Supporting well-being and motivation in school

Associate Professor Anna Widlund

Todays talk

- How does well-being develop over the school years?
- How is it affected by the classroom context?
- How does it effect the performance of students
- What can we do about it?

WELL-BEING IN RELATION TO SCHOOL

School engagement

- Feeling energetic
- Feeling dedicated
- Being absorbed by schoolwork

"Schoolwork feels meaningful to me"

"Schoolwork inspires me"

School-related burnout

- Exhaustion
- Cynicism
- Feelings of inadequacy

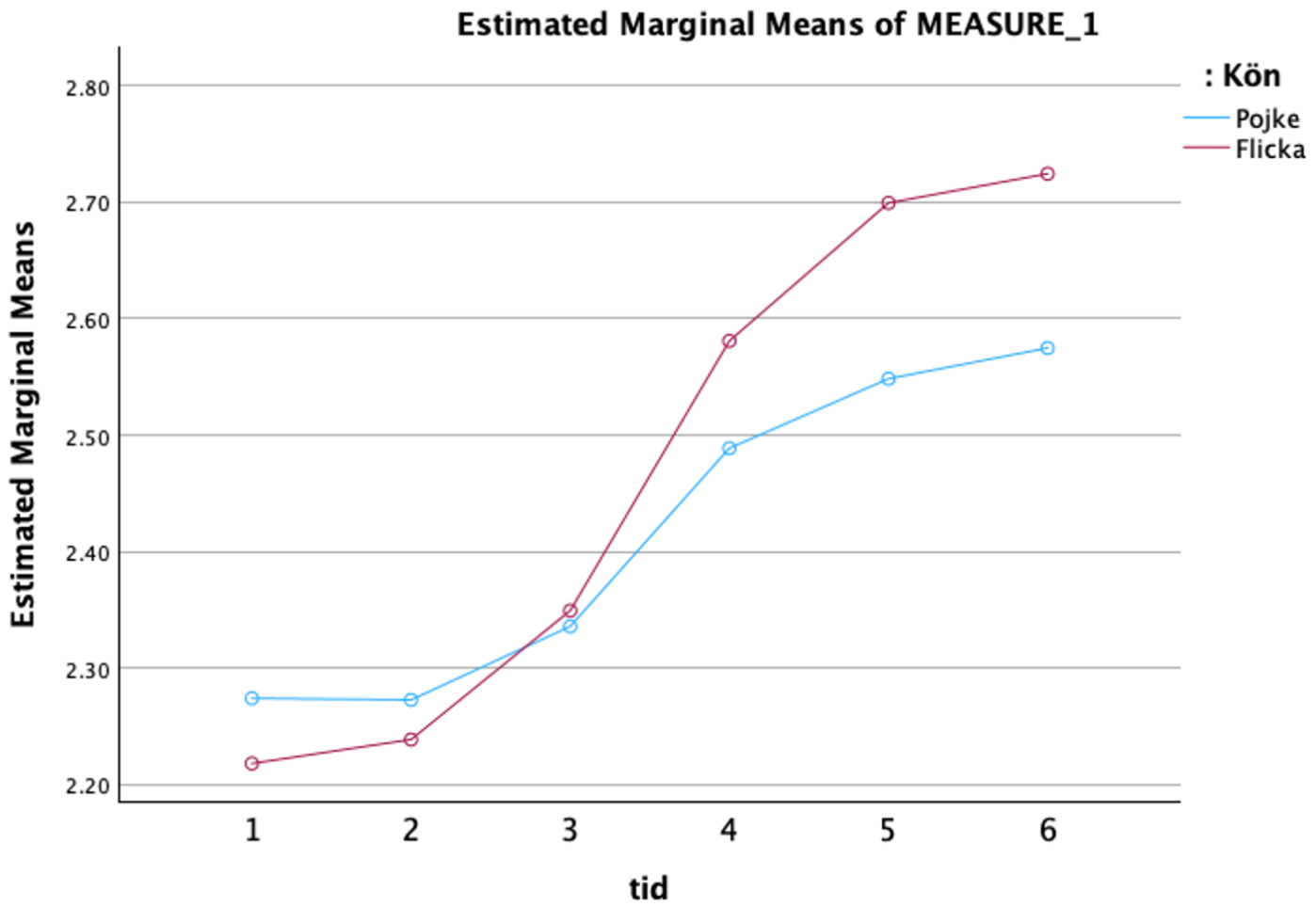
"I feel there's no point in school"

"I feel exhausted"

Optimal well-being -> High engagement and low burnout
-> requires a good balance between perceived study demands and resouces

All items are rated on a scale from 1–6
1 = do not agree at all, 6 = agree completely

DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL EXHAUSTION, GRADE 4 → GRADE 6

