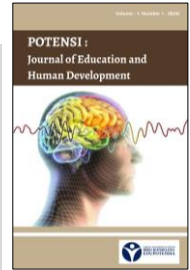


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Exploring Emotional Well-Being: A Phenomenological Analysis of Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explored students' emotional well-being using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Three participants were selected through purposive sampling based on emotional experiences that had significantly influenced their lives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation and analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis. The findings showed that emotional well-being developed through self-acceptance, positive self-evaluation, gratitude, life satisfaction, emotional regulation, autonomy, purpose in life, and supportive social relationships. Initially, participants experienced sadness, disappointment, confusion, low self-confidence, and social pressure. However, through self-reflection, self-compassion, and support from family, peers, and the school environment, they gradually adapted and achieved greater psychological stability. The results indicate that emotional well-being is a dynamic process shaped by subjective experiences, meaning-making, and social support, which together promote resilience and adaptive psychological growth among students.



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Introduction

Emotional well-being is one of the fundamental aspects of adolescents' psychological development, particularly during the high school years, which are characterized by significant biological, social, cognitive, and emotional changes (Guerra-Bustamante et al., 2019). Adolescence represents a complex transitional period in which individuals undergo the processes of identity exploration, self-concept development, and adaptation to increasingly demanding social expectations (Zaky, 2016). At this stage, adolescents begin to understand themselves, establish their life values, and develop aspirations for the future. This process often gives rise to unstable emotional dynamics, as individuals are confronted with various internal and external changes that influence the way they think, feel, and behave (Bruque et al., 2016). Therefore, emotional well-being plays a crucial role in helping adolescents maintain psychological stability and achieve optimal personal development. In their daily lives, high school students encounter various emotional challenges that may affect their psychological condition, including academic pressure, achievement demands, family issues, social relationships, peer conflicts, and difficulties in the process of self-acceptance (Yang, 2016). These experiences may lead to feelings of sadness, disappointment, anxiety, low self-esteem, and confusion when individuals lack adequate emotional regulation skills. Emotional well-being is not only associated with the ability to experience positive emotions but also encompasses the ability to accept oneself, manage stress, develop healthy emotional regulation, build positive social relationships, and cope adaptively with various life challenges (Fernández, 2016). Thus, emotional well-being serves as an essential foundation that enables students to navigate their developmental process in a more balanced manner despite the various challenges they encounter (Meschko et al., 2021).

Furthermore, emotional well-being plays a significant role in fostering adolescents' psychological resilience, which refers to an individual's ability to recover from adversity, adapt to change, and derive meaning from life experiences (Masten, 2001). Adolescents with high levels of emotional well-being tend to demonstrate greater self-confidence, self-compassion, self-reflection, and healthier interpersonal relationships (Ryff, 1989; Neff, 2003). In contrast, low levels of emotional well-being may increase vulnerability to various psychological problems, including prolonged stress, anxiety, depression, and adjustment disorders (Keyes, 2002). Therefore, emotional well-being should be understood as a dynamic process that develops through the interaction of personal experiences, social support, and an individual's ability to make meaning of life, thereby serving as an essential component in supporting adolescents' overall development (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

High school students are vulnerable to various emotional problems due to the substantial developmental demands they experience (Trigueros et al., 2019). When individuals are unable to cope with these pressures adaptively, this condition may lead to decreased self-confidence, difficulties in emotional regulation, impaired social relationships, and reduced academic motivation (Trigueros et al., 2019). In contrast, students with high levels of emotional well-being tend to demonstrate greater self-acceptance, resilience, healthy emotional regulation, and the ability to adapt to various life challenges (Chen, 2019; Romano et al., 2021). The school environment plays an important role in supporting students' emotional development. Schools function not only as settings for academic learning but also as social and psychological environments that influence the development of emotional well-being (de Boer et al., 2019). Support from teachers, peers, and a conducive educational environment can help students cope with emotional pressures and foster healthier psychological well-being (Zhao & Wang, 2020; Romano et al., 2021).

Based on the results of the preliminary observations, it was found that students experienced a wide range of emotional experiences, including feelings of disappointment, sadness, confusion, social pressure, and difficulties in self-acceptance (Suldo et al., 2020; Arslan, 2021). Nevertheless, these experiences also reflected a process of adaptation through self-acceptance, emotional regulation, social support, and the development of meaning in life (Arslan, 2021; Zysberg & Ben-Zur, 2022). These findings indicate that students' emotional well-being is a dynamic process influenced by each individual's subjective experiences (Ryff & Singer, 2021).

