion of autonomy and development of skills/abilities (Positive Perception) also present a positive concept about the school regarding its ability to provide them with the Achievement of Objectives and Personal Goals, and *vice versa*. These results corroborate data from previous studies (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Lerner, et al., 2010; Holsen, Geldhof, Larsen, & Aardal, 2016; Skaalvik, & Federici, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2007) and point towards the conception of *Positive Youth Development*, promoted in the temporal relationship between the individual resources and contextual conditions favourable to healthy development (Årdal, Holsen, Diseth, & Larsen, 2018; Larsen, 2016; Lerner, 2017; Lerner, et al., 2010).

Results also confirmed the importance of providing students with school experiences that generate a Sense of Belonging in relation to the school, as it relates to the Achievement of the adolescents' Personal Goals/Objectives. The high magnitude positive correlation between the Positive Perception of a healthy school environment, that fosters healthy development, and the strong Sense of Belonging to the school supports perspectives that underline the importance of positive relationships and of the sense of belonging, associating them with psychological well-being and mental health (Seligman, 2011; Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2013).

As expected, considering previous studies (e.g., Perry, & Pauletti, 2011), results revealed some statistically significant differences in the variables under study according to gender, school failure, area of study, type of school (private or public school), and rural or urban schools. Intervention at school for a positive and healthier development of students should take into account the specificities of these differences.

### CONCLUSION

The relevance of this study lies in the possibility of obtaining information about the perceptions of adolescents regarding the school climate and what they value at school, as a potential for development, not only at the cognitive, but also socio-affective and emotional level.

Notwithstanding the limitations that this study presents, namely because it is based on a restricted and unrepresentative sample, it reveals interesting relations between the variables under study, show the role of certain socio-demographic variables, and opens space for reflection on the possibilities of intervention. Thus, intervention measures at school level, at this age group, should be based on the implementation of educational policies that will, in fact, meet what is desirable for young people to perceive about their school, integrating actions that foster the feeling of personal fulfilment and the increase of their own capacities, also enabling the development of their autonomy. Assuming that a Positive Perception and Sense of Belonging to school are important to the development and academic success of students, our findings provide relevant information for planning and implementing school intervention programs that help improve the students' perceptions about school environment.

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