The term “school attitude,” representing a student’s positive or negative feelings associated with school, describes students’ subjective well-being in school. In the literature, school attitude has been measured through corresponding degrees of behavioral and cognitive engagement. Although they do not use the term school attitude, a number of studies focus on conceptually related terms and concern students’ affective relationship to school (see Libbey, 2004 for a review of the lexicon of terms related to school attitude). We now turn to the cumulative knowledge provided by these studies. The variables that are relevant to these studies inform this study’s indicators (measures) of school attitude in the survey instrument which was developed for this study.

Positive Orientation Toward School

Positive Orientation Toward School was conceptualized in Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, and Turbin’s (1995) study which originally examined protective factors that are associated with the prevention of problem behaviors such as sexual precocity, drug abuse, and delinquency. The authors characterized positive orientation toward school as a psychological construct which has as a foundation, fundamental respect for, and loyalty toward pro-academic goals (Jessor et al., 1995).

Not surprisingly, students with Positive Orientation toward School show high measures of self-efficacy. The Positive Orientation toward School Scale developed by Jessor et al. (1995) was based on two dimensions: how much students report liking school, and the extent to which students value academic achievement. Specifically, students who demonstrate a fondness for school often endorse survey items such as “I look forward to going to class” (Jessor et al., 1995).

These students are respectful to school rules, and their personal goals are in line with the school’s goals (Jessor et al., 1995). Students with Positive Orientation toward School are identified by beliefs that academic achievement and learning is
relevant to their lives and/or to their success as adults. Positive Orientation Toward School, as a construct, is especially important, because its presence seems to convey a protective measure. This is simply because pro-academic goals and activities make for little time to engage in problem behaviors (Jessor et al., 1995). These students are essentially on the “right track,” with little time or interest in engaging in destructive or problem behaviors (Jessor et al., 1995). They also are found to have more positive relations with teachers and other adults (Jessor et al., 1995).

Of central importance to this study is that Jessor et al.’s (1995) research demonstrates that positive orientation toward school is a conceptually similar construct to (positive) school attitude. It suggests that the subjective measure of liking school certainly has some relationship to the measure of school attitude. Furthermore, the value placed on academic achievement appears to extend to a respect for and loyalty to school-based rules as well. This underscores the importance of measuring levels of respect or agreement with school rules, for the purposes of assessing school attitude.

School Attachment

Moody & Bearman (1998) measured school attachment through three primary dimensions of his school attachment scale. One dimension measured the degree to which students felt socially and emotionally close to others at school. Another dimension measured basic indicators of how much students enjoyed being at school and attending classes. The third dimension of their scale measured the degree to which students reported feeling a part, or member, of the school (Moody & Bearman 1998). Moody & Bearman (1998) school attachment research, then, is similar to the previously reviewed, positive orientation toward school construct, in its use of school liking as an indicator to measure the construct. Moody & Bearman’s (1998) school attachment concept also bears resemblance to Jessor et al. (1995) sense of membership and Jenkins’s (1997) school bond, in that the perception of being a part of school (i.e., students’ reported degree of activity involvement) can serve as an indicator for the respective constructs.

In their work concerning school attachment, Gottfredson et al. (2009) maintained that it is teacher rapport and student–teacher interaction which ultimately mediate levels of school attachment. While their survey instrument contained items measuring school enjoyment, the main focus of their instrument concerned the dynamic between students and their teachers. Their research revealed a significant and important interaction between teacher expectations and student self-concept with school attitude.

The Gottfredson et al. (2009) survey contained 15 questions probing how much students feel that teachers respect and value their contributions. These items included how receptive teachers were to clarifying questions as well as students’ perceptions of the teacher’s appraisal of their ability to achieve (Gottfredson et al. 2009). The survey also measured students’ academic self-concept—their self-appraisal of their
own levels of achievement, and how strongly they believed they were capable of meeting academic challenges Gottfredson et al. (2009). Among the important findings, Gottfredson et al. (2009) established that students readily perceived and conformed to the low expectations meted out by the teachers. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) identified this process as an *expectancy effect*. First, the teacher forms expectations for student performance, students then respond to the behavioral cues of their teacher, and performance is then shaped by these expectations (see Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968, for a review).