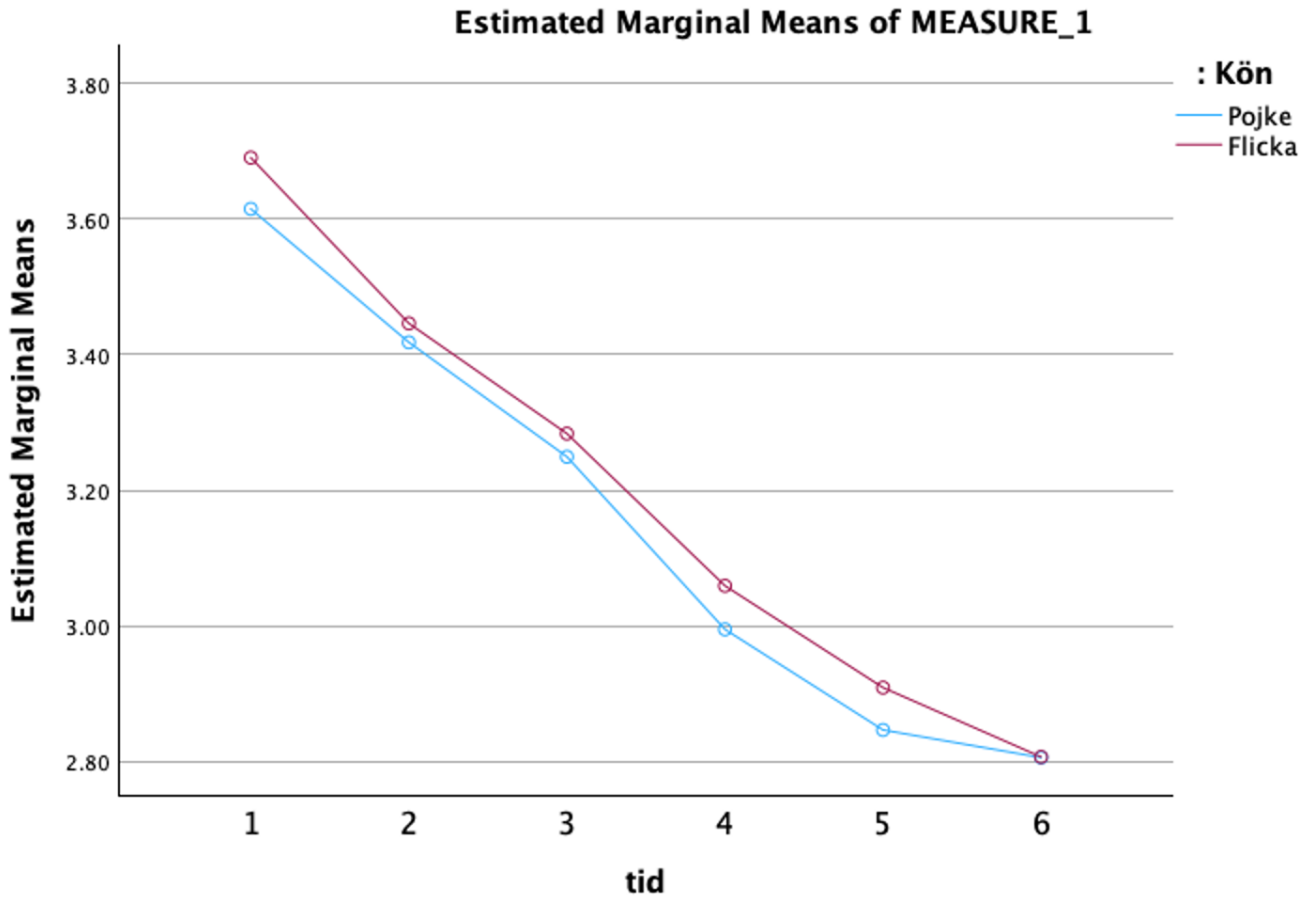


1 = Grade 4, fall
2 = Grade 4, spring
3 = Grade 5, fall
4 = Grade 5, spring
5 = Grade 6, fall
6 = Grade 6, spring

Girls' school exhaustion increases more than boys'