The phenomenological approach was employed in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of how students make meaning of their emotional experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenological analysis enables researchers to explore the essence of participants' lived experiences from a subjective perspective, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the process through which emotional well-being is developed (Neubauer et al., 2019). Through this approach, the study focused not only on students' emotional conditions in general but also on how they experience, understand, and develop emotional well-being in their daily lives (Neubauer et al., 2019). This study is important because students' emotional well-being has a substantial impact on personal development, social relationships, and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2022; Arslan, 2021).

Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute to the development of more comprehensive school guidance and counseling services that are more responsive to students' psychological needs (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Therefore, exploring students' emotional well-being is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics of adolescents as well as strategies for strengthening emotional well-being within educational settings (Arslan, 2021; Domitrovich et al., 2017).

Method

Participants

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological analysis design to gain an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences related to emotional well-being (Neubauer et al., 2019). A phenomenological approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore the meaning of participant's lived experiences directly from their individual perspectives (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study focused on how students understand, experience, and make meaning of emotional well-being through personal experiences, social relationships, self-acceptance, emotional regulation, purpose in life, and adaptation to various life challenges (Smith et al., 2022).

The study participants consisted of three students selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria, namely students who had experienced significant emotional events and were able to reflect on those experiences in depth (Campbell et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method, as this approach enabled the researchers to obtain rich, detailed, and comprehensive information regarding the participants' emotional experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). In addition to interviews, observations and documentation were employed as supporting data collection techniques to enhance the validity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the dimensions of emotional well-being, including self-acceptance, positive self-evaluation, positive social relationships, autonomy, purpose in life,

environmental mastery, and emotional regulation. The interview guide was designed to enable participants to describe their experiences in a comprehensive and reflective manner.

Measure

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore student's lived experiences and subjective perceptions of emotional well-being. The interview guide was developed based on relevant dimensions of emotional well-being, including self-acceptance, positive self-evaluation, social relationships, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and emotional regulation. These dimensions were used as thematic areas to guide the interview while allowing participants sufficient flexibility to describe their experiences, feelings, perceptions, and interpretations in their own words. The semi-structured interview format was selected to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. The questions focused on participants' experiences of accepting themselves, evaluating their personal characteristics and abilities, managing emotions, developing relationships with others, making independent decisions, finding meaning and purpose in life, adapting to their environment, and responding to various emotional challenges.

In addition to interviews, observations and documentation were used as complementary data collection techniques. Observations were conducted to obtain contextual information regarding participants' behaviors and interactions, while documentation was used to support and enrich the information obtained from the interviews and observations. The use of multiple data sources allowed the researcher to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences related to emotional well-being. The participants were three high school students selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria. Participants were selected because they had experienced significant emotional events and were considered capable of reflecting on and describing their experiences in depth. The study was conducted within a school context and focused on participants' experiences of emotional well-being in their everyday lives, including their experiences of self-acceptance, emotional regulation, social relationships, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and adaptation to various challenges.

Because this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, the measures were not intended to generate numerical scores. Instead, the interview guide, observations, and documentation served as instruments for eliciting rich descriptions of participant's lived experiences. The collected data were subsequently analyzed phenomenologically to identify significant statements, meanings, and themes that represented participants' experiences of emotional well-being.

Procedure

This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological design to explore students' subjective experiences related to emotional well-being. A phenomenological approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study did not involve any intervention or counseling procedure, as its primary focus was to explore and understand participant's lived experiences and subjective perceptions of emotional well-being. Data were therefore examined to identify meaningful experiences, perceptions, and interpretations that reflected how participants understood and experienced emotional well-being in their everyday lives.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis to identify, organize, and interpret the meanings embedded in participant's lived experiences related to emotional well-being (Neubauer et al., 2019). The analysis was conducted systematically through several stages, beginning with data familiarization, in which the researcher repeatedly reviewed the interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documentation to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Relevant statements and descriptions that were considered meaningful to the research focus were subsequently identified and extracted from the data.

The identified data were then reduced and organized according to their relevance to the research objectives. The researcher conducted an initial coding process by assigning codes to meaningful statements that represented particular experiences, perceptions, emotions, behaviors, and responses described by the participants. Similar codes were subsequently compared, grouped, and organized into broader categories. These categories were then examined to identify recurring patterns and relationships across participants' experiences. The emerging categories were further developed into themes representing the essential aspects of participants' lived experiences of emotional well-being. The researcher continuously compared the themes with the original interview data to ensure that each theme remained grounded in the participants' narratives. The themes were then reviewed and refined to clarify their boundaries, meanings, and relationships with one

another. Particular attention was given to both shared experiences and variations among participants in order to preserve the richness and complexity of their individual perspectives.