The decreased performance and low achievement observed in these students is clearly detrimental to school attitude Gottfredson et al. (2009). Other research supports the finding that underachievers display more negative attitudes and behaviors toward school than high achievers. Those who routinely feel overwhelmed, stressed, or unable to meet academic demands harbor negative feelings toward school. Stated in another way, underachievement is strongly predictive of (negative) school attitude (McCoach, 2000a, 2000b). And, as established by Brophy and Good (1974); this underachievement is likely associated with both lowered teacher expectations and differential treatment.

Interestingly, Brophy and Good (1974) discovered that students are able to point out who the low-achieving students are in the class, based on the teachers’ treatment of such classmates. These students reported the following teacher practices directed toward low achievers: more directives and rules, more negative feedback and criticism; and (when compared to higher achieving students) less freedom of choice (Weinstein, Marshall, Brattesanim, & Middlestadt, 1982). That classmates can readily identify the characteristics of teacher treatment toward low-achieving peers suggests that the differential treatment is readily perceived (Weinstein et al., 1982) and these teacher behaviors are not subtle. Through naturalistic observation, Brophy and Good (1974) further corroborated these findings and reported the following behaviors to be directed at low-achieving students: general, insincere praise, less frequent, and less specific feedback and verbal support, less attention in general, more criticism, and fewer cues given to direct student to improve or elaborate their responses. These students were also noted to be seated further away from the teacher Brophy and Good (1974).

Components of school attachment highlighted in the literature bring to light several important implications. One is that the dimension concerning students’ perception of how much their teachers respect them proves to be a powerful predictor of school attitude. Differential treatment in the classroom contributes significantly to self-perception and school attitude in these students (Brophy & Good, 1974). When there is differentially negative treatment from the teacher, along with chronic academic struggles, school attitude is likely to be very low (Brophy & Good, 1974).

This study employs measures that probe both students’ appraisal of their ability to achieve and the degree to which they feel supported by teachers. Based on an understanding of the research, it was anticipated that the variables of self-perception and school bond would be significantly correlated with school attitude.
School Bond

As mentioned previously, one aspect of school bond that has been identified is school spirit. A component of school spirit which has particular relevance to adolescence is the belief that one’s school is an adequate reflection of who they are (Coker & Borders, 1996). Another way to understand the adolescents’ strong need to identify with their school is through Finn’s (1989) identification–participation model. Finn (1989) argues that being able to identify with school or a part of school is critical for an adolescents’ school attitude and well-being. According to this identification–participation model, students must first identify (i.e., align their identity and values with school). If this identification is successful, the student will then be willing and motivated to participate and engage (Finn, 1989).

And as Jenkins’s (1997) work with school bond demonstrates, measures of involvement in extracurricular activities including sports, clubs, and special school events is a strong predictor of school attitude. In keeping with Finn’s (1989) Identification–Participation model, school bond represents involvement and engagement that also includes nonacademic, school-related activities. School bond is enhanced through having the ability to choose different voluntary experiences through voluntary activities, is essential for well-being. The degree to which student feel they have adequate choices for their learning and recreational activities proves to be instrumental in reported levels of happiness at school (Lasso & Larson, 2000). Other documented methods of studying external, systems-level factors influencing school attitude include measures of reportable behavior such as number of clubs attended by students (Voekl, 1996), or functional outcomes such as grades (McCoach, 2000a, 2000b). Indeed, low grade point average (GPA) has been shown—in and of itself—to be an excellent predictor of negative school attitude (Jessor et al., 1995). Jessor and colleagues’ (1995) research supports this finding and speculates that low GPA indicates detachment from school as well as an increased sense of helplessness regarding school. Manlove (1998) operationally defined the construct school engagement by the number of hours spent per day on homework. In summary, it is clear that measuring both indicators of positive emotionality as well as measuring external variables, such as those in students’ environments, is the most comprehensive method to study school attitude. By measuring both internal and external dimensions in this study, we anticipate a larger, more comprehensive spectrum of data concerning school attitude.