N ≈ *600*

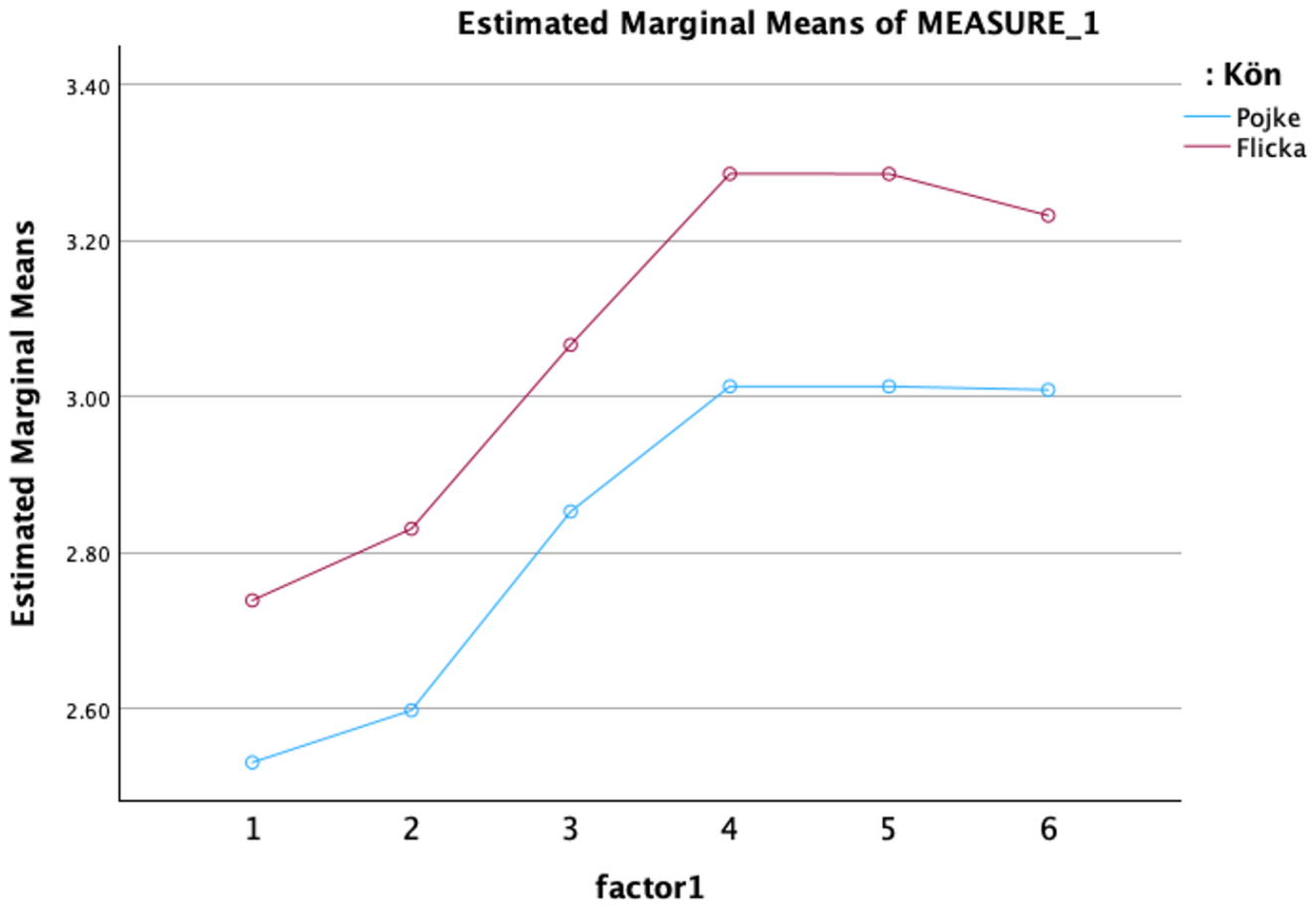
DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT, GRADE 4 → GRADE 6



1 = Grade 4, fall
2 = Grade 4, spring
3 = Grade 5, fall
4 = Grade 5, spring
5 = Grade 6, fall
6 = Grade 6, spring

