

Teacher Support and Adolescents' Subjective Well-Being: A Mixed-Methods Investigation

Shannon M. Suldo, Allison A. Friedrich, Tiffany White, Jennie Farmer,
Devon Minch, and Jessica Michalowski
University of South Florida

Abstract. Adolescents' subjective well-being (SWB) is associated with a variety of schooling experiences, particularly their perceptions of teacher support. This article presents results of a mixed-methods study conducted to identify which types of perceived social support enacted by teachers are most strongly associated with middle school students' SWB (quantitative component) as well as student-reported specific teacher actions and/or comments that communicate social support (qualitative component). Four hundred and one students completed self-report measures of SWB and social support; 50 students participated in eight focus groups to uncover students' perceptions of teacher behaviors that communicate support. Findings from a simultaneous regression analysis indicated that perceived teacher support accounted for 16% of the variance in students' SWB, and that emotional support and instrumental support uniquely predicted SWB. Themes that emerged during focus groups included the following: Students perceive teachers to be supportive primarily when they attempt to connect with students on an emotional level, use diverse and best-practice teaching strategies, acknowledge and boost students' academic success, demonstrate fairness during interactions with students, and foster a classroom environment in which questions are encouraged. Gender differences emerged in the qualitative stage of the study only.

The 2002 Future of School Psychology Conference identified prevention and early intervention as one of the most pressing issues in educating children. The national agenda of prioritized goals for school psychologists developed at this time specified a desired outcome of improved social-emotional functioning of children through educating school professionals about the relation between social-emotional health and positive outcomes, including academic success, social competence, and effective problem-solving and cop-

ing capabilities (Cummings, Harrison, Dawson, Short, Gorin, & Palomares, 2004). Strategies identified to address this issue included school psychologists "advocating for the incorporation of prevention, relationship-enhancing, and resiliency models (protective factors) in school and community environments as key to achieving social-emotional success at the classroom, school, and community level" (Cummings et al., 2004, p. 251). Considering the emphasis on prevention in the field, school psychologists must understand

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Shannon Suldo, Department of Psychological and Social Foundations, University of South Florida, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, EDU 162, Tampa, FL, 33620; E-mail: suldo@coedu.usf.edu

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the link between teacher support and students' social-emotional wellness in order to educate teachers regarding their specific actions that are associated with optimal wellness in youth. Thus, the current study aimed to clarify which aspects of social support teachers convey to students are most strongly linked to students' wellness, with an eye towards application of these findings. The focus on perceived social support as a predictor is justified by the link between positive teacher–student relations and beneficial outcomes for youth (Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Regarding student outcomes, subjective well-being (SWB) was examined in line with calls for increased attention to the presence of positive markers of mental health.

Role of Positive Psychology in the Schools

The National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP, 2006) position statement on school-based mental health services contends that facilitating social-emotional support for students is a necessary component of the school psychologist's role because of the link between social-emotional health and academic success. It is NASP's (2006) position that "mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness but also encompasses social, emotional, and behavioral health and the ability to cope with life's challenges" (p. 1). School psychologists are encouraged to create a continuum of mental health services for students rooted in prevention.

Consistent with NASP (2006), the positive psychology movement calls for a reduced focus on deficits and pathology as well as increased attention to strengths and general wellness in all children. A central tenet of this movement is the study and pursuit of happiness (Diener, 2000). The term *happiness* is commonly operationalized as SWB, which is comprised of three components: frequent positive affect (pleasant feelings and moods), relatively infrequent negative affect (bothersome emotions like guilt and anger), and high life satisfaction (cognitive, global appraisal of one's contentment with his or her life). There-

fore, SWB is a wellness construct that communicates children's self-appraisal of their own protective factors (e.g., positive emotion, life satisfaction). Empirical studies have uncovered links between students' SWB and their perceptions of academic competence (Suldo & Shaffer, 2007) as well as satisfaction with their schooling experiences (Suldo, Shaffer, & Riley, 2008). Given the positive correlations between students' SWB and their attitudes toward teachers and school (e.g., Huebner, Funk, & Gilman, 2000), enhancing school-based relationships may be an essential way to proactively increase students' social-emotional wellness.

Relationships Between Teacher Support and Students' Functioning

Psychologists and educators alike can promote wellness in schools through fostering a healthy academic environment. Within a healthy environment, "school classrooms can become resilient communities that provide essential support and guidance so that vulnerable children can learn and be successful" (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004, p. 2). One source of support and guidance that is relevant to student success is the classroom teacher. Positive teacher–student relationships have been defined as the degree to which students feel respected, supported, and valued by their teachers (Doll et al., 2004).

Healthy relationships involve conveying and perceiving high levels of social support (i.e., comfort and assistance by concerned others, such as family members, friends, and teachers). As summarized by Tardy (1985), social support is a multidimensional construct in which four distinct types of support (specifically, emotional, instrumental, appraisal, and informational) can be conveyed as appropriate for various situations and needs. Emotional support includes perceptions of trust and love, as well as communications of empathy and care (e.g., "you are important to me"). Instrumental support includes the provision of tangible assistance such as one's time, skills, services, or even money in order to help someone in need. Appraisal support involves pro-

viding evaluative feedback on behavior—for instance, via a critical assessment of the positive and negative aspects of one's performance as well as suggestions for improvement. Informational support is characterized by the provision of guidance, advice, or information that can provide a solution to a problem.

Despite the availability of such comprehensive conceptual frameworks for examining the content of social support, most extant research on social support perceived by youth has measured support as a global, unitary construct, or assessed just one type of support (most commonly, emotional support), precluding a complete understanding of which types of support are most highly related to adolescents' functioning. In a notable exception, Malecki and Demaray (2003) compared the unique influences of the four aforementioned types of support perceived from different sources on middle school students' social, academic, and emotional adjustment. This study found that although all types of support from parents, classmates, and close friends were associated with students' adjustment in a comparable manner, emotional support from teachers was particularly predictive of better social skills and academic competence. Such research demonstrates the utility of examining the content of social support provided to youth and is consistent with other studies (e.g., Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007) that have identified teachers as an important source of perceived social support.