Studies show that, in fact, higher levels of commitment to activities that are nonacademic such as sports, community service, and extracurricular activities are positively associated with higher school bond (Jenkins, 1997). Therefore, in the investigation of school attitude, we note that measuring involvement in extracurricular activities such as sports and special events (Jenkins, 1997) is valuable to school attitude explorations. Altruism is particularly predictive of positive school attitude. Altruistic behavior, such as peer counseling and volunteering for school-based initiatives, is another indicator of positive school attitude.
School bond has been tied to school spirit and to membership, as established in the literature. Another dimension of school bond, according to Jenkins’ conceptualization, concerns school rules (Jenkins, 1997). Respect for the rules was defined by Jenkins (1997) as the degree to which students respect and follow the regulations and behavioral guidelines established by the school. For instance, survey items testing this dimension included, “Do you think that rules at your school are fair?” and “Do you feel that rules are important?” (Jenkins, 1997).

It has been found that students who perceive school rules as fair and reasonable are more positive toward school (Jenkins, 1997). Another study found similar results. Students who felt supported by their teachers, as well as by their peers were found to be more academically responsible and scholastically oriented. Above all, they were more compliant with school rules (Wentzel, 1994).

Other research studies have found similar relationships between students’ respect for school rules and self-concept. Research by Levy (1997) shows a significant inverse relationship between anti-authoritarian views (i.e., disregard for school rules) and levels of self-concept. The more positive one’s self-concept, the more favorably they view sources of authority and rule enforcement (Levy, 1997). It is speculated that students with positive self-concept have goals and values that are in line with what school has to offer. The more successful the student is with academic and other school-related goals, the more school is viewed as a supportive, receptive, and positive arena in which to achieve those goals (Wentzel, 1994). It seems clear, too, that pro-academic behavior will be reinforced by good grades, recognition, and acknowledgement from teachers thereby strengthening their self-concept.

Motivation and Self-regulation

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that a strong, positive self-perception creates a well-spring of incentive and motivation for further challenges. These types of students envision success and are able to self-regulate, that is, persevere with determination. They can continue their efforts until the goal is obtained.

Results from the McCoach (2000a, 2000b) study showed that motivation/self-regulation had a significant relationship with school attitude. The construct of self-regulation refers to the degree that individuals are able to actively apply their motivation and behavior to be active participants in their own learning and academic achievement (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Motivation is less about the actual behavior than self-regulation and refers to the self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions, which orient an individual toward attaining a goal (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). This construct is based on: self-control, strong organizational skills, and determination to meet one’s goals (high conscientiousness), self-motivation, task commitment, conscientiousness, persistence, work ethic, and will to achieve (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). Students with high motivation and self-regulation are driven internally and have the stamina and work ethic to persevere through academic tasks. The higher the level of motivation and self-regulation, the more tolerance for some of
the routine, mundane tasks that must be done for mastery and successful completion of academic tasks (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994).

This research suggests that students who have good motivation and self-regulation are not likely to feel overwhelmed and/or helpless when undertaking academic tasks. On the contrary, these students maintain a sense of control over tasks; whether by good use of organization skills, lack of procrastination, or consistently high levels of energy and focus for such tasks. In the McCoach (2000a, 2000b) study, the relationship between motivation and self-regulation was determined to be strong with a correlation coefficient of .66.

In his classic book, *Rebellion in High School* (1964) concerning student motivation, Stinchcombe hypothesized that motivation was high in students who believed that their schoolwork would help them to achieve more status in the future. Those who agreed that doing well in school would help secure job prospects, financial gains, or social status, he observed, had higher motivation to achieve in school, as well as to conform to the norms, rules, and expectations of the school. In contrast, he asserted that students who were unable to make a connection between schoolwork and occupational or social success were not only unmotivated in school but also tended to be more rebellious (Stinchcombe, 1964).