Similar development for girls and boys

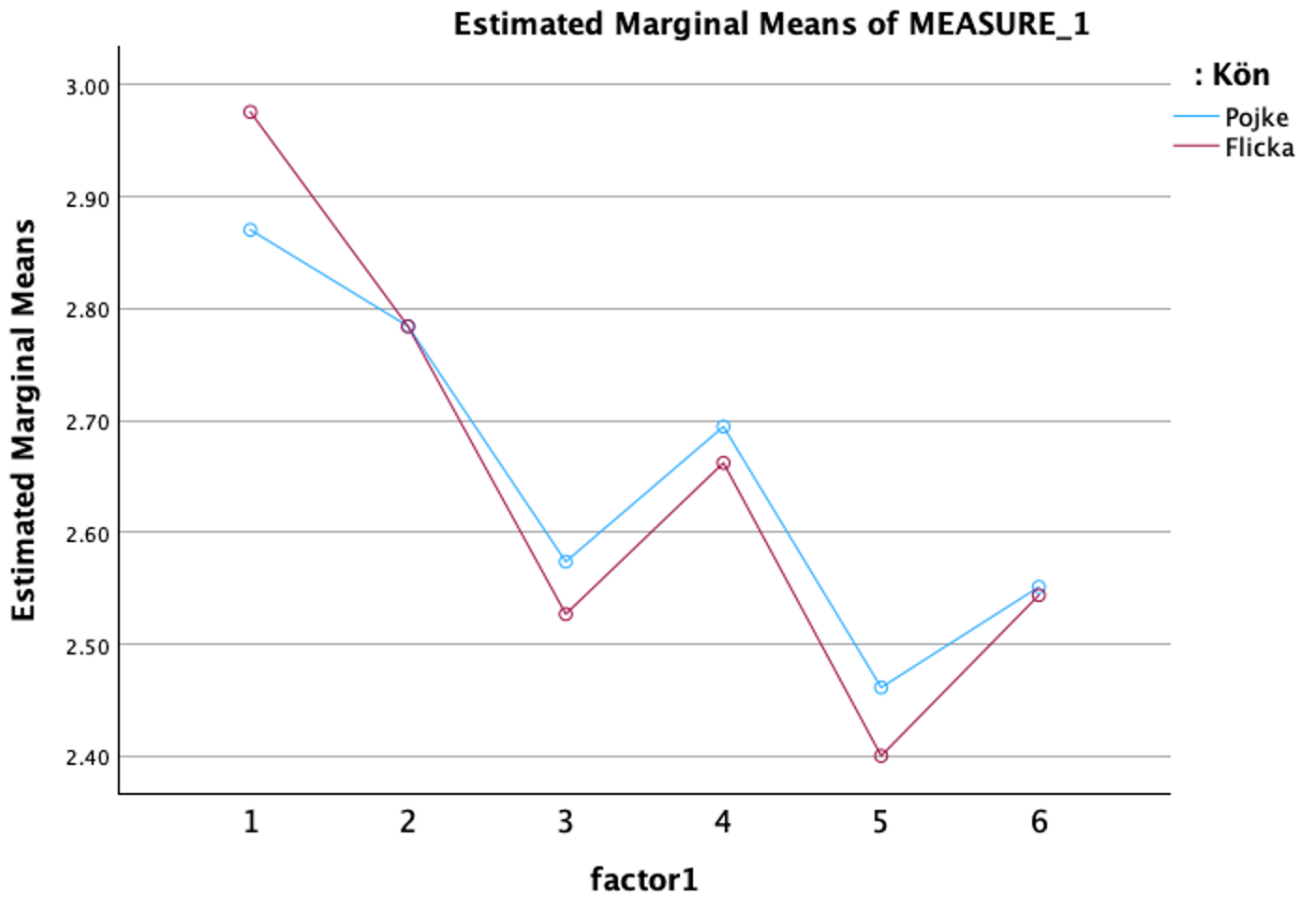
SCHOOL EXHAUSTION, GRADE 6 FALL➔GRADE 8 SPRING



1 = Grade 6, fall
2 = Grade 6, spring
3 = Grade 7, fall
4 = Grade 7, spring
5 = Grade 8, fall
6 = Grade 8, spring

Similar development for girls and boys

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT, GRADE 6 FALL➔GRADE 8 SPRING



1 = Grade 6, fall
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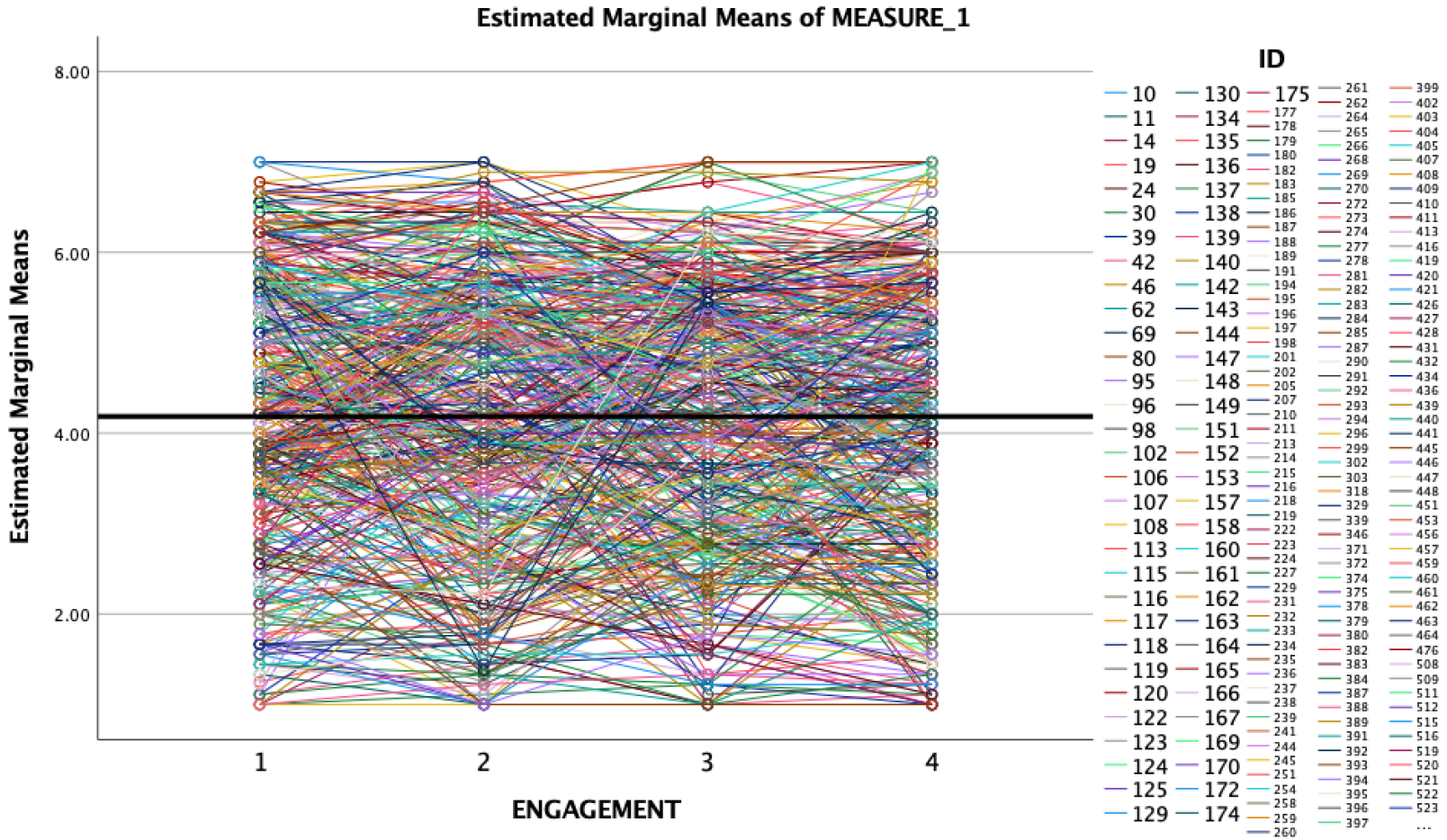
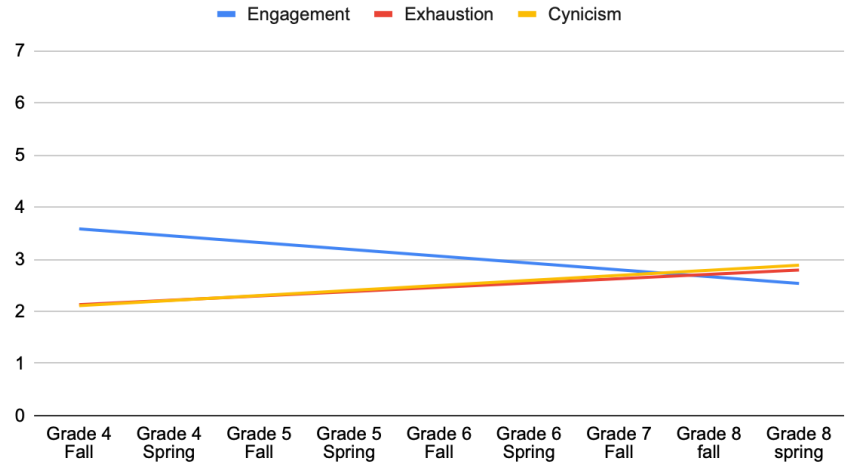
Similar development for girls and boys

