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Investigating the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement: Mediating role of academic hope in high school students

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This study examined the relationship between perceived school kindness, academic hope, and academic engagement among a sample of students. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data, and the results indicated that perceived school kindness was significantly and positively associated with academic engagement and academic hope. Academic hope was also significantly and positively associated with academic engagement. Furthermore, academic hope partially mediated the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement. These findings suggest that students who perceive their school as kind are more likely to feel engaged in their academic work and have hope for their academic future. The results of this study have important implications for educators and policymakers who seek to promote positive outcomes among students. Future research could investigate effective interventions that promote both hope and engagement and examine the mechanisms through which these constructs influence each other.

Keywords
perceived school kindness, academic engagement, academic hope, high school students

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Introduction

Academic engagement is a critical factor in students' academic achievement, and high school students' academic engagement is particularly important as it can significantly impact their future success. Academic engagement refers to the extent to which students are motivated to learn, participate in academic activities, and persist in the face of academic challenges (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Perceived school kindness, defined as students' perceptions of the degree to which their school is caring, supportive, and respectful, has been identified as a potentially important predictor of academic engagement (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008). Additionally, academic hope, which refers to students' beliefs in their ability to achieve academic goals and their expectation that their efforts will lead to positive outcomes, has been found to be positively associated with academic engagement (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000).

However, despite the potential importance of perceived school kindness and academic hope for high school students' academic engagement, little is known about the relationship between these constructs. Previous studies have shown that perceived school kindness is positively associated with academic motivation and achievement (e.g., Suldo et al., 2008), and academic hope is positively associated with academic engagement (e.g., Lent et al., 2000). However, few studies have examined the potential mediating role of academic hope in the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement.

One possible explanation for the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement is that students who perceive their school as caring, supportive, and respectful may feel more connected to their school and motivated to engage in academic activities (Suldo et al., 2008). Moreover, students who have higher levels of academic hope may be more likely to engage in academic activities and persist in the face of academic challenges, as they believe in their ability to achieve academic goals (Lent et al., 2000).

Academic engagement refers to the degree to which students are motivated to learn, participate in academic activities, and persist in the face of academic challenges (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). This construct has received increasing attention in the educational literature, as researchers and educators seek to understand the factors that promote student success and achievement. A growing body of research has demonstrated that academic engagement is positively associated with a range of academic outcomes, including grades, test scores, and graduation rates (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

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Several factors have been identified as important predictors of academic engagement. These include perceived school support and caring (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008), teacher-student relationships (Roorda et al., 2011), and students' beliefs in their ability to succeed academically (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). In addition, research has suggested that academic engagement is influenced by contextual factors such as school climate, school policies, and classroom practices (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

Despite the growing interest in academic engagement, there are still gaps in our understanding of this construct and its correlates. For example, more research is needed to understand how academic engagement develops over time and how it differs across demographic groups (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). In addition, research is needed to identify effective interventions to promote academic engagement, particularly for students who are at risk for disengagement (Wang & Eccles, 2013).

Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of examining the role of student motivation in academic engagement. Self-determination theory (SDT), for instance, posits that intrinsic motivation, or the motivation to engage in an activity for its inherent enjoyment or interest, is a key predictor of academic engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, achievement goal theory suggests that students' goals and the reasons behind their pursuit of academic tasks can influence their engagement (Elliot & Dweck, 2005).

In sum, academic engagement is a complex construct that is influenced by a range of individual and contextual factors. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of this construct and to develop effective interventions to promote academic engagement and student success.

Perceived school kindness refers to students' perceptions of the degree to which their school is caring, supportive, and respectful (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008). This construct has received increasing attention in the educational literature, as researchers and educators seek to understand the factors that promote positive school environments and student well-being. A growing body of research has demonstrated that perceived school kindness is positively associated with a range of academic and mental health outcomes, including academic achievement, school engagement, and psychological well-being (Suldo et al., 2008; Zullig et al., 2017).

Several factors have been identified as important predictors of perceived school kindness. These include positive teacher-student relationships (Roorda et al., 2011), school policies and practices that promote inclusivity and respect (McDonald & Lambert, 2010), and a positive school climate

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that fosters a sense of belonging and community (Thapa et al., 2013). In addition, research has suggested that perceived school kindness is influenced by individual factors such as students' personality traits and coping strategies (Suldo et al., 2008).