Supportive student-teacher relationships also predict children's academic engagement and subsequent reading and math skills (Hughes et al., 2008), as well as mitigate negative academic outcomes such as adolescents' risk for school failure (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Such beneficial academic outcomes have been observed in studies of youth from diverse backgrounds, suggesting that the link between teacher support and student success is generalizable across culture and ethnicity (Close & Solberg, 2008; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). In addition to improved academic functioning, supportive student-teacher relationships are

linked to beneficial social-emotional outcomes, such as positive peer relations as well as decreases in suicidal ideations, externalizing behaviors, emotional distress, violence, substance abuse, and sexual activity (Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001; Paulson & Everall, 2003; Resnick et al., 1997).

Despite calls for a greater focus on positive markers of mental health, relatively few studies have examined the association between student-teacher relationships and students' SWB. Initial investigations using one-item indicators of SWB found teacher support was linked to increased happiness among Norwegian adolescents (Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnstrom, 2003), but was a relatively weak predictor of Chinese students' global life satisfaction (Leung & Leung, 1992). Recent studies with American youth that utilized comprehensive and valid measures of student-teacher relationships and life satisfaction found that adolescents with the highest life satisfaction perceive the most social support from teachers (Suldo & Huebner, 2006) and that student-teacher relations are the aspect of school climate most strongly related to high school students' life satisfaction (Suldo et al., 2008). To elucidate the general link between supportive student-teacher relationships and SWB in youth, additional research is needed to clarify which types of social support (e.g., emotional, informational) are most strongly related to optimal wellness in order to further guide teachers' efforts at promoting healthy classrooms.

Limitations of Extant Literature

Taken together, the body of research demonstrating the beneficial effects of warm, supportive, high-quality student-teacher relationships on students' academic and psychological functioning underscores the relevance of teacher support to prevention efforts geared toward improving the social-emotional functioning of all children. Additional research is needed to address areas in the literature currently unanswered. As aforementioned, the association between teacher support and adolescent SWB is in need of clarification by determining which types of social support are most

influential. Second, the few empirical attempts to identify the explicit behaviors that students perceive as supportive have only been examined among adult learners (Reeve & Jang, 2006), urban youth (Alder, 2002), or in elementary classrooms (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007), thus current understandings of how social support is manifested may not generalize to the broader adolescent population. Finally, the role of student gender in the link between perceived teacher support and student well-being has not been thoroughly explored. Previous studies that examined gender as a moderator have yielded contradictory results (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2006).

Aims of the Current Study

The current investigation endeavored to identify which types of teacher support were most strongly associated with adolescents' SWB (quantitative component) and uncover students' perceptions of specific teacher behaviors and/or comments that communicate social support (qualitative component). The first aim was intended to identify the specific areas of teacher support most likely to have an effect, whereas the second aim intended to specify effective supportive actions that could be offered to teachers. The role of gender was considered in all analyses to determine whether specific teacher behaviors were more relevant to boys or girls.

Overview of Methodology

In recent years, mixed-methods research has been recognized as a very promising research paradigm; it has been described as an expansive form of research that draws from the strengths and minimizes the weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Mixed-methods research involves combining quantitative and qualitative approaches either concurrently or sequentially, at some stage beginning with the data collection process, from which interpretations are made either in a parallel, integrated, or iterative manner. Mixed-methods research offers the potential for

deeper understandings of some education research questions and provides the opportunity to generate more meaning and enhance the quality of data interpretation (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In the current study, the researchers sought to enhance, elaborate, and illustrate the results from the quantitative method with results from the qualitative method. A sequential, mixed-methodological design using nested samples was undertaken to collect and analyze the data. A multistage purposeful random sampling scheme (cf. Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) allowed the researchers to randomly select participants for the quantitative component and purposefully select participants for the qualitative component.

Study 1: Quantitative Component

Method

Participants. Data were collected from 401 middle school students attending a single school in a suburban community within a diverse, urban school district of a southeastern state. Participants were enrolled in either the gifted, advanced, or general education tract. The majority of the sample was female (60%). Regarding ethnicity, participants identified themselves as Caucasian (54%), Hispanic/Latino (14%), African American (14%), multiracial (10%), Asian (5%), or of other ethnic background (3%). About 25% of the sample was of low socioeconomic status, in that they reported receiving free or reduced-cost school lunch. Students were in Grades 6 (34%), 7 (40%), and 8 (27%); mean age was 12.92 years ($SD = 0.96$).

Measures. *Students' Life Satisfaction Scale* (Huebner, 1991). The Students' Life Satisfaction Scale is a 7-item self-report measure of students' global life satisfaction developed for use with youth between 8 and 18 years. Students rate their agreement with global satisfaction statements (e.g., "My life is just right," "I have a good life") on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). After two items are reverse-scored, all items are averaged, with higher

scores indicating higher life satisfaction. Adolescent samples demonstrated adequate internal consistency with a coefficient alpha of .84 and a test-retest coefficient of .64 (Gilman & Huebner, 1997). Validity is supported by large correlations between the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale and a single-item indicator of life satisfaction from the Andrews and Withey scale ($r = .62$) and the Piers-Harris Happiness subscale ($r = .53$; Huebner, 1991). In the current study, the coefficient alpha was .89.

Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children (Laurent et al., 1999). The Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children is a 27-item self-report measure developed for use with children in fourth to eighth grade. It includes a Positive Affect scale (PA: 12 items such as energetic, cheerful, and proud) and a Negative Affect scale (NA: 15 items such as afraid, miserable, and lonely) asking children to rate their emotions within the last few weeks from 1 (*very slightly to not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Regarding psychometric properties, reliability coefficients ranged from .90 (PA) to .94 (NA; Laurent et al., 1999). Convergent and discriminative validity has been established with measures of depression ($r = -.55$ for PA; $r = .60$ for NA) and anxiety ($r = -.30$ for PA; $r = .68$ for NA; Laurent et al., 1999). In this study, coefficient alphas were .88 (PA) and .93 (NA).

Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki, Demaray, & Elliot, 2000). The CASSS (2000) is a 60-item self-report scale that measures participants' perceptions of support received from five major sources including parents, teachers, classmates, close friends, and school. Each source subscale measures four types of social support including emotional, instrumental, appraisal, and informational. In the current study, only the 12-item teacher support subscale was analyzed. Scores were calculated by averaging students' ratings of the frequency, from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*), of items tapping each of the four types of support within the teacher subscale; higher scores indicate higher perceptions of a particular type of support.

Support for the reliability and validity of the CASSS (2000) is provided by previous studies with middle school students, as summarized by Malecki and Demaray (2006). Regarding construct validity, the teacher support scale of the CASSS (2000) has yielded moderate correlations ($r = .48$ and $.55$) with teacher scales from the Social Support Scale for Children and the Social Support Appraisals Scale, respectively (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). High internal consistency of the teacher support subscale is supported by a coefficient alpha of .92 (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). In the current study, coefficient alphas for types of teacher support measured by the CASSS (2000) ranged from .83 (instrumental support) to .89 (emotional support).

Procedures. Students participated in the quantitative stage of the current study as part of a larger investigation of subjective well-being in adolescence (see Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). The larger study used active parent consent and student assent procedures that yielded a participant response rate of 40%. Students completed the measures in a single class period during the spring of 2006 (Time 1). Trained research assistants administered the measures in counterbalanced order to groups of 20–75 participants.

Overview of analysis plan. Relations between types of teacher support and SWB were examined via correlational and regression analyses. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Kasser & Sheldon, 2002), an aggregate SWB variable was created by standardizing and summing scores for life satisfaction and positive affect, then subtracting standardized negative affect scores.

Results

Intercorrelations among students' perceptions of the four types of social support measured by the CASSS (2000), as well as bivariate correlations between SWB and types of social support, are displayed in Table 1. With alpha set at .05, all bivariate correlations between student SWB and types of perceived social support from teachers reached statistical

Table 1
Intercorrelations Between Dimensions of Social Support From Teachers and Students' Subjective Well-Being ($N = 401$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional support	4.84	(1.22)	—			
2. Informational support	5.10	(1.04)	.74*	—		
3. Appraisal support	4.72	(1.17)	.73*	.77*	—	
4. Instrumental support	4.56	(1.23)	.72*	.75*	.81*	—
5. Subjective well-being	0.00	(2.33)	.38*	.32*	.33*	.36*

* $p < .05$.

significance, ranging from .32 (informational support) to .38 (emotional support). Notably, the large intercorrelations among types of support ($r = .72-.81$) indicate high multicollinearity and made it difficult to detect unique effects of theoretically separate constructs.

To determine which types of teacher support are most predictive of students' SWB, the four types of support were entered into a simultaneous multiple regression equation. The linear combination of teacher support types accounted for 16% of the variance in SWB ($F[4,396] = 18.91, p < .001, R^2 = .16$). A review of beta weights yielded from the equation indicated only two of the four types of teacher support were unique predictors ($p < .05$) of SWB. In other words, after controlling for the shared variance among types of teacher support, only perceptions of emotional support ($\beta = .24$) and instrumental support ($\beta = .19$) independently related to differences in students' SWB. Uniqueness indices (squared semipartial correlation) were reviewed to determine the relative contribution of each type of teacher support after controlling for the variance accounted for by the other types. Perceived emotional support and instrumental support accounted for 2% and 1% of the unique variance, respectively, in SWB above and beyond that explained by the other three types. Thus, results suggest that students' perceptions of emotional support and instrumental support from teachers are the aspects of teacher support most highly related to students' SWB.

To determine whether these types of support predicted SWB similarly for boys and girls, an additional regression analysis was conducted using SWB as the criterion variable and the four types of teacher support, gender, and moderator terms, represented by interactions between gender and the teacher support types that uniquely predicted SWB (i.e., Gender \times Emotional Support, Gender \times Instrumental Support), as the predictors. All continuous predictor variables were centered by subtracting the group mean from each predictor variable. Although the main effects of emotional and instrumental support on SWB remained significant, neither interaction term reached statistical significance, suggesting that higher perceptions of emotional and instrumental support were associated with increased SWB in both boys and girls.

Study 2: Qualitative Component

Method

Participants. Qualitative data were collected from a subset of the 401 student participants via focus groups conducted in the spring of 2007 (Time 2). A purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 1990) was utilized to identify participants for focus groups equally representative of students in general and gifted education; students were recruited to participate regardless of their initial level of SWB or perceived teacher support. A total of 50 students in the seventh and eighth grade participated in the eight focus groups analyzed in the

current study. The majority of participants were female (62%), in the seventh grade (56%), and Caucasian (50%); other participants identified their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino (16%), multiracial (14%), Asian (10%), and African American (8%). Approximately 18% of participants reported receiving free or reduced-cost lunch.