The final stage involved interpreting the meanings associated with the identified themes within the context of participants' everyday experiences. The interpretation focused on understanding how participants perceived, experienced, and responded to various emotional and developmental challenges. Through this process, the analysis generated an integrated description of participants' experiences across several dimensions of emotional well-being, including self-acceptance, positive self-evaluation, gratitude and life satisfaction, positive social relationships, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and emotional regulation. The analysis therefore sought not only to identify recurring topics but also to understand the meanings and psychological experiences underlying the participants' narratives.

Results

Based on the in-depth interviews, observations, and phenomenological analysis, the participants' experiences revealed that emotional well-being was experienced as a dynamic process involving several interconnected aspects. The analysis identified eight major themes: self-acceptance, positive self-evaluation, gratitude and life satisfaction, positive social relationships, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and emotional regulation. These themes reflected the participants' experiences in responding to emotional challenges, understanding themselves, interacting with others, and adapting to different situations in their daily lives. The participants described a gradual process of self-acceptance. At the beginning of their experiences, participants reported feelings of disappointment, sadness, confusion, and low self-confidence, particularly when they became aware of personal shortcomings or encountered difficult situations. Over time, participants described changes in the way they perceived themselves. They gradually became more willing to acknowledge their strengths and limitations, appreciate their efforts, and view themselves more positively. Participants also described becoming less likely to blame themselves continuously for their shortcomings and more willing to give themselves opportunities to learn and improve. This process reflected a gradual movement from negative self-perceptions toward greater acceptance of their personal characteristics.

The participants also described changes in their self-evaluation. They reported becoming more able to recognize and appreciate their personal achievements, including small accomplishments that they had previously overlooked. Feelings of pride in their efforts, the ability to forgive themselves after making mistakes, and increasing confidence in their abilities were frequently reflected in their experiences. Participants described becoming more aware of their capabilities and were increasingly able to acknowledge their progress. These experiences demonstrated a shift toward a more positive and balanced evaluation of themselves. Gratitude and life satisfaction also emerged as important aspects of participants' experiences. Participants expressed gratitude for various aspects of their lives, including family, educational opportunities, supportive individuals, friendships, and meaningful experiences. Despite encountering difficulties, they described becoming more able to recognize positive aspects of their circumstances. Participants reported that appreciating what they had helped them view their lives more positively. Their experiences indicated that feelings of satisfaction were associated not only with favorable circumstances but also with their ability to appreciate and accept aspects of their everyday lives.

Positive social relationships were another prominent theme. Participants described family members, close friends, and other significant individuals as important sources of emotional support. Having people whom they could trust and communicate with enabled participants to share their experiences, express their feelings, and obtain support when facing difficulties. Participants reported feeling more comfortable and emotionally secure when interacting with supportive individuals. They also described positive interpersonal relationships as helping them cope with pressure and challenging situations. The theme of autonomy was reflected in participants' experiences of making personal decisions, expressing their opinions, and taking responsibility for their choices. Some participants described initially feeling hesitant or concerned about being different from their peers. As they gained greater confidence, they became more willing to make decisions according to their own considerations and beliefs. Participants also described becoming more capable of accepting responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. These experiences indicated a gradual development of independence in managing personal choices and responding to social pressures.

Purpose in life emerged through participants' descriptions of their hopes, aspirations, and plans for the future. Participants identified various goals that provided them with motivation to continue moving forward despite difficulties. Their aspirations included educational goals, personal development, future careers, and expectations for a better life. Participants described their future goals as sources of motivation and enthusiasm in dealing with everyday challenges. Having a direction for the future also helped them maintain hope and optimism. Environmental mastery was reflected in participants' ability to adapt to changes and manage situations encountered in their daily lives. Participants described experiences in which changes or new circumstances initially caused discomfort, uncertainty, or emotional distress. However, they gradually learned to adjust to these situations and manage their daily activities. Participants reported developing different ways

of responding to changes and dealing with situations that were initially difficult for them. Their experiences reflected an increasing ability to manage personal responsibilities and adapt to their surrounding environment.

Emotional regulation was also identified as a central theme in participants' experiences. Participants described various ways of managing emotional responses when facing stress, disappointment, conflict, and other difficult situations. Strategies included calming themselves, reflecting on their experiences, talking with trusted individuals, seeking emotional support, and attempting to understand the meaning of difficult experiences. Participants reported that these strategies helped them reduce emotional distress and regain a sense of emotional stability. Over time, they became more aware of their emotional responses and more capable of managing their reactions to challenging circumstances. Overall, the participants' experiences demonstrated that emotional well-being involved multiple interconnected aspects of psychological functioning. Participants described a process that began with experiences of emotional difficulty and gradually involved greater self-acceptance, more positive self-evaluation, gratitude, supportive social relationships, autonomy, future orientation, adaptation to the environment, and improved emotional regulation. These experiences illustrate how participants perceived and experienced changes in their emotional well-being throughout their everyday lives.

