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REPORT

The relation between social acceptance and school well-being in early childhood

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relation between social acceptance and school well-being in early childhood. Additionally, it was explored whether this relation depended on gender and age. In total, $N = 311$ children (aged 4–7) participated. Social acceptance was assessed with a peer nomination method and school wellbeing was measured with a parent questionnaire. Outcomes of hierarchical multiple regression analysis demonstrated a positive relation between social acceptance and school wellbeing. Regarding the role of gender and age, outcomes indicated that social acceptance was related to school wellbeing only for girls (not boys) and only for younger children (not older children). Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

early childhood education, gender differences, school wellbeing, social acceptance

1 | INTRODUCTION

Most people want children to be happy, feel good and have a high quality of life (Spratt, 2016). In other words, they care about children's well-being (Layouts et al., 2012). Although there is no uniform definition of well-being (Diener, 2009; Kennedy-Behr et al., 2015; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Soutter, 2011), the concept usually refers to personal happiness and life satisfaction (Holder & Klassen, 2010; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Slee & Skrzypiec, 2016). Today, children are challenged with an increasingly complex world, which raises the question of how to support children's well-being.

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The primary intent of the present study was to investigate the relation between social acceptance and school well-being in early childhood. Besides, it was investigated whether gender and age moderate this relation.

The concept of school well-being has many similarities with that of school liking (i.e., positive attitudes towards school; Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Ladd et al., 2000) and refers to well-being in one specific domain of children's life, namely school (Huebner & Gilman, 2006; Løhre et al., 2014). School is an important context for young children and has a profound effect on their learning and development (Løhre et al., 2014; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Weyns et al., 2021). It is therefore especially interesting to investigate the correlates of children's well-being in school (Løhre et al., 2014).

In examining school well-being, the present study specifically focused on early childhood. Early childhood is the period during which most children start formal schooling (McIntyre et al., 2007). When children start formal schooling, they are faced with new challenges, such as adhering to academic standards, gaining acceptance from peers and building a positive relationship with teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 2000). The challenges with which children are faced during this transition are likely to affect children's well-being in school (McIntyre et al., 2007). This has motivated research into the (school) well-being of young children (Ladd et al., 2000).

Findings of these studies stress the importance of early school well-being for later outcomes. Research in kindergarten, for example, demonstrated that the degree to which children like school contributes to their academic achievement (Ladd et al., 2000). This outcome is in line with research among 7- to 12-year-old children, showing that school liking is positively correlated with children's school performance (Valiente et al., 2007). The link between school liking and academic achievement can be explained by the finding that children who enjoy school are more likely to actively engage in classroom activities, which in turn contributes to their academic achievement (also see Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 2000; Ladd & Dinella, 2009).

As outcomes of prior studies suggest that children's early attitudes towards school determine their subsequent development (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014), it is important to identify factors that are related to children's well-being in school. In doing so, the current study focused on social acceptance, which refers to the extent to which a child is liked by peers (Oberle et al., 2010; Rabiner et al., 2016). When a child is socially accepted, he or she is included within the peer group (DeWall & Bushman, 2011; Leary, 2010). The level of children's social acceptance is determined by their social position within their peer group, which stabilizes during early childhood when children spend an increasing amount of time with peers (Deater-Deckard, 2001; Rubin et al., 2015; also see Van der Wilt et al., 2018a; Van der Wilt et al., 2018b). Because children who are accepted by peers have been found to engage in meaningful relationships and have a sense of belonging and worthiness (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Rieffe et al., 2005; Rubin et al., 2015; Weyns et al., 2021), social acceptance is likely to impact children's well-being in school (Slee & Skrzypiec, 2016).

In fact, there is some empirical evidence suggesting that social acceptance might indeed be related to school well-being. Specifically, toddlers' social competence (i.e., a proxy for social acceptance, Rabiner et al., 2016; Rose-Krasnor, 1997) has been found to be positively related to their well-being (Giske et al., 2018). In addition, research among 7-year-olds has demonstrated that children's position within their peer group is associated with school liking: Children who were more popular liked school better than children who were less popular (Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014). Finally, a study in fourth grade has indicated that a high connectedness to peers is associated with high life satisfaction (Guhn et al., 2016). Although these prior studies did not exactly focus on social acceptance and school well-being in early childhood, based on their outcomes, it might be reasonable to expect that the extent to which young children are accepted by their peers is positively related to their school well-being.

The potential relation between young children's social acceptance and school well-being can be explained from multiple developmental theories in which the importance of social interaction and peer relationships for children's development has been emphasized (Bandura, 1989; Bowlby, 1973; Piaget, 1932; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory considers human development as a socio-cultural process that is originated in social interactions with significant others. The learning opportunities that emerge in these interactions could in turn support children's well-being, especially in school (Giske et al., 2018).