THERE ARE LARGE INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THIS DEVELOPMENT

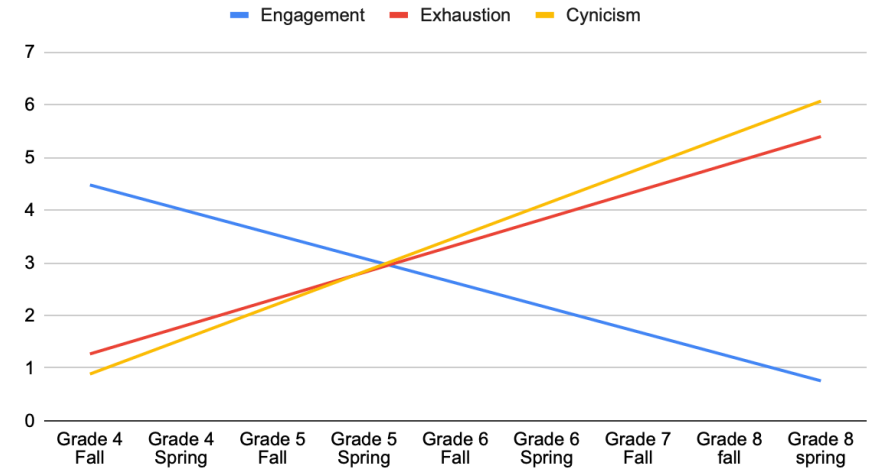


DIFFERENT DEVELOPMENTAL PROFILES AMONG STUDENTS

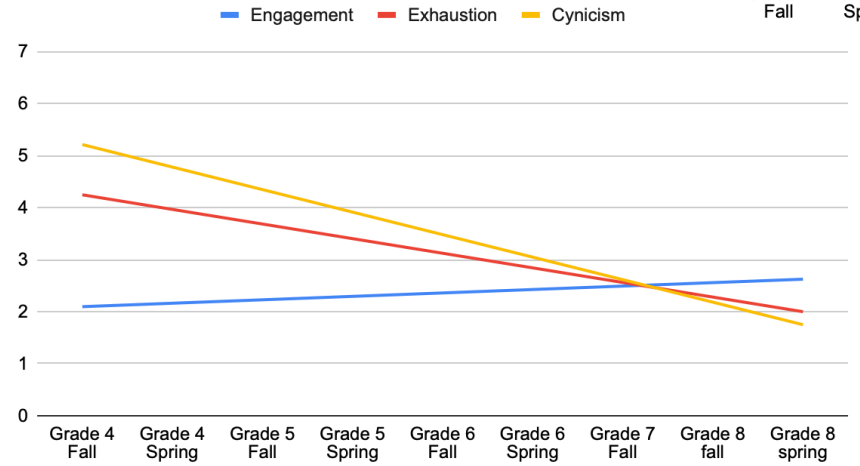
Moderate decline (79%)



Steep decline (14%)