Procedures. The research team secured separate written parental consent and student assent for student participation because of the introduction of methods (i.e., focus groups) not included in the original request for participation. Based on recommendations by Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups were composed of students with similar educational experiences (i.e., gifted or advanced/general education) and grouped by gender. Each focus group was held during the school day and lasted 20 to 60 minutes. The groups comprised of boys tended to be shorter in duration because they (a) contained fewer participants and (b) yielded more concise responses; girls frequently provided a personal story or experience to illustrate their points. Consistent with the findings from the regression analysis completed within the quantitative portion of the study, a focus group protocol was developed from the CASSS (2000) survey using the instrumental and emotional support questions as the framework for the development of open-ended questions. Specifically, participants were asked to describe how teachers show that they care about them, show that they treat kids fairly, make them feel comfortable asking questions, and make sure that they learn something well. Participants were then asked to answer the same four questions, but based on teacher behaviors that did not convey support (e.g., “What do teachers do to make you feel like they don’t care about you?”). A single moderator led all focus groups to ensure a standardized questioning procedure. The moderator monitored the group to allow all participants an equal chance to participate. A field-note taker recorded each sentiment conveyed by participants. Each focus group was recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Overview of analysis plan. Transcripts of focus groups were coded using grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data analysis progressed through the stages of open, axial, and selective coding; analysis was open-ended and involved several iterations, wherein meaning of the data were established, codes were identified and refined, and a codebook was developed. The method of constant comparison was utilized inductively (i.e., codes were identified as they emerged from the data). A team of six researchers engaged in several careful readings of initial transcripts and developed a short list of tentative codes for each of the research questions that matched text segments within the transcript. The researchers then met to reach an initial understanding regarding the major themes and minor subthemes identified in the transcripts and to develop a codebook that would organize participant responses into discrete categories.

Nine researchers applied the codebook to all transcripts. Each transcript was analyzed by three people; when there were differences of opinion about the codes assigned, an additional opinion was solicited from a fourth researcher. Trustworthiness of data analysis was obtained through comparison of coding results and discussion by the researchers until 100% agreement was reached. Researchers then entered the consensus of the coding into a qualitative software program (Atlas.ti), which provided a tool for organizing questions, codes, and quotations.

Frequency counts represent the number of times participants expressed a sentiment (i.e., quotation) indicating the coded teacher behavior. Sentiments ranged in length from a few words to an entire discussion such that a single thought presented by one participant was assigned a code and counted only once. Sentiments could reflect multiple ideas or thoughts and thus be assigned more than one code; however, no code was ever assigned more than once within a sentiment. For instance, the sentiment “Teachers show they care about me by giving me extra credit and bringing me candy and allowing me to make-up work I forgot to do and then giving

me more candy” would be assigned two codes (gives tangible objects; leniency in grading policies) and contribute a total of two times to frequency counts (one count toward gives tangible objects and one count toward leniency in grading policies). A total index of the frequency with which the coded student-reported teacher behaviors were described was created by summing the total number of times a code was mentioned by all participants in the eight focus groups, and then broken down into total mentions for the four groups of boys and the four groups of girls. Because fewer boys ($n = 19$) than girls ($n = 31$) were in the focus groups, a weighting procedure was applied to adjust gender-specific frequency counts so that they better reflected the emphasis that boys and girls placed on each coded teacher behavior. Specifically, frequency counts within gender groups were multiplied by a constant (1.316 for boys; 0.806 for girls) to increase the voice of boys and decrease the voice of girls so that each gender represented approximately half of the sample. After reflecting on theoretical links between the codes generated as well as the code frequency, researchers collapsed codes into a final conceptualization of thematic families, which guided further theory development about the teacher behaviors that students felt conveyed support.

Results

Students’ perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey high social support. Table 2 lists the 12 types of teacher behaviors participants identified as conveying high levels of support and the subthemes within each category. For those subthemes that may not convey specific meaning through name only, further descriptors are provided in parentheses. Table 2 also presents the frequency with which students mentioned a particular teacher behavior in response to questions about high support. Although we initially intended to analyze and present results by the four questions posed to the students during the focus group interview, the overlap of coded teacher behaviors that emerged during these four sections precluded such a clean organization. For in-

stance, student responses to the question “How can you tell teachers care about you?” included discussions of such recalled behaviors as providing them with additional academic assistance and attending to their specific preferences for learning, actions that at face value may seem better suited for the question “What do teachers do or say to make sure you learn to do something well?” Because almost all of the coded teacher behaviors appeared within student discussions throughout the entire interview (i.e., in response to multiple questions), the codes were applied as they were mentioned during focus groups. Thus, the four questions are better viewed as probes of different aspects of the same construct—social support.

The first three themes listed in the table involve teachers’ interest and involvement in students’ wellness beyond academic progress; this concern exceeds their “required” teaching behaviors and reflects students’ perceptions of teachers’ attempts to connect on an emotional level. Students felt that teachers communicated care for their wellness via such means as asking personal questions (e.g., asking a withdrawn student if everything was okay), being pleasant and/or respectful, allowing students to have free time during the school day, and giving candy.

The next three themes involve teaching practices that most educators would regard as best practices. Specifically, students reported perceiving teacher support when teachers appeared concerned with both the entire class’s and individual student’s understanding of academic material, and then provided additional learning experiences as needed to ensure mastery of content. Students also commented positively on teachers’ use of diverse strategies to convey information and appreciated when they selected strategies (e.g., lecture, group projects) that students perceived were consistent with their expressed preferences for learning modality.

The next three themes relate to students’ academic work. Specifically, Themes 7 and 8 pertain to teachers’ explicit interest in students’ academic achievement, via recognizing their accomplishments as well as helping them

Table 2
Teacher Behaviors That Convey High Levels of Social Support (N = 50)

