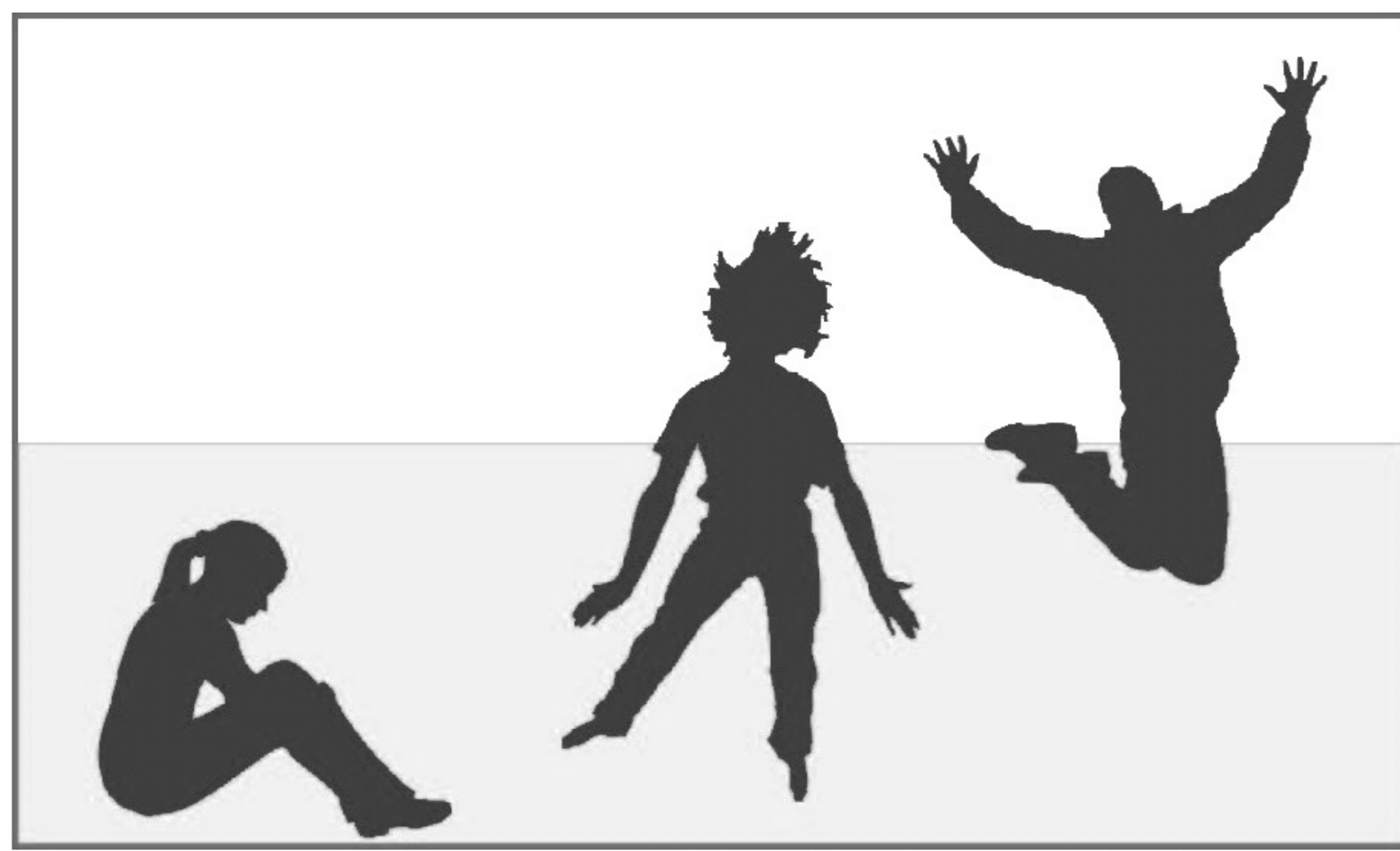


# Strengths, Education, and Well-Being

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RESILIENT YOUTH RESEARCH GROUP