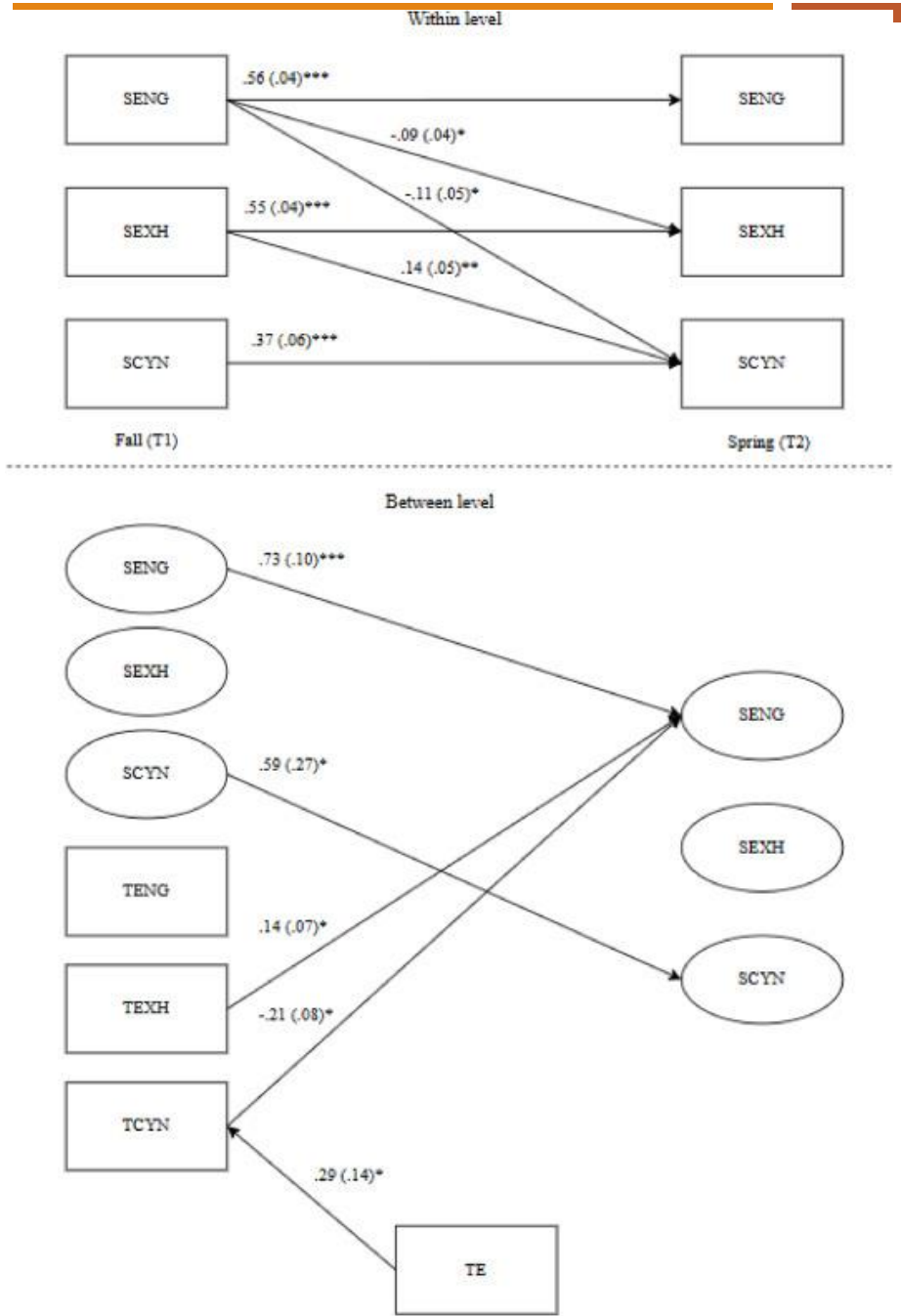
recovery (7%)



No significant differences in mathematics skills in grade 4 between these groups

SPREADING WELL-BEING WITHIN A GROUP / CLASSROOM

- Research suggests that well-being is not only an individual experience but can also “spread” across social contexts.
- For example, one student's positive emotions and engaged behaviour can influence classmates, which in turn creates a more supportive classroom climate and strengthens a collective sense of motivation and well-being.
- In the same way, engaged and attentive teachers can drive a healthy social climate, inspiring students toward greater engagement and giving them a better basis for managing stress.
- Previous studies emphasise that the school's social climate and the quality of interactions between students and teachers play a central role in promoting well-being and preventing ill-health.