Themes That Emerged From Focus Groups	Frequency Counts ^a		
	Total	Boys	Girls
1. Conveys interest in student wellness	26	9.21	15.31
Communicates care about students' emotional well-being (e.g., students' moods, relationships, and health)	14	3.95	8.87
Communicates investment in students' personal interests, such as sports and weekend plans	12	5.26	6.45
2. Takes actions to improve students' moods and emotional states	30	7.90	19.34
Creates positive emotional environment via a pleasant or humorous teacher disposition	13	1.32	9.67
Attempts to alleviate students' personal or academic concerns (e.g., reduces students' academic stress, helps students problem solve personal situations)	10	6.58	4.03
Shows respect for students by maintaining their privacy and being honest with them	7	0	5.64
3. Gives students what they want, specifically things that are pleasurable	35	30.27	5.64
Provides fun activities (e.g., free time, sports, field trips)	22	22.37	4.03
Gives tangible objects/rewards (e.g., candy, food)	13	7.90	5.64
4. Is sensitive and responsive to the entire class's understanding of academic material	52	30.27	23.37
Checks for entire class' understanding and arranges mastery experiences during class (e.g., explains and clarifies concepts, provides enrichment activities, is flexible with class agenda/schedule)	30	23.69	9.67
Provides additional academic assistance (e.g., more review of difficult concepts during or after class)	15	3.95	9.67
Elicits student feedback about class and teaching style	7	2.63	4.03
5. Shows interest in an individual student's progress	37	13.16	21.76
In class, checks for individual student's understanding and provides assistance/help	22	5.26	14.51
Outside of classroom, checks for individual student's understanding and provides assistance/help	15	7.90	7.25
6. Uses diverse teaching strategies	51	25.00	25.79
Uses creative teaching strategies (e.g., collaborative and/or active learning, word searches, crosswords)	27	13.16	13.70
Uses directive instruction (e.g., provides advance organizers, concrete examples, mnemonic devices)	11	6.58	4.84
Attends to individual student's preferences for learning	7	0	5.64
Augments content in textbook with additional information via movies, Internet, field trips, and personal anecdotes	6	5.26	1.61
7. Provides evaluative feedback on student performance	46	26.32	20.96
Provides rewards contingent on performance (e.g., rewards individual student or entire class with party or treat for good performance)	17	9.21	8.06
Communicates student achievement to students and/or parents (e.g., provides compliments/praise)	15	9.21	6.45
Provides constructive feedback and encouragement	14	7.90	6.45

Table 2 Continued

Themes That Emerged From Focus Groups	Frequency Counts ^a		
	Total	Boys	Girls
8. Helps students improve their grades	38	30.27	12.09
Leniency in grading policies (e.g., provides extra or partial credit, helpful hints; lets students make up or redo work)	22	19.74	5.64
Increases students' ability to prepare well for exams	11	9.21	3.22
Directs student how to self-improve (e.g., explains students' errors, redirects them to task)	5	1.32	3.22
9. Ensures a manageable academic workload	14	10.53	4.84
Assigns reasonable amount of homework	7	5.26	2.42
Provides sufficient time for students to complete assignments and/or prepare for tests	7	5.26	2.42
10. Treats students similarly	19	13.16	7.25
Allows students equal chances to participate in class and assignments	11	7.90	4.03
Creates the appearance of not discriminating against specific students due to race, ability level, etc.	5	3.95	1.61
Equally distributes positive reinforcement, such as teacher attention and treats	3	1.32	1.61
11. Punishes in a fair manner	9	6.58	3.22
Punishes the correct student for each incident	7	5.26	2.42
Attempts to solve problems in favor of automatically punishing	2	1.32	.81
12. Creates an environment in which questions are encouraged	45	35.53	14.51
Provides explicit permission for student to ask questions aloud during class as needed	18	13.16	6.45
Provides positive response to student questions (e.g., answers all questions thoroughly, leads students to current answers)	8	6.58	2.42
Provides methods for students to pose questions privately and/or anonymously	7	7.90	.81
Dedicates time in class or after class to address questions	5	2.63	2.42
Allows students to pose their questions to peers	5	2.63	2.42
Provides a physical environment that encourages questions (e.g., posters on class walls remind students to ask questions)	2	2.63	0

^a Frequency counts presented for gender groups are weighted estimates.

to improve their classroom grades. Students appreciated teachers providing rewards for good academic performance and explaining errors made on assignments. The ninth theme indicates that students also felt supported when perceiving that teachers ensured the academic workload could be completed in a reasonable amount of time.

Themes 10 and 11 in Table 2 pertain to the aspect of equity in teacher support. Students primarily discussed teachers appearing objective in their approach to selecting stu-

dents to participate in class and providing rewards. Students also appreciated explicit statements from teachers that they intended to treat all students similarly, regardless of gender or educational tract. In addition, students felt teachers conveyed support by continuing to be fair when disciplining students via such mechanisms as taking the time to correctly identify the wrongdoer (vs. punishing an entire class) and using punishment as a last resort.

Responses captured in the twelfth and final theme primarily arose from students' de-

descriptions of teacher behaviors that made them feel comfortable asking questions. Specifically, students appreciated situations in which teachers created a physical (e.g., posters on walls), emotional, and logistical classroom environment in which questions appeared to be encouraged. A supportive emotional environment was characterized by teachers' provision of positive responses to questions. Logistical arrangements that students perceived encouraged questions included providing permission, time, and diverse mechanisms for students to pose questions.

Frequency students emphasized teacher behaviors. During discussions of high-support behaviors, four themes emerged particularly often (i.e., mentioned a total of 45 or more times during the focus groups, for a rate of at least approximately one time per participant): being sensitive and responsive to the class's understanding of the academic material, using diverse teaching strategies, providing feedback on student performance, and creating a classroom environment in which questions are encouraged. Conversely, relatively low-frequency themes (i.e., mentioned 20 times or less, equating to approximately 0.4 mentions or fewer per student) included: treating all students similarly, maintaining a manageable workload, and punishing students in a fair manner.

Trends in responding by gender. Table 2 also presents the weighted frequency with which each coded behavior was mentioned by boys and girls. Girls were at least twice as likely to mention taking actions to improve students' emotional states as ways they perceived that teachers communicate high levels of social support. Boys were at least twice as likely to mention giving students pleasurable activities, helping students improve their grades, creating an environment in which questions are encouraged, assigning a manageable academic workload, and using fair punishment, as strategies students perceive communicate social support. The remaining six themes were mentioned at a relatively similar rate by both gender groups.

Students' perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey low social support.