In part to verify Stinchcombe’s findings, a large-scale, longitudinal study was conducted by the U.S. Department of Education between 1976 and 1999 to assess over 13,000 students’ attitudes toward school. Of the most noteworthy findings was that the proportion of seniors in 1999 who endorsed, “often” or “almost always” when asked if they were given meaningful and important work, was 25% less than the proportion of seniors who had endorsed these descriptors in 1976 (Boesel, 2001). This suggests that over time, students are finding less meaning and purpose to what is being presented to them in class (Boesel, 2001). From Stinchcombe’s perspective, this failure to find relevance in the schoolwork is a major cause of lowered motivation levels on a global scale. More central is the additional finding in the study which revealed that the same mean relative decline (about 25%), between 1976 and 1999, was found concerning the proportion of high school seniors who endorsed “a lot” or “very much” in response to the question, “I like school.”

The implications for the work of Stinchcombe (1964) and of Boesel (2001) is that this study would be wise to probe the degree to which students find their work to be meaningful and relevant, especially in relation to the attainment of future goals, such as career and income capabilities. The findings of Stinchcombe (1964) and of Boesel (2001) appear to address motivation from an existential point of view. Students strive to find meaning and importance in their schoolwork in terms of its relationship to current and future goal realization.

Other studies examine motivation through more psychological and behavioral standpoints. For example, it has been established that individuals are, in general, more likely to engage in tasks in which they believe there is a high probability of success (Willingham, 2009). This is especially true among tasks that are perceived to be mildly challenging (Willingham, 2009). In fact, succeeding at such tasks has been demonstrated to stimulate pleasure-enhancing neurotransmitters in various parts of the brain (Willingham, 2009). School work that is high on both dimensions,
that is—challenging, but not overwhelming; and solvable with some sustained effort, is motivating and rewarding for students (Willingham, 2009). “Working on problems that are of the right level of difficulty is rewarding,” writes Willingham (2009) “… but working on problems that are too easy or too difficult is unpleasant. Students cannot opt out of these problems … if the student routinely gets work that is too difficult, it’s little wonder that s/he doesn’t care much for schoolwork … (p. 13).”

The relationship is such that tasks that are too difficult or too easy disrupt students’ abilities to self-regulate in effective and productive ways (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Once the task is deemed to be too difficult or too easy, components of self-regulation such as time management, goal directedness, and mastery come to a halt (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; McCoach, 2000a, 2000b). Levine & Moreland (2004) who analyzed instructional practices in terms of their relevance to motivation, found at least five main domains which are crucial to levels of student motivation. *Relevance* guarantees that what students are learning feels relevant to their present lives, interests, and/or future career goals, which means the material they are learning does not feel arbitrary, useless, or irrelevant to their lives. *Choice* enables students to feel that they have some say in their learning; that they have some autonomy and area allowed the freedom to make choices based on their own interests and goals. *Success* must be possible since it has been established that students are motivated to do things which they have experienced success in the past. (This bears resemblance to self-efficacy, discussed earlier.) This work also posits that for motivation to be ideal, there must be some element of *Collaboration* in the learning, such that students are working together, sharing ideas, and helping understanding. Finally, the units presented by the teacher must be aligned with clearly stated goals for mastery. This enables students to aim for and strategize their work around reaching a desired goal.

The motivation and self-regulation variable has a complex relationship with school attitude. Research suggests that when students lack motivation they are unable to effectively engage their self-regulation, which, as we have seen, is associated with failing to achieve the goal of a particular task. Ultimately, this lack of success and lack of motivation is hypothesized to have a negative impact on school attitude.