ELSEVIER

Teaching and Teacher Education

Volume 167, December 2025, 105205

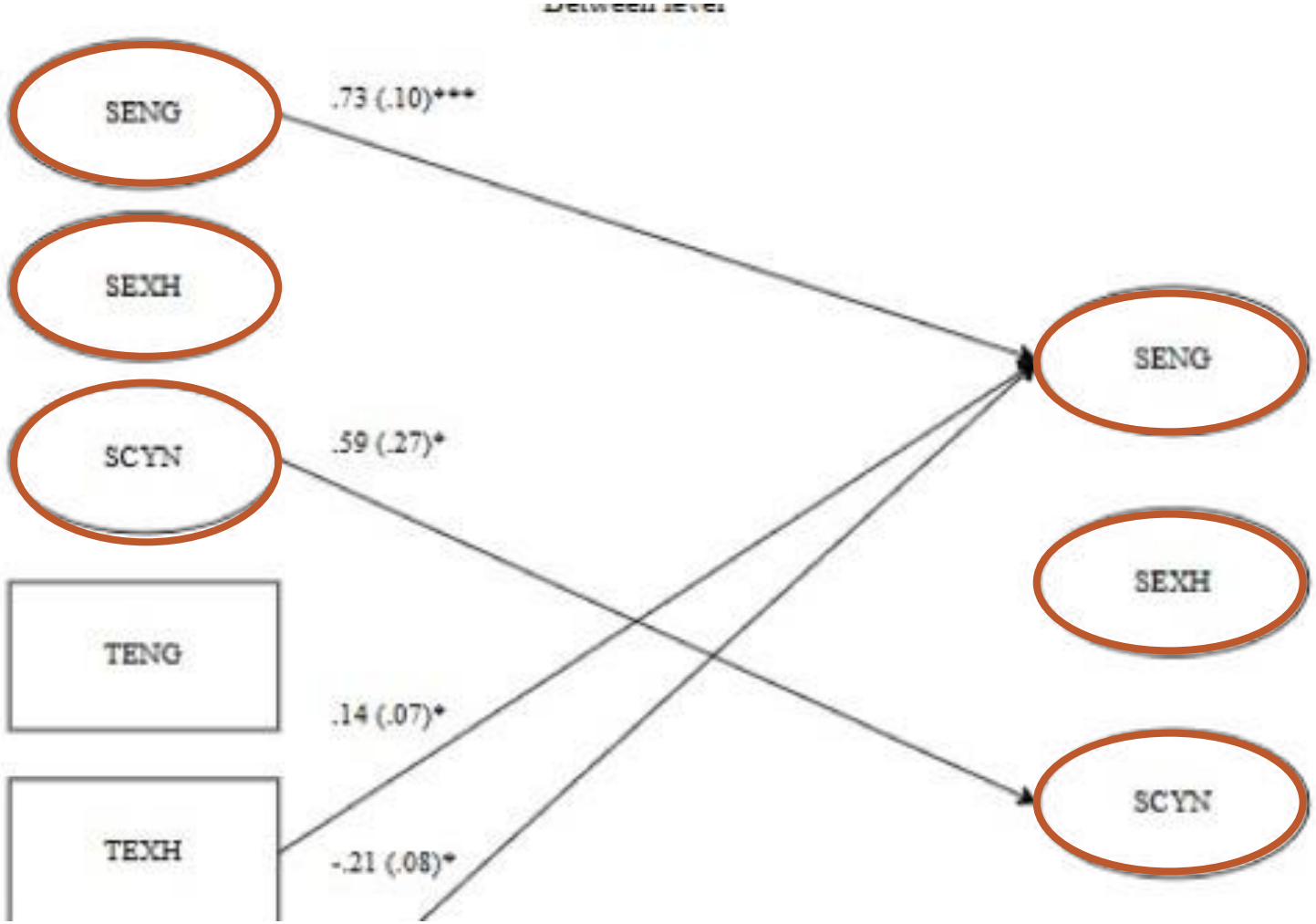
Research paper

Engagement and burnout in the classroom – Crossover effects from teachers to students

Linda Österholm, Anna Widlund, Johan Korhonen

How can a class's level of engagement, exhaustion, or cynicism predict the whole class's later levels of well-being?

How do the class teacher's work engagement and work-related exhaustion predict students' well-being over a school year?



- Some classes experience more engagement, exhaustion, or cynicism than others
- Classes with higher average engagement become even more engaged over time
- Exhaustion and cynicism also tend to cluster in certain classrooms
- Classes with a higher starting level of cynicism develop even more cynicism over time, compared with classes that start at a lower level

- Teacher cynicism lowers the whole class's school engagement over time
- The longer a teacher has worked, the higher their level of cynicism
- Teacher exhaustion has a positive short-term effect on class engagement

SO WHY IS WELL-BEING RELEVANT FOR STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE?

- Cognitive ability usually predicts the starting level, while motivation and well-being (e.g., self-concept, interest, exhaustion) influence how skills develop (Murayama et al., 2013)
- Both positive and negative dimensions of well-being and motivation affect the development of mathematics skills over time (e.g., Gunderson et al., 2018; Widlund et al., 2023)
- Students' self-concept and values matter more for educational choices and goals than skills do (Korhonen et al., 2016; Widlund et al., 2020)
- It is not always students with learning difficulties who struggle with motivation or well-being

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT MOTIVATION AND WELL-BEING?

- Research shows that **feedback is one of the best ways to support self-concept**:
  - Should be credible and realistic — this requires that tasks are set at the right level. That way, performance can be explained by persistence and practice
  - Help the student notice their own existing skills
  - The student is rewarded for persistent effort, but only when the task genuinely required it
  - Help the student put into words why they succeed or fail, and attribute this to persistence and practice rather than innate ability or chance

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT AND INTEREST?

- **Connect to the student's everyday life:** make visible why the skills (e.g., in mathematics) matter in everyday life (not just something done in math class)
- **Choice**: the option to choose which tasks to do in class (from a range of tasks)
- **Personal interest**: connect the material to students' interests
- **Constructive feedback**
- **Relevance**: have students reflect on how the material they learn will be useful to them in the future or in their hobbies / dream job

HOW CAN WE COUNTERACT NEGATIVE EMOTIONS SUCH AS EXHAUSTION OR MATH ANXIETY?