## ABSTRACT

It is well established that adolescence is a period of significant stress during which the risk for developing psychopathology and disengagement from school increases substantially. Considerable research has applied a deficit-based approach, focusing on identifying risk factors and developmental sequela that result in deleterious outcomes for adolescents. What is less well established are factors that underlie positive developmental outcomes in the transition from childhood to adolescence. The present study addresses this gap, contributing to extant literature on positive psychology, by examining how personal character strengths relate to adolescents' positive development. A sample ( $N = 321$ ) of school-recruited youth ages 8 to 18 ( $M_{age} = 13.26$ ) participated in the study. Measures of strengths, student performance and engagement, happiness, and life satisfaction were completed. Multiple regression analyses revealed that youths' various character strengths uniquely predicted ratings of happiness and life satisfaction, as well as aspects of school performance and engagement. Several age and sex differences were also discovered. When taken in combination with extant knowledge on risk factors and negative functioning in adolescence, these results contribute to a more holistic understanding of the psychological mechanisms that promote positive development among youth. These results have the potential to be mobilized into meaningful interventions for students, allowing them to build and utilize their personal strengths in the classroom to enhance well-being and school performance and engagement.

## BACKGROUND

During adolescence, risk for psychopathology and disengagement from school markedly increases (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Larson, 2006). It is also important to consider positive psychology constructs that may relate to positive outcomes for adolescents during this transition.

Personal character strengths refer to characteristics and competencies within an individual, embedded in a culture, valued by the individual and society (Rawana & Brownlee, 2010). Strengths are inherent, built overtime, and help individuals navigate their environment. Examples of strengths assessed in the study are outlined below.

SAI Subscale	Example Item
Strengths at Home	<i>I treat my family members with respect</i>
Strengths at School	<i>I use my listening skills in school</i>
Strengths during Free Time	<i>I like to try doing new things</i>
Strengths with Friends	<i>I am honest with my friends</i>
Strengths from Knowing Myself	<i>I can ask for help when I need it</i>
Strengths from Keeping Clean & Healthy	<i>I eat healthy food</i>
Strengths from Being Involved	<i>I go to events in my community</i>
Strengths from Faith & Culture	<i>I think its important to honour my culture</i>
Strengths from Goals & Dreams	<i>When I set goals, I try hard to reach them</i>

How well a student performs in the school environment (e.g., grades) is referred to as school performance. Student engagement includes concepts such as school connectedness, cognitive motivation, and family and peer support (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003; Libbey, 2004). It is unclear how specific strengths relate to school engagement and performance.

Life satisfaction and happiness are important aspects of youths' subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Life satisfaction refers to one's appraisal of contentment with life, while happiness is a measure of the frequency of positive affect (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Understanding how particular strengths relate to aspects of well-being would contribute to a more holistic understanding of student thriving.

## PURPOSE

1. Identify relations between students' personal strengths and their school performance and engagement.
2. Identify relations between students' personal strengths and their well-being.

## HYPOTHESES

1. Given the exploratory nature of the study, no specific hypotheses were made.
2. Age and gender differences were suspected.

## METHOD

Students between the ages of 8 and 18 ( $M_{age} = 13.26$ ,  $SD_{age} = 2.18$ ) were recruited from five different schools in the Wellington Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) in Ontario, Canada. A total of 321 students in grades 4 through 12 participated in the study.