Discussions

The findings indicate that students' emotional well-being is a complex, dynamic psychological process that develops gradually through life experiences, self-reflection, social support, and the ability to adapt to various challenges. Based on the phenomenological analysis, emotional well-being is understood not merely as the absence of emotional distress, but more broadly as students' ability to understand, accept, manage, and make meaning of their emotional experiences in adaptive ways. These findings demonstrate that the development of students' emotional well-being is formed through multidimensional interactions between internal and external factors that influence one another. Self-acceptance emerged as the primary foundation in the development of students' emotional well-being. The findings showed that all participants initially experienced emotional distress when they became aware of their personal shortcomings, including feelings of disappointment, low self-confidence, confusion, and a tendency to blame themselves. This condition indicates that awareness of personal limitations often gives rise to emotional distress during adolescence. However, through self-reflection, appreciation of personal efforts, and self-compassion, students gradually developed healthier self-acceptance. This process is important because self-acceptance enables individuals to build a more stable and realistic psychological identity, thereby reducing prolonged emotional distress.

Furthermore, positive self-evaluation developed as a result of a more mature process of self-acceptance. Students became able to appreciate their efforts, forgive their mistakes, and develop a sense of pride in their personal achievements. These findings suggest that emotional well-being is not only associated with the reduction of negative emotions but also with the ability to develop healthy self-evaluation. During adolescence, this ability is particularly important because it contributes to the development of a positive self-concept, increased self-confidence, and stronger psychological resilience. Gratitude and life satisfaction also emerged as important components of students' emotional well-being. The findings revealed that students who were able to appreciate their lives, families, educational opportunities, and life experiences tended to demonstrate better emotional stability. Gratitude functions as a positive meaning-making mechanism that helps individuals perceive life challenges more constructively. Consequently, students do not focus solely on the difficulties they experience but are also able to recognize the positive value of these experiences as part of their psychological growth.

Positive social relationships emerged as an external factor that strongly influences students' emotional well-being. Support from family, peers, and the social environment provides a sense of security, acceptance, and emotional validation that helps students cope with life pressures. Healthy interpersonal relationships enable students to share experiences, obtain psychological support, and develop self-confidence. Conversely, a lack of social support may increase emotional vulnerability and worsen students' psychological conditions. Therefore, social relationships function as a protective factor in maintaining emotional well-being. In addition, autonomy and the ability to make independent decisions also play an important role in emotional well-being. Students who are able to maintain their opinions, make choices based on their personal values, and take responsibility for their decisions demonstrate greater psychological independence. This ability is particularly important because adolescents frequently encounter social pressure from their peer groups. Autonomy enables students to maintain their personal identity and reduce psychological distress resulting from social conformity.

Purpose in life and the ability to find meaning in life also serve as important sources of motivation for students in facing various challenges. The findings showed that students who possess aspirations, hope for the future, and clear life goals tend to be more resilient to emotional distress. A sense of purpose provides psychological direction that enables individuals to perceive difficulties as part of the journey toward a better future. Thus, meaning in life functions as an internal strength that supports emotional well-being.

Environmental mastery and the ability to adapt to change also constitute important aspects of students' emotional well-being. The ability to manage daily activities, cope with change, and adjust to new situations indicates that students are able to develop psychological control over their lives. Individuals with strong adaptive abilities tend to be more emotionally stable and better able to cope with stress in constructive ways. Emotion regulation represents the core component of the entire process of students' emotional well-being. The ability to calm oneself, manage stress, cope with failure, and recover from adversity demonstrates the development of adaptive coping strategies. Emotion regulation enables students to transform negative experiences into psychological learning that supports personal growth. Therefore, emotion regulation plays a major role in fostering adolescents' resilience and psychological stability.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that students' emotional well-being is a multidimensional process of psychological development, shaped through self-acceptance, positive self-evaluation, gratitude, positive social relationships, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and emotion regulation. Through a phenomenological approach, this study demonstrates that emotional well-being is not merely a state of positive emotion but rather a profound psychological journey from emotional distress toward more mature, adaptive, and meaningful personal growth. These findings provide important implications for the development of more comprehensive guidance and counseling services to support students' psychological well-being as a whole.

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