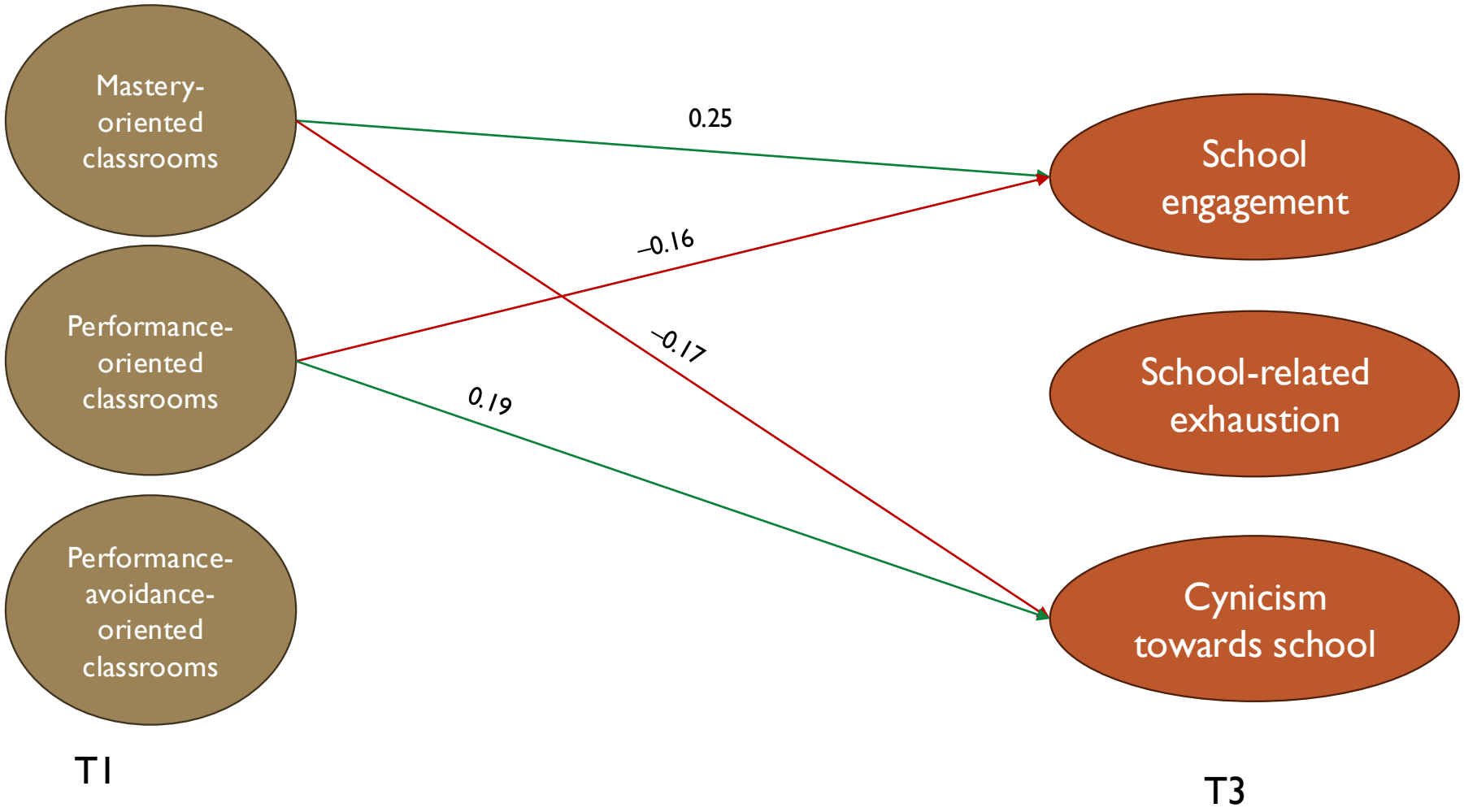
- Negative emotions in school can be counteracted by:
  - Teaching the child flexible problem-solving skills
  - Supporting the child to "keep going" with tasks
  - Supporting and making metacognitive thinking visible
  - Giving more time for tests
  - Letting children write down their feelings and thoughts for about 10 minutes before a test — this has been shown to reduce negative emotions and improve test results
  - Avoiding a focus on grades and performance results, and instead focusing on learning new skills and the progress students make
  - Creating a classroom environment where mistakes are seen as a natural part of learning, not as failures
  - Helping students set realistic goals and sub-goals

ASSOCIATIONS WITH HOW STUDENTS EXPERIENCE CLASSROOM GOALS

- Students well-being is also affected by how students perceive the goals in the classroom
- Goal orientation = what the student perceives as the purpose of engaging in the various classroom activities

- **Mastery-oriented classrooms**: the purpose is to master knowledge (learning, developing) → "In our class, it's important to understand what you learn"
- **Performance-oriented classrooms**: the purpose is to perform and demonstrate one's knowledge → "In our class, the most important goal is to get good grades"
- **Avoidance-oriented classrooms**: it is important to avoid showing one's lack of knowledge → "In our class, it's important not to look stupid"

CAN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM GOALS AFFECT THEIR WELL-BEING?



Summary

Reflect on the attitudes and emotions you yourself bring into the classroom

Be alert to negative attitudes in the classroom (e.g., "school is pointless", "math is hard", "this is boring") and discuss these feelings with students

We need to get better at systematically monitoring students' well-being

The emphasis should be on preventive work

Make use of student welfare services to support well-being at the group level

Tuomela, S., Widlund, A., Gädda, F., Österholm, L., Björkgård, L., Johansson, S., Kulla, I., Sundqvist, C., Korhonen, J., & Forsman, A. (2025). *SAMSYN – Tidiga mångprofessionella insatser för att systematiskt stödja barns och ungas välbefinnande i skolkontexten: Från forskningsdata till evidensbaserad samverkan. Slutrapport.* Åbo Akademi. https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe20260133343

Svenska kulturfonden

Högskolestiftelsen i Österbotten

VASA.

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