## MEASURES

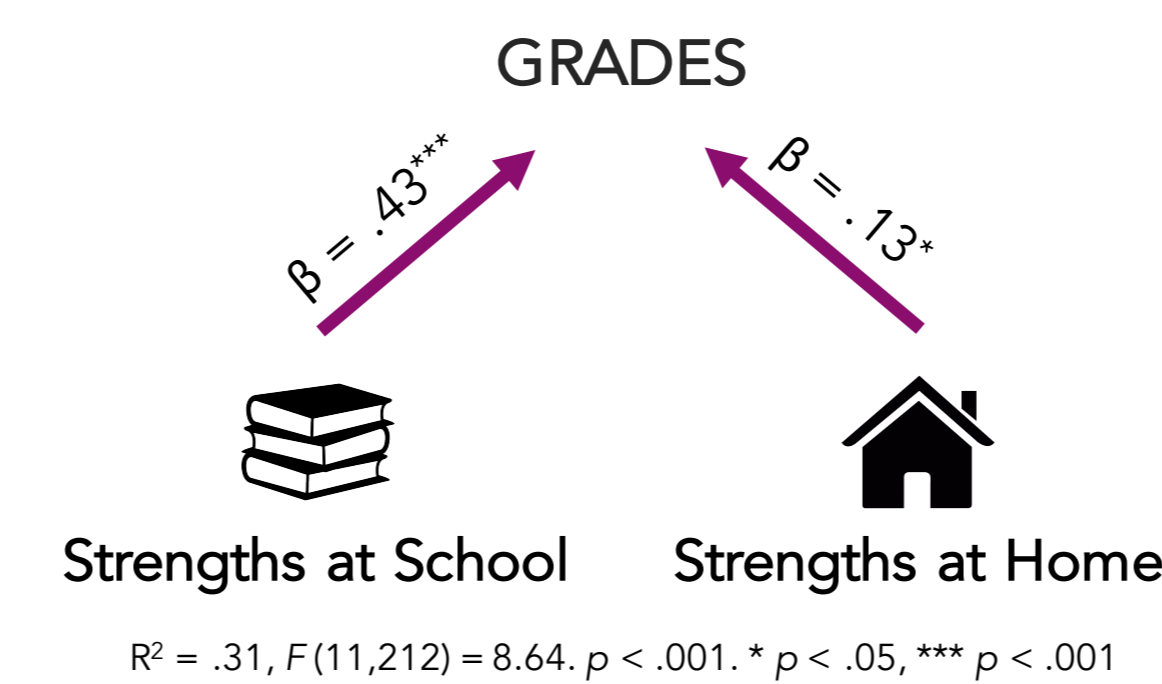
Measure	Description
Strengths Assessment Inventory (SAI; Rawana & Brownlee, 2010)	Assesses strengths derived from characteristics (e.g., optimism, faith) and competencies (e.g., school functioning, self-awareness). $\alpha = .97$
Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschley, 2006)	Assesses student engagement in five domains: Teacher-Student Relationships, Control & Relevance of School Work, Peer Support for Learning, Family Support for Learning, and Future Aspirations & Goals. $\alpha = .93$
Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)	Assesses happiness from respondent's own perspective. $\alpha = .83$
Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLS; Seligson, Huebner, & Valois, 2003)	Assesses student reported level of satisfaction in various aspects of their life. $\alpha = .89$
Student Report Cards	Assessed school performance using grades.

## RESULTS

Hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to evaluate whether specific strengths would uniquely predict the various outcomes. Age and gender were entered as controls, followed by the SAI subscales.

