Optimism in the Elementary School Classroom

Shannon Wheeler

English 400

Professor Hammer

April 25, 2014

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Abstract

This project examines the work of Albert Ellis, the positivist psychologist who championed the ABC model of learned optimism. This model suggests that the acquisition of joy is a learned talent and that, like any talent, joy can be both taught and learned. For Ellis, the goal was to demonstrate that optimism, similar to joy, could be taught to third grade students, who traditionally experience a decline in self-confidence regarding their academic ability. This essay also draws upon the studies of Martin Seligman and E. J. Stipeck, who examined the effects of positive psychology programs implemented within elementary school curricula. Most previous studies of optimism have focused on the effects of these programs in decreasing pessimism in K-12 students. However, this paper reports on studies that employ the Children’s Attributional Style Questionnaire to explain how the Ellis ABC model builds students’ optimism.

Keywords: Optimism, Ellis ABC Model, Education
Optimism in the Elementary School Classroom

In 1993 it was reported that nearly 20% of youth experience an episode of clinical depression by the end of high school (Lewinsohn, Rhode, Seeley, & Fischer). Because of this spike, which was almost ten times the reported rate of fifty years prior, there has been an increased emphasis on positive psychology in the classroom. This focus is an attempt by psychologists to reverse an emotional trend that diminishes student learning. To be clear, optimism does not mean that students are cheerful; rather, it is a way of reacting to setbacks by acknowledging one’s personal power in an educational setting. An optimistic outlook would emphasize that obstacles are impermanent and the individual is able to overcome them though personal effort. According to Patty O’Grady (2013), author of Positive Psychology in the Elementary School Classroom, “the optimistic brain works to reduce tension by remaking the actual outcome and persuading itself that it was the best choice or result” (p. 48).

Research by Dr. Robert Seligman, a forerunner on the theories surrounding optimism, has demonstrated that optimism is not a genetic gift. Seligman first investigated optimism as part of his work with learned helplessness. He wrote of his research, “When I first began to work on learned optimism, I thought I was working on pessimism” (2006, p. iii). As part of this initial work, he conducted experiments on dogs’ reactions to shock. While at first the dogs attempted to avoid the negative stimulus by jumping over a barrier, they later accepted the shock and whimpered. However, Seligman’s research on the ability of humans to learn pessimism led him to conclude that optimism is similarly learnable. He argued that people can learn to create
channels to turn their thoughts from pessimism to optimism. But Seligman (2002) also argued that while we can learn to choose optimism, it is not necessarily a “positive emotion” (p. 7) but rather an intellectual position.

A specific example of how this form of optimism can be learned is provided by Albert Ellis’ ABC theory. This model maintains that individuals react dissimilarly to the same event based on their discrete perceptions. According to Ellis, it is not the activating event (A) but the beliefs we attach to the event (B) that determine its consequences (C) in the form of our emotions and behaviors (as cited in Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). For students, learning to be resilient alters “engagement and meaning” with learning (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 293). Consequently, as Ellis suggests, an individual can learn a set of internal skills to process setbacks. Through these self-directed thought processes, the person changes beliefs from pessimistic to optimistic and thus alters the consequences of the misfortunes being faced.

Whether a learned behavior or not, optimism is important within the classroom because of its positive effects on the ability of students to learn (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006). In regard to educational policy, positive psychology, specifically optimism, frequently falls by the wayside because researchers are often concerned about the lack of empirical evidence for most programs to promote traits like optimism (Seligman et al., 2009). However, solid research supports the value of implementing policy aimed at increasing optimism in schools. According to O’Grady (2013), “positive psychology programs increase children’s readiness, willingness, ability to learn, and overall well-being” (p. 28). Simply,

there is a growing convergence in the literature about the importance of social and relational constructs such as children’s sense of relatedness (Connell, 1990),
belongingness (Goodenow, 1993), caring community (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997), perceived pedagogical caring (Wentzel, 1998), or positive teacher–child relationship (Pianta, 1999) as contributors to school success. (Baker, 2006, p. 212)

With these contributions to student success in mind, the question arises of how to determine and measure a student’s optimism. The most widely known test for learned optimism is the Attributional Style Questionnaire. It assesses respondents by forcing them to choose causes for hypothetical events. The test traditionally contains 12 hypothetical actions, half being positive and half being negative. As described in the Encyclopedia of Psychological Assessment, “Events are further divided into an equal number of interpersonal and achievement contexts. The perceived cause of each event is rated along the dimensions of locus, stability, and globality using seven-point scales” (Hesling, Anderson, & Russell, 2002, p. 116). The individual score for each category can then be determined. A measure for children has also been developed by Seligman in 1984 and is known as the Children’s Attributional Style Questionnaire. This test includes 48 items, and the responding children choose between two possible causes for the event (Hesling et al., 2002).

**Previous Evaluations and Findings**

A number of studies have examined levels of optimism in the classroom.

Beginning with our understanding of the future of schooling in America, a U.S. Department of Education report (2006) helped us understand the need to examine best practices for building our children’s competences. According to research focusing on children’s self-perception, most children’s perception of their own competence begins somewhat unrealistically high before entering into K-12 school and becomes
more accurately correlated to their actual level of competence as they advance across the school years. There is a decline in this self-perceived competence level around the middle of elementary school. While kindergarten children accurately perceive the relative competence levels of peers, a lack of accurate self-perception remains prominent until about age eight (Stipeck & Tannatt, 1984). While Stipeck and Tannatt (1984) recorded a decline in children’s optimism as the children advance, Evangelou (1990) also noted that the decline is not uniform within grade levels. This suggests that internal, individual-specific factors may contribute to the amount of optimism a student perceives.

An especially famous program focused on decreasing depression in school-aged children is the Penn Resiliency Project. This is an intervention program designed to prevent depression in adolescents between the ages of 8 and 15. According to Seligman, “Penn Resiliency Program promotes optimism by teaching students to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter” (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 297). The effects of this program have been analyzed by at least 17 studies. According to the studies focusing on symptoms of depression, there was a decreased feeling of hopelessness as the children progressed from age 8 to 15 in the program (Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008). On average the effects of the Penn Resiliency Project were relatively small, but it did seem to promote positive emotions and produce improvements in students’ well-being (Seligman et al., 2009).

**Conclusion**

By reading each of these past studies, I have seen how an adoption of the Ellis ABC Model of learned optimism can influence both self-perceptions of achievement as well as actual
academic achievement outcomes inside an elementary school classroom. However, these studies do not yet answer some essential questions. These include:

1. Can optimism be taught and learned as predicted by Seligman and Ellis?
2. How does an understanding of Ellis’s ABC Model of thinking increase optimism levels in elementary school?
3. Can learned optimism, when introduced in advanced grades, still offset declines in optimism traditionally seen at advanced student ages? Lastly,
4. How does an understanding of learned optimism affect academic outcomes?

To understand and address these questions, we can examine Figure 1 from Adams’s (2014). In this illustration, it becomes clear that optimism in the classroom is a social construction. And, throughout my review of past research, it also becomes clear that the “trust” that Adams’s image offers is built by teachers through their interactions with students, the development of their assignment, and the students’ complex relationships with teachers, their appointed work, and the structures of schooling.
Figure 1. Social construction of collective trust in the classroom. The figure helps educators understand how “trust,” developed through assignments and made concrete through learning outcomes, becomes a pivotal factor in understanding how students develop optimism in the elementary school classroom. From Collective student trust: A social resource for urban elementary students. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 50*(1), (p. 138).
References