**Peer Attitude**

A large amount of empirical evidence exists concerning the degree to which peers exert influence on one another’s norms, values, and behaviors (e.g., Brown & Klute, 2003). For example, it has been found that students whose friends plan to go to college are far more likely to also aspire to attend college (Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972). Risky behavior, such as the use of drugs, is also facilitated by peer influence, despite strong parental forces. Peer attitude has a significant impact on individuals’ school attitude (Dunphy, 1963). The literature concerning adolescent friendship has established that adolescents strive for consensus and agreement of
attitudes and behaviors within their peer groups (Kandel, 1978). Not surprisingly, individuals in these peer groups often feel similarly about school; they share similar attitudes, areas of interest, and levels of academic motivation (Duncan et al., 1972; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Indeed, underachieving students often report peer influence as the strongest force that hampers their achievement (Berndt, 2002). Berndt also observed that over the course of an academic school year, significant changes evolve among affiliated students, such that grades and degree of academic aspirations become very similar by the end of the year.

The reasons that adolescents are readily impacted by their peers’ attitudes can be traced, in part, to the confluence of dramatic biological, social, and cognitive changes that occur during adolescence. As these changes take place, adolescents begin to interact with each other outside of school (Youniss, 1982). As adolescents, they spend twice as much time with their peers than with their parents, a dramatic increase from their younger years. Furthermore, adolescents are increasingly away from the vigilance (and intervening) of parental figures.

It is at this time that they begin to view peers as better companions than parents or siblings (Berndt, 2002). Adolescents begin to recognize that they can work with a peer reciprocally to solve each other’s problems. Friends get to know each other’s viewpoints, wishes, and opinions. A natural outcome of this mutual understanding is intimacy (Youniss, 1982). The need for increased time spent with peers and away from parents is explained, in part, by cognitive-developmental theory of Jean Piaget. Adolescents gain the capacity for formal operations; a complex set of cognitive abilities that expands thinking and relating to the world (Piaget, 1952, 1977). For example, adolescents are increasingly more able to reason hypothetically, to understand other’s points of view, and to grasp abstract concepts. This increases their interest in laws and justice; in rules and fairness; and the logic behind a debate or argument (Piaget, 1952, 1977).

Another significant and important developmental process that is central to adolescence is identity formation (Erikson, 1959, 1968a). Adolescents are thus rapidly coming to define themselves in terms of how they relate to the society in which they live. Through formal operations, adolescents have the ability to judge and form opinions from multiple perspectives. They can understand not only how they judge others, but an awareness of how others judge them (Piaget, 1952, 1977). Judgment deepens in complexity and the adolescent is able to mentally place others into different social categories, such that the adolescent characterizes their acquaintances into different groups, in terms of social status (Erikson, 1959, 1968a). Furthermore, as they arrive at a sense of personal identity, they are increasingly more likely to identify with a particular group in which they are a member (Erikson, 1959, 1968b).

The peer group becomes the dominant context for identity development. In order to belong to the group, there is a high expectation of conformity and acceptance of the group’s behaviors, norms, and values. After extensive observation of adolescence, Dunphy (1963) explained this process of socialization this way:

By demanding conformity to peer group standards, members ensured that the group would be a cohesive entity capable of controlling the behavior of those in it in the interests of the dominant majority. The basic consensus of values which results is a major factor in the strong esprit de corps of most adolescent peer groups (p. 3)
Since the adolescent desperately yearns for acceptance into a given peer group, there is a strong tendency for this individual to abide by the norms and behavioral expectations of the group (Brown, 1990). In fact, the importance of maximizing congruency among members is so important that if there are discrepant attitudes or behaviors either the incongruent member will separate from the group, or the group will keep the associate but modify their behaviors to reflect the formerly incongruent behavior (Kandel, 1978).

Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) introduced the term homophily to represent this tendency for a group of individuals to ultimately display very similar attributes, behaviors, and norms. Kandel (1978) broadened the application of homophily to characterize adolescent socialization and strivings for conformity among members. Two processes have been implicated in the development of homophily—selection and socialization described previously.

The selection process describes the fact that adolescents appear to select friends who display similar characteristics. In fact, there is evidence that supports that the degree of liking is related to the degree of similarity across dimensions such as attitudes, abilities, values, and personality traits (Kandel, 1978). The second process that works to establish homophily is socialization, that is, the act through modeling and reinforcement of increasing behavioral agreement among members, such that the group will become increasingly more similar over time (Kandel, 1978). Dunphy (1963) appears to convey the importance of homophily when he writes: “entrance to a peer group depends on conformity, and failure to continue to conform at any stage means exclusion from the group” (p. 239).