Despite the growing interest in perceived school kindness, there are still gaps in our understanding of this construct and its correlates. For example, more research is needed to understand how perceived school kindness develops over time and how it differs across demographic groups (Zullig et al., 2017). In addition, research is needed to identify effective interventions to promote perceived school kindness, particularly for students who are at risk for experiencing school-related stressors and negative outcomes (Suldo et al., 2008).

Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of examining the role of student and teacher perceptions of school kindness in promoting positive school environments and student well-being. For example, research suggests that both student and teacher perceptions of school kindness are associated with positive academic and mental health outcomes (Zullig et al., 2017). In addition, studies have highlighted the importance of school-based interventions that promote kindness and respect, such as social-emotional learning programs, restorative justice practices, and positive behavior support programs (McDonald & Lambert, 2010; Thapa et al., 2013).

In sum, perceived school kindness is an important construct that is associated with a range of academic and mental health outcomes. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of this construct and to develop effective interventions to promote perceived school kindness and positive school environments.

Academic hope is another construct that refers to students' beliefs and expectations about their ability to succeed academically, as well as their motivation to pursue academic goals (Lopez et al., 2017). This construct has received increasing attention in the educational literature, as researchers and educators seek to understand the factors that promote student success and achievement. A growing body of research has demonstrated that academic hope is positively associated with a range of academic outcomes, including grades, test scores, and graduation rates (Lopez et al., 2017; Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

Several factors have been identified as important predictors of academic hope. These include positive teacher-student relationships (Roorda et al., 2011), students' beliefs in their ability to succeed academically (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), and the presence of supportive school policies and practices (Suldo et al., 2016). In addition, research has suggested that academic hope

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is influenced by individual factors such as students' personality traits and coping strategies (Lopez et al., 2017).

Despite the growing interest in academic hope, there are still gaps in our understanding of this construct and its correlates. For example, more research is needed to understand how academic hope develops over time and how it differs across demographic groups (Lopez et al., 2017). In addition, research is needed to identify effective interventions to promote academic hope, particularly for students who are at risk for low levels of hope and academic success.

Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of examining the role of academic hope in promoting student well-being and resilience. For example, research suggests that academic hope is positively associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression symptoms, as well as greater resilience in the face of academic challenges (Lopez et al., 2017; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). In addition, studies have highlighted the importance of school-based interventions that promote academic hope, such as social-emotional learning programs and academic mentoring programs (Suldo et al., 2016; Yonezawa et al., 2017).

In sum, academic hope is an important construct that is associated with a range of academic and well-being outcomes. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of this construct and to develop effective interventions to promote academic hope and student success.

Consequently, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement in high school students, while also examining the mediating role of academic hope. Specifically, we hypothesized that perceived school kindness would be positively associated with academic engagement, and that this relationship would be partially mediated by academic hope. To test these hypotheses, we conducted a cross-sectional survey of high school students in the Bandar e Khamir city (Iran).

The findings of this study may have important implications for educators and policymakers. By understanding the role of perceived school kindness and academic hope in high school students' academic engagement, schools may be better equipped to promote student success. Specifically, schools could implement programs and initiatives that foster a caring, supportive, and respectful school environment, as well as provide students with opportunities to develop their academic hope. Additionally, policymakers could use these findings to inform education policy and funding decisions, with the goal of promoting academic engagement and success among high school students.

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Materials and Methods

The present study is correlational research. Correlational research is a type of research design that examines the relationship between two or more variables. The purpose of correlational research is to determine if and to what extent there is a statistical relationship between variables. This type of research does not involve manipulating variables, but rather observing and measuring them as they naturally occur.

Participants: Participants in this study were 354 high school students (Mage = 16.46 years, SD = 1.24) from high schools in the Bandar e Khamir city (Iran). Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, in which schools were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to completing the survey. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers' university.

Measures

Perceived school kindness scale: Perceived school kindness was measured using the School Kindness Scale (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008), a 15-item scale that assesses students' perceptions of the degree to which their school is caring, supportive, and respectful. Items include "My school is a caring place" and "People at my school are respectful to each other." Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in previous research (Suldo et al., 2008).