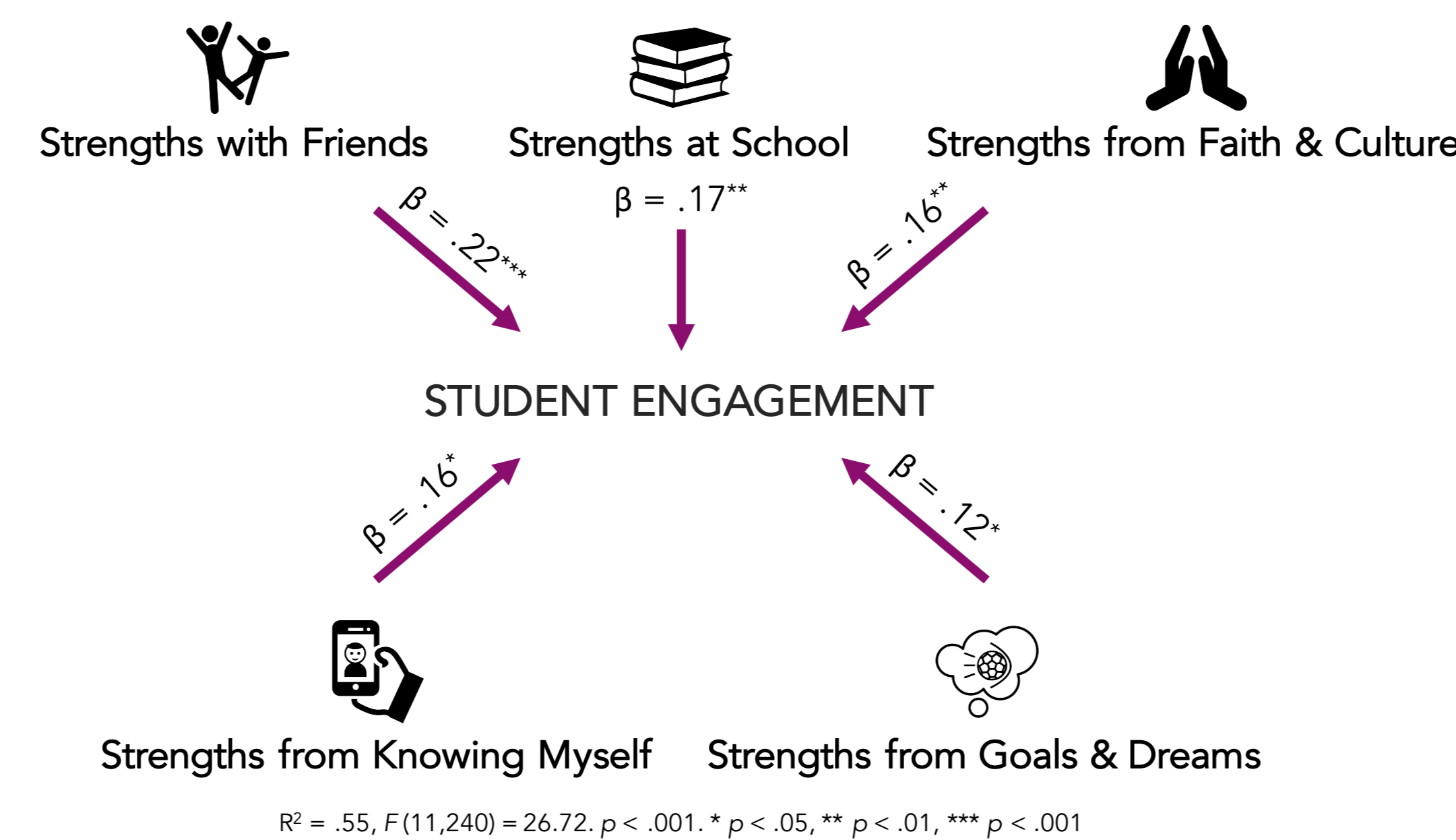
### Strengths and School Performance

The SAI subscales accounted for an additional 26.2% of the variance beyond the effects of age and gender. Strengths at School followed by Strengths at Home emerged as strong, unique predictors.



### Strengths and Student Engagement

The SAI subscales accounted for an additional 47.9% of the variance beyond the effects of age and gender. Strengths with Friends, followed by Strengths at School, Strengths from Faith & Culture, Strengths from Knowing Myself, and Strengths from Goals & Dreams emerged as strong, unique predictors.

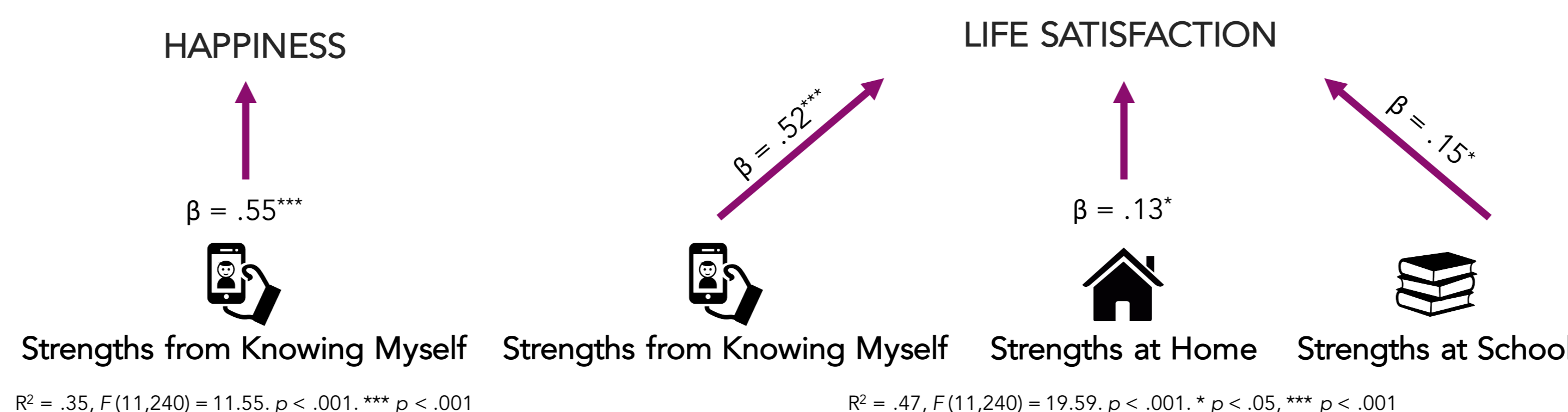


### Strengths and Happiness

The SAI subscales accounted for an additional 34.4% of the variance beyond the effects of age and gender. Strengths from Knowing Myself emerged as the only strong, unique predictor.