Table 3 provides the frequency of student-perceived teacher behaviors specified as indicating low levels of support. The research team attempted to code behaviors discussed as evidence of low teacher support based on opposites of the themes that emerged for high-support behaviors, but also allowed for the emergence of new themes and subthemes. Ideas in 10 of the 12 high-support themes were represented in corresponding low-support themes (give students what they want/things that are pleasurable and provide evaluative feedback were the exceptions). For instance, during discussions of low support, students provided examples of teachers appearing disinterested in students' grasp of academic material (Theme 4 in Table 3), whereas discussions of high support included examples of teachers expressing interest in the learning of an individual student as well as an entire class (Themes 5 and 4, respectively, in Table 2).

Even though the themes representing high- and low-support behaviors largely mirrored each other, the frequency with which students mentioned them did not. For instance, students discussed instances in which teacher behaviors contributed to their poor emotional states 89 times, whereas teacher actions that improved students' moods were mentioned only 30 times. Also, students discussed teacher bias as indicative of low support more often than nonbias behavior indicated high support (69 to 19, respectively). Similarly, punishing students incorrectly was discussed frequently (58 times) as a means by which teachers conveyed low support, whereas the opposite teacher behavior (i.e., punishing in a fair manner) was mentioned only 9 times in terms of what communicates high support.

In addition to identifying opposite behaviors from high-support themes as indicating low support, a new theme—sets firm expectations, rules, and discipline procedures—emerged during discussions of low support. Here students discussed how perceived teacher actions such as enforcing school and classroom rules and policies as well as frequently reminding students of the policies

Table 3
Teacher Behaviors That Convey Low Levels of Social Support (N = 50)

Themes That Emerged From Focus Groups	Frequency Counts ^a		
	Total	Boys	Girls
1. Conveys disinterest in student wellness	27	0	21.76
Communicates lack of interest in students' names, personal interests, and/or emotional concerns or well-being	18	0	14.51
Verbal praise appears insincere (e.g., compliments seem perfunctory)	9	0	7.25
2. Contributes to students' negative moods and poor emotional states	89	10.53	65.29
Creates a negative emotional environment (e.g., uses aversive voice tone, calls students names, behaves hypocritically)	47	2.63	36.27
Violates student privacy (e.g., crosses student-teacher boundaries, tells students' confidential information to others)	37	3.95	27.40
Threatens students (i.e., that they will fail or be disciplined)	5	3.95	1.61
3. Sets firm expectations, rules, and discipline procedures	39	21.06	18.54
Students are disciplined for breaking a rule (e.g., teacher reduces student conduct grade, notifies parents)	19	11.84	8.06
Students perceive overly strict or senseless classroom rules	13	6.58	6.45
Repeated reminders of school/classroom rules and schedule	7	2.63	4.03
4. Insufficient interest in, and assistance with, students' academic progress	57	23.69	31.43
Students required to learn concepts independently, such as seatwork without teacher assistance	39	14.48	22.57
No concern conveyed with student level of understanding or expressed difficulty with mastering material	10	3.95	5.64
Teacher assigns classwork irrelevant to learning objective (e.g., assigns busywork, mismatch between classwork and tests)	8	5.26	3.22
5. Reliance on single mode of instruction	15	6.58	8.06
Does not attend to individual student's preferences for learning style	10	2.63	6.45
Uses a lecture style of teaching only (e.g., no creative activities or opportunities for active learning)	5	3.95	1.61
6. Does not help students improve grades	21	2.63	15.31
Strict approach to grading (e.g., low grades given on new material, tests count for high percentage of grades, difficult tests)	13	1.32	9.67
No leniency in grading policies (e.g., no opportunities for students to earn extra credit or make up or redo work)	8	1.32	5.64
7. Assigns an overwhelming workload	24	25.00	4.03
Assigns too much classwork or homework	13	11.84	3.22
Provides insufficient time for projects to get done and/or creates a schedule that yields an uneven workload	11	13.16	.81
8. Treats students in a biased manner	69	28.95	37.88
Favors certain students on the apparent basis of achievement level, gender, race, peer group	51	22.37	27.40
Student treated worse than peers for an unknown or unique reason (e.g., student is shy, thin, or once was a troublemaker)	9	0	7.25
Allows some students more chances to participate in class and assignments	5	3.95	1.61
Gives positive reinforcement (e.g., teacher attention), treats, or privileges to only some students	4	2.63	1.61

Table 3 Continued

Themes That Emerged From Focus Groups	Frequency Counts ^a		
	Total	Boys	Girls
9. Punishes in an incorrect manner	58	25.00	31.43
Punishes the incorrect student for an incident	30	17.11	13.70
Punishes automatically (e.g., makes inaccurate assumptions)	19	7.90	10.48
Extreme position on discipline continuum (e.g., doesn't intervene when should or gives punishment too harsh for offense)	9	0	7.25
10. Creates an environment in which questions are discouraged	69	26.32	39.49
Ignores students' questions	29	15.79	13.70
Provides a negative response to questions (e.g., appears angry after students' questions, punishes bad questions)	28	5.26	19.34
Limits time to address questions	12	5.26	6.45

^a Frequency counts presented for gender groups are weighted estimates.

contributed to perceptions of low support, as did the presence of too many rules or rules that were perceived as unnecessary (e.g., not allowed to talk or use the restroom).

Frequency students emphasized teacher behaviors. During discussions of low-support behaviors, five themes emerged particularly often (i.e., mentioned at least approximately one time per participant): contributing to students' negative moods, treating students in a biased manner, discouraging questions, punishing incorrectly, and demonstrating disinterest in students' academic progress. Four themes were emphasized at a more moderate rate (approximately 0.5 times per student): maintaining firm expectations of rules and discipline procedures, showing a disinterest in students' well-being, assigning an overwhelming workload, and not helping students improve their grades. Relying on a single mode of instruction was discussed at a relatively low frequency.

Trends in responding by gender. Overall, girls provided more examples of low social support behaviors than boys. In fact, only one theme (assigns an overwhelming workload) was emphasized more often by the boys. Girls in particular mentioned teacher behaviors that can result in hurt feelings (e.g., conveys dis-

interest in student wellness; contributes to students' negative moods and poor emotional states) or poor academic achievement (i.e., does not help improve grades) more often than the boys discussed such behaviors. The remaining six themes were mentioned at a relatively similar rate by both gender groups.