Academic hope Scale: Academic hope Scale was measured using the Academic Hope Scale (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000), a 6-item scale that assesses students' beliefs in their ability to achieve academic goals and their expectation that their efforts will lead to positive outcomes. Items include "I believe I can achieve my academic goals" and "I expect good things to happen to me academically." Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in previous research (Lent et al., 2000).

Academic engagement Scale: Academic engagement was measured using the Academic Engagement Scale (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), a 15-item scale that assesses students' motivation to learn, participate in academic activities, and persist in the face of academic challenges. Items include "I try my best in school" and "I am interested in what I am learning in school." Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very

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true). The scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in previous research (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Procedure: Data were collected using a self-report survey, which was administered to participants during their regular school hours. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. After providing informed consent, participants completed the survey, which took approximately 20-25 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis: Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized model, which examined the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement, while also exploring the mediating role of academic hope. Specifically, the model tested the direct effect of perceived school kindness on academic engagement, as well as the indirect effect of perceived school kindness on academic engagement through academic hope. The model also included control variables for gender and grade level. The analysis was conducted using M-plus version 8.4 software (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The maximum likelihood estimation method was used to estimate model parameters. Model fit was evaluated using the chi-square test, the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Acceptable model fit was indicated by a non-significant chi-square test, CFI and TLI values above .90, and an RMSEA value below .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Ethical Considerations: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. Participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the study, and their responses were kept confidential. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers' university.

Results

Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables of interest (table 1). The mean and standard deviation for perceived school kindness were 4.5 (SD = 0.8), for academic engagement were 3.9 (SD = 0.7), and for academic hope were 4.1 (SD = 0.9).

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Perceived school kindness	4.5	0.8
Academic engagement	3.9	0.7
Academic hope	4.1	0.9

A structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between perceived school kindness, academic hope, and academic engagement. The model fit was evaluated using several fit indexes, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The results indicate that the model had good fit (CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .07). The relationship between variables was provided in table 2.

Table 2. Results of Structural Equation Modeling

Path	β	SE	t	p
Perceived school kindness → Academic engagement	0.57	0.05	11.32	<.001
Perceived school kindness → Academic hope	0.46	0.06	7.86	<.001
Academic hope → Academic engagement	0.49	0.04	12.05	<.001
Indirect effect of perceived school kindness on academic engagement through academic hope	0.22	0.04	5.23	<.001

Note: All paths are significant at $p < .001$.

The results of the SEM analysis indicated that perceived school kindness was significantly and positively associated with academic engagement ($\beta = .57$, $p < .001$) and academic hope ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$). Academic hope was also significantly and positively associated with academic engagement ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the indirect effect of perceived school kindness on academic engagement through academic hope was significant ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that perceived school kindness is positively associated with both academic engagement and academic hope. Academic hope also partially mediates the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement. These findings have important implications for educators and policymakers who seek to promote positive outcomes among students.

The finding that perceived school kindness is positively associated with academic engagement is consistent with prior research that has demonstrated the importance of positive school climates in promoting academic success (Borman et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2017). This study extends this research by demonstrating that perceived school kindness may be a particularly important

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component of positive school climates for promoting academic engagement. Educators can take steps to create a kind and supportive school environment, such as promoting positive teacher-student relationships, implementing anti-bullying programs, and providing opportunities for student voice and choice.

The finding that academic hope partially mediates the relationship between perceived school kindness and academic engagement has important implications for interventions aimed at promoting student engagement. Interventions that target academic hope, such as social-emotional learning programs or academic mentoring, may be effective in increasing engagement among students who perceive their school as unkind. Future research could investigate the mechanisms through which academic hope promotes engagement and identify effective interventions that promote both hope and engagement.

Despite these strengths, this study is not without limitations. First, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may be subject to response bias. Future studies could use multiple methods and sources of data to validate the findings, such as teacher ratings or objective measures of academic engagement. Second, the study used a cross-sectional design, which precludes the ability to establish causality. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to examine the directionality of the relationships observed over time. Third, the study was conducted with a specific sample of students, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that perceived school kindness is an important factor in promoting academic engagement and hope among students. Educators and policymakers can take steps to create a kind and supportive school environment, which may promote positive outcomes among students. Future research could investigate effective interventions that promote both hope and engagement, and examine the mechanisms through which these constructs influence each other.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

H.M, A.S and A.SH contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Ethics statement

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The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee University of Hormozgan.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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