### Strengths and Life Satisfaction

The SAI subscales accounted for an additional 44.9% of the variance beyond the effects of age and gender. Strengths from Knowing Myself, followed by Strengths at Home and Strengths at School emerged as strong, unique predictors.



## RESULTS (CONTINUED)

### Age and Gender Differences

Bivariate correlations were calculated to identify age differences across the study variables. Grades were found to increase with age ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while student engagement ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and total strengths ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were both found to decrease with age.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age					
2. Grades	.20**				
3. Student Engagement	-.27**	.20**			
4. Happiness	-.00	.26**	.39**		
5. Life Satisfaction	-.06	.25**	.5**	.69**	
6. Total Strengths	-.17**	.31**	.70**	.46**	.59**

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

The effects of gender were explored using independent samples t-tests. Females had significantly higher grades ( $M = 80.29$ ,  $SD = 6.45$ ) than males ( $M = 78.41$ ,  $SD = 7.16$ ),  $t(260) = -2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ . Males had significantly higher reports of life satisfaction ( $M = 35.05$ ,  $SD = 4.95$ ) than females ( $M = 33.53$ ,  $SD = 7.23$ ),  $t(279) = 1.98$ ,  $p < .05$ .

## CONCLUSIONS

Considerable overlap exists in particular strengths associated with grades, student engagement, and well-being. Strengths at School was consistently associated with grades, student engagement, and life satisfaction. Similarly, Strengths from Knowing Myself was consistently associated with student engagement, happiness, and life satisfaction. These findings indicate Strengths at School and Strengths from Knowing Myself may be important strengths to consider for understanding and promoting positive youth development.

Student engagement was predicted by a variety strengths, including Strengths with Friends, Strengths at School, Strengths from Faith & Culture, Strengths from Knowing Myself, and Strengths from Goals & Dreams. This suggests student engagement is influenced by a range of interpersonal, scholastic, spiritual, and self-reflective strengths.

Several age and gender differences across the study variables emerged. Notably, it appears strengths decrease as students get older. This may signal an important direction for future research, including identifying more relevant strengths for older students and/or strength interventions for older youth.

## IMPLICATIONS

### Implications for researchers:

- Identifies strengths that may be of interest for future study
- May inform interventions to build strengths in students
- Contributes to understanding how to best utilize strengths to enhance students' school performance, engagement, and well-being
- May help mobilize research findings to benefit educators and students

### Implications for educators:

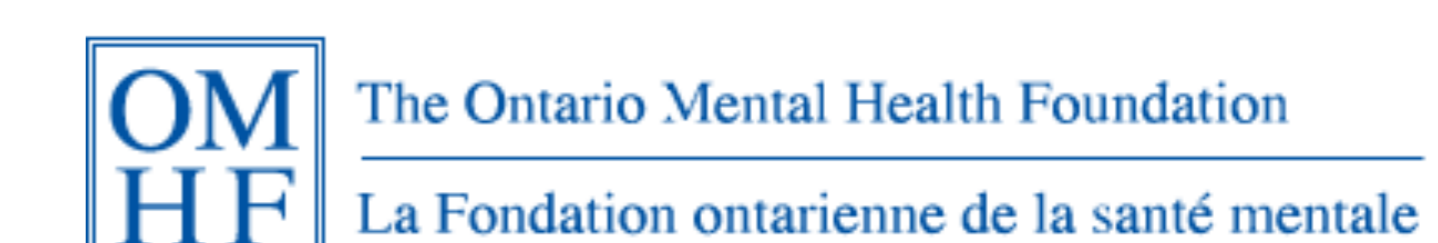
- Can become familiar with strengths to look for in students
- Better understanding of how to enhance school performance and engagement by giving students opportunities to identify, utilize, and further develop their strengths in the classroom
- Better understanding of how to enhance well-being in students through strengths

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Examine how student strengths predict engagement, performance, and well-being over time
- Examine how a focus on strengths in students may be associated with well-being benefits among educators
- Develop the Strengths in Education website as a valuable knowledge translation resource (strengthsineducation.ca)

Note. References available upon request.

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