Discussion

Findings from the present study underscore the importance of teacher support for adolescents' social-emotional wellness. Specifically, social support from teachers explained 16% of the variance in students' SWB, consistent with prior research that identified strong links between perceived teacher support and adolescents' life satisfaction (Natvig et al., 2003; Suldo et al., 2008). The current study also clarified that the types of teacher support most related to students' life satisfaction are emotional support (students' perceptions of how often teachers care about them, treat them fairly, and make it okay to ask questions) and instrumental support (the extent to which students perceive teachers make sure they have what they need for school, take time to help them learn to do something well, and spend time with them when they need help).

The unique influence of emotional support on wellness is consistent with earlier research that has found that adolescents who perceive more emotional support, particularly from teachers, have greater school satisfaction, academic competence, and social skills (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998). Whereas instrumental support from teachers did not uniquely predict student outcomes in Malecki's and Demaray's (2003) research, other studies have identified links between instrumental support from a variety of sources and adolescents' levels of depressive symptoms and time engaged in studying (Brajsa-Zganec, 2005; Richman et al., 1998). In part because middle school students have previously rated informational support as the most important type of support teachers can provide (Malecki & Demaray, 2003), it is somewhat surprising that informational support did not emerge as a unique predictor of SWB. However, the bulk of variance (13% of 16%) in students' SWB that was explained by teacher support was attributed to commonality among the four types, which challenges the clinical utility of focusing on specific types of support and suggests that all types are relevant to SWB in that they contribute to the general construct of teacher support.

The present study found that emotional and instrumental support influenced boys' and girls' SWB similarly. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that although gender differences may exist in mean levels of perceived teacher support, the relations between teacher support and student outcomes, such as depression, self-esteem, and peer acceptance, operate in similar manners for both genders (Hughes & Kwok, 2006; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003). These studies that failed to detect a moderator effect for gender contrast with earlier research that yielded some gender-specific findings (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Because wellness is tied to perceptions of teacher support for both boys and girls, it is important to understand how teachers can improve and sustain the quality of their classroom conditions. Reeve and Jang (2006) pur-

port that students are motivated by an "autonomy-supportive" teaching style that attends to and nurtures students' psychological needs and personal interests. Teacher behaviors perceived to communicate support in the current study overlap considerably with "autonomy-supportive" behaviors identified by Reeve and Jang (e.g., listening carefully, creating opportunities for students to work in their own way, praising students' improvement or mastery, being responsive to students' questions and comments).

Middle school students in the current study perceived teachers to be supportive primarily when they connected with students on an emotional level, used diverse and best-practice teaching strategies, acknowledged and boosted students' academic success, demonstrated fairness during interactions with students, and fostered a classroom environment in which questions were encouraged. In contrast, an earlier study found that a sample of inner-city middle school students who were primarily African American and economically disadvantaged perceived the most care when their teachers were strict, controlled disruptive behavior, and pressured students to complete academic work (Alder, 2002). In the current study of middle-class, primarily Caucasian students in a suburban community, behaviors consistent with this authoritarian style of teaching (i.e., using an aversive voice tone and setting firm expectations and rules) were discussed as conveying *low* support. Similar to the current sample, Alder found urban students perceived care when teachers ensured mastery of academic content and were responsive to questions; however, these good teaching practices were not emphasized as much as firm teaching and eliciting parental involvement in student discipline issues (a sentiment not conveyed by youth in the current study). Such results indicate that student perceptions of caring teacher behaviors may differ across sociocultural contexts. Bondy and colleagues (2007) describe specific teacher behaviors (e.g., fostering relationships by being genuine, referencing popular culture within instruction) that are indicative of culturally responsive classroom management.

In contrast to the lack of gender differences in quantitative investigations of teacher support (e.g., current study; Hughes & Kwok, 2006; Reddy et al., 2003), boys and girls in the qualitative portion of this study often emphasized different teacher behaviors as conveying low and high levels of support. This suggests that quantitative investigations of the student outcomes associated with student–teacher relationships may mask more subtle (yet important) gender differences in perceptions of how the social support construct is manifested. Notable findings in the current study include the following: Girls were particularly likely to perceive their teachers as supportive when they contributed to improving students' moods and emotional states, by such means as creating a positive emotional environment in the classroom and/or treating students respectfully via honest communication and maintenance of student privacy; they viewed teachers as unsupportive when they did not appear concerned or conveyed disinterest. Boys, on the other hand, more often perceived teachers as supportive when they provided access to treats, pleasurable activities, a manageable (vs. overwhelming) academic workload, and/or better grades, as well as encouraged students to ask questions in class. Girls' focus on interpersonal interactions and boys' emphasis on achievement was previously underscored in Tatar's (1998) qualitative study of the ways in which teachers are important to students. Specifically, adolescent girls emphasized the affective support and help in problem solving that teachers can provide, whereas boys focused more on teachers' provision of academic support (Tatar, 1998). Girls' greater attention to emotional exchanges with teachers is also in line with the notion that females are generally raised to be more interpersonally focused whereas boys are socialized to be more achievement focused and independent (Block, 1983).

The qualitative portion of the current study also identified specific types of teacher behaviors (e.g., providing evaluative feedback and access to pleasurable activities) that indicated support, yet were not mirrored in students' ideas of what conveys a lack of support.

The reverse trend was also identified, such that instances in which teachers exerted a negative influence on students' emotional states appeared especially memorable relative to the lower frequency with which students discussed teacher actions that improved their moods. Because of adolescents' needs for acceptance and belonging, teacher behaviors perceived as punitive and uncaring may result in a heightened emotional response. Such negative interactions may be recalled more readily, in line with the phenomenon that emotional memories are often recalled more vividly than nonemotional memories (Phelps, 2006).