Of central importance to this study is the notion that peer attitude toward school is a significant contributor to an adolescent’s attitude toward school (Kinderman, 1993; McCoach, 2000a, 2000b). As has been discussed, the peer group exerts a tremendous amount of influence on shaping adolescents’ attitudes as the group strives for consensus and the individual considers group acceptance to be critical and thereby continually abides by its norms and behaviors.

In fact, previous research has established that crowds [large, mixed gender networks, comprised of multiple cliques (Brown & Klute, 2003)] commonly behave and define themselves with respect to the degree of importance they attach to schooling. Some adolescents categorize groups of peers in terms of how scholastically focused they are, such as “brains” and “nerds,” or degree of involvement in sports, such as “jocks” (Brown & Huang, 1995).

Another body of research posits that the importance of scholastic achievement of a given group is directly governed by strivings for popularity (Ellis & Wolfe, 2002). This research establishes the premise that behavior embraced by popular groups often involves deviant, aggressive behaviors which espouse antischoolastic values (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Acker, 2000). Furthermore, youths’ perceptions also concur that more popular groups tend to engage in deviant, attention-getting activities (Ellis & Wolfe, 2002). Given these research findings, it is possible that students with the highest sociometric status (i.e., those who are popular) are members of groups which embrace anti-school norms and behaviors. However, other studies refute the findings, stating that wide peer acceptance (a measure of popularity) is a consistent determinant of school achievement and positive attitude.
Furthermore, other research that has corroborated Rodkin et al. (2000) findings were only confirmed among disadvantaged communities. Specifically, Staff and Kraeger (2008) discovered that among high school boys in disadvantaged areas, prestige was earned by asserting violent and aggressive behaviors.

Positive school attitude not only is important for reducing the risk of dropping out of school, but also is, not surprisingly, positively correlated with academic achievement (McCoach, 2000a, 2000b). Positive school attitude ensures beneficial outcomes such as academic achievement, and, simultaneously, prevents adverse events such as dropping out of school.

This study examined the factors that are most closely associated with positive (and negative) school attitude. With this perspective in mind, the researchers of this study identify at least three variables used in the study—motivation/self-regulation, school bond, and (positive) self-perception—as positive emotional assets, in line with the positive psychology paradigm. That is, possessing these psychoemotional traits is clearly adaptive and leads to positive personal and social outcomes (Bandura, 1993). Furthermore, the research suggests that these traits are positive determinants of school attitude (McCoach, 2000a, 2000b). The term “school attitude,” representing a student’s positive or negative feelings associated with school, has received little attention in the research domain of students’ feelings toward school. This study conceptualizes the term school attitude as a construct that represents well-being in school and corresponds with different degrees of behavioral and cognitive engagement (see Libbey, 2004 for a review of the lexicon of terms related to school attitude). Without using the term school attitude a number of studies are conceptually related to school attitude and concern students’ affective relationship to school. We now turn to the cumulative knowledge provided by these studies and discuss the relevance to this study.

Our review of the existing literature reveals mainly psychological, intrapersonal variables such as motivation and well-being as measures of school attitude. The current study widens the scope of variables to include the few studies which measure feelings toward school by looking at nonpsychological variables. Examples employing nonpsychological variables of individuals include research concerning teacher behavior (Gottfredson, Birdseye, Gottfredson, & Marcinick, 1995); instructional content (Willingham, 2009); and involvement in extracurricular activities (Jenkins, 1997). Gottfredson et al. (1995), for instance, found that teachers’ interpersonal styles differentially impact students’ attitude and motivation. Willingham (2009) examined the content of instruction in class and found that students who felt that what they were learning was irrelevant to their lives had poor school attitudes and low motivation for academic achievement (Willingham, 2009). Jenkins (1997) also measured nonpsychological variables when he demonstrated that hours spent in extracurricular clubs was a reliable indicator of positive feelings toward school.
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