Implications for Practice

If the results from the current study are replicated and a causal relation between teacher behavior and students' SWB is supported, the implications for professional practice would be significant. Specifically, NASP (2006) contends that social-emotional support for students is a necessary component of the school psychologist's role. In that vein, school psychologists are expected to take a preventative, skill-building stance to prepare children to meet challenges successfully. This goal can be addressed through enhancing naturally occurring supports in children's daily lives (i.e., student–teacher relationships), such as by collaborating with school administrators and teachers to implement preventative and wellness promotion strategies on a universal level (or Tier 1 in terms of a response to intervention model of service delivery). As summarized in the proceedings of the 2002 Futures Conference regarding strategies for improving social-emotional functioning for all children, "school psychologists are also in a unique position to provide staff development trainings and inservices to promote positive teacher–student interactions" (Harrison et al., 2004, p. 32). Thus, practitioners may consider relaying to teachers summary points from the current study pertinent to the vital role teacher support plays in students' well-being, as well as what to do and what to limit to promote a healthy classroom. School psychologists can also fa-

cilitate regular assessments of the quality of student–teacher relationships via school-wide administration of instruments like the School Climate Survey (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 2001). Systematic evaluations allow practitioners to monitor the outcomes of school-wide relationship-enhancing strategies implemented as well as alert them to the need for targeted interventions within specific classrooms or grade levels.

At the level of the individual classroom, school psychologists can encourage and assist teachers to collect data on their class environment via rating scales completed by students (e.g., CASSS; Malecki et al., 2000) and teachers (e.g., Student–Teacher Relationship Scale; Pianta, 2001). Such data can be combined with school psychologists' classroom observations and/or qualitative student feedback to identify a teacher's strengths and weaknesses and provide recommendations that are aligned with healthy teacher behaviors described in the current study and similar investigations (e.g., Alder, 2002; Bondy et al., 2007; Reeve & Jang, 2006). For instance, educators can be helped to enhance their provision of social support through such classroom-based strategies as verbalizing their personal policies on how students' privacy and fair treatment is ensured, implementing a reward system for student performance and effort, and providing multiple means by which students can pose questions. These types of classroom interventions should be monitored in part to establish efficacy for increasing student SWB through teacher behavior change. Notably, these universal and targeted prevention efforts aimed at increasing teacher behaviors that convey support are consistent with the tenets of the positive psychology movement (Diener, 2000), in that they entail attempts to enhance protective factors for the promotion of general wellness in all youth.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Findings in the current study are limited by such factors as the sample utilized, shared variance among constructs examined, and the

retrospective design. First, although we aimed to determine student perceptions of specific teacher behaviors that contribute to student SWB and convey support, there was substantial overlap among types of social support. This overlap emerged in both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study in the form of shared variance between types of social support and same behaviors identified in response to the four questions posed during the focus groups. More research is needed to determine the extent to which types of support are separate constructs. Second, the current study employed a convenience sample of students who attended a single school in the suburbs. Only 40% of the student body elected to participate, and intellectually gifted and/or high-achieving youth and Caucasian students were oversampled. Although these demographic characteristics mirror the makeup of the school from which the sample was drawn, the sample does not necessarily generalize to youth in more ethnically diverse, inner-city, low socioeconomic status, or rural environments. Additional research is needed to verify findings with larger, representative samples of youth attending different schools, as well as with students of different ages and cognitive and academic ability levels. Third, students were required to retroactively recall types of positive and negative teacher behaviors, which is inherently subject to memory effects. Observed teacher behaviors should be monitored in relation to concurrent levels of, and changes in, students' SWB.

Further steps in this line of research include determining the extent to which students' perceptions and recollections of teacher behaviors are consistent with actual observed teacher actions. Pending verification that students accurately perceive teacher behaviors, researchers should facilitate controlled interventions in which teachers apply the high-support behaviors and avoid the low-support behaviors perceived by students in the current study to their classroom settings. The effects of such efforts should be monitored (by instruments shown to provide data relevant to intervention development as well as sensitivity to student change) to determine whether increas-

ing teacher behaviors that students reported communicate support leads to greater perceptions of social support and, subsequently, enhanced SWB. Such action research intended to establish the effectiveness of interventions in practice is consistent with professional roles school psychologists are encouraged to embrace in order to improve students' social-emotional functioning (Harrison et al., 2004).

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Shannon Suldo, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the School Psychology Program at the University of South Florida. Her current research interests pertain to subjective well-being during youth and the social-emotional functioning of adolescents in college preparatory programs. Her applied interests pertain to school-based mental health services, including strengths-based assessment and intervention, as well as universal strategies and targeted interventions to improve students' life satisfaction. She received her PhD in School Psychology from the University of South Carolina in 2004.

Allison Friedrich, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the School Psychology Program at the University of South Florida. Her research interests include school-based mental health, gifted education, and positive psychology.

Tiffany White, MA, is a graduate student in the School Psychology Program at the University of South Florida. Her broad interests surround the construct of school-based mental health and how school psychologists can effectively develop and maintain collaborative relationships between home, school, and community agencies in order to address the mental health needs and school success of children and adolescents.

Jennie Farmer, MA, is a graduate student in the Special Education and Educational Measurement and Evaluation Programs at the University of South Florida. Her research interests include gifted students with learning disabilities, improving academic outcomes for students through meeting social and emotional needs, teacher education, and research design and methodology.

Devon Minch, MA, is a graduate student in the School Psychology Program at the University of South Florida. Her research interests include positive psychology, particularly the relation between adolescent personality and life satisfaction, in addition to systems change and program evaluation, specifically, identifying the mechanisms of sustained and meaningful parental involvement within a systems perspective as they relate to improved student achievement and well-being.

Jessica Michalowski, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the School Psychology Program at the University of South Florida. She is currently completing a predoctoral internship in the Hillsborough County Public Schools. Her research interests include the relation between students' subjective well-being and their academic success, as well as interventions to promote students' social-emotional health.