Yet, the possible association between social acceptance and (school) well-being might be even more apparent in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Within this theory, three psychological needs are distinguished: (1) autonomy (need to make own choices, take initiative and endorse activities), (2) competence (need to experience mastery), and (3) relatedness (need to feel close and connected to others; Ryan & Deci, 2017). These three needs are considered universal (also see Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017), and one is expected to experience greater well-being when these needs are satisfied (Church et al., 2013; La Guardia et al., 2000; Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011; Véronneau et al., 2005). As social acceptance is closely related to the need of relatedness and thereby satisfies one of the three needs, the self-determination theory suggests that being accepted by peers is likely to contribute to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

There are however three gaps within the literature on well-being. First, research into well-being originally focused on adolescents and adults; there is still much less known about the well-being of young children (Baiocco et al., 2019; Løhre et al., 2014). This is problematic because the factors that are associated with well-being in adolescents and adults (e.g., job satisfaction) are likely to differ from those in children (Baiocco et al., 2019; Holder et al., 2009; Street, 2021). Second, the school context has largely been ignored in research on well-being (Anderson et al., 2022). As young children spend an increasing amount of time at school, it is important to understand the correlates of school well-being in order to identify potential support factors (Løhre et al., 2014). Third, studies into well-being were initially focused on identifying potential risk factors (Løhre et al., 2014). It has been argued, however, that examining support factors (e.g., social acceptance) is at least equally important (Antonovsky, 1979; also see Løhre et al., 2014). The present study aimed to fill these gaps by investigating the relation between social acceptance and school well-being in early childhood.

In doing so, the effect of gender on this relation was examined as well because several studies reported gender differences in the correlates of well-being (Løhre et al., 2014; Oberle et al., 2010). For example, it has been found that loneliness had a negative effect on school well-being 2 years later, but this was only the case for girls (Løhre et al., 2014). In addition, research among 7- to 14-year-olds indicated that loneliness and low social self-efficacy were more strongly related to poor happiness for girls than for boys (Baiocco et al., 2019). Although these studies focused on loneliness instead of social acceptance, loneliness might reflect a lack of affective bonding and acceptance (Baiocco et al., 2019; Løhre et al., 2014). Hence, these outcomes seem to suggest that social acceptance is stronger related to school well-being for girls than for boys. Besides gender, the effect of age on the relation between social acceptance and school well-being was included in the current study. Previous research has indicated that friendships are more important for older children than for younger children (Thoilliez, 2011). This is in line with research of Baiocco et al., which indicated that loneliness and low social self-efficacy were stronger related to happiness for older than for younger children. This outcome could be explained by the finding that younger children generally have a higher self-esteem than older children, which might buffer the negative effects of loneliness and low social self-efficacy on their happiness (Baiocco et al., 2019). As friendships (Thoilliez, 2011) and loneliness (Baiocco et al., 2019) are constructs that are closely related to social acceptance, these previous outcomes could indicate that the relation between social acceptance and school well-being is stronger for older than for younger children.

To summarize, the main objective of this study was to examine the relation between social acceptance and school well-being in early childhood. Additionally, the potential effects of gender and age on this relation were examined. The hypothesis was that social acceptance would be positively related to the school well-being of young children. Furthermore, this relation was expected to be stronger for girls than for boys and for older children than for younger children.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Sample

The present study was part of a larger project for which ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the author's university (details removed for blind review). Written informed consent was obtained from parents; only

children who received parental permission participated in the study. The sample consisted of $N = 311$ children from 17 early childhood classrooms from 8 Dutch primary schools. In the Netherlands, early childhood education is part of primary school that contains eight grades. The first two grades are usually mixed within the same early childhood classroom, consisting of children aged 4–6 years. Children's schools were situated in rural, urban or suburban neighbourhoods and the number of children in each class ranged from 12 to 29 ($M = 18.29$, $SD = 4.47$). Ages of children were between 3.9 and 7.0 years ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 0.66$) and there were somewhat less boys ($n = 138$, 44.4%) than girls. Children were born in the Netherlands (91.3%), Europe (1.3%), Asia (1.0%), Africa (0.6%), South America (0.6%) and North America (0.3%). For the majority of children (83.9%), Dutch was the main language spoken at home. Other home languages were English (1.3%), Arabic (1.0%), Aramaic (1.0%), Kurdish (0.7%) and other non-Western (5.5%) and Western (1.6%) languages. Parents' education level was low (no education, primary school, some high school; 7.4%), average (vocational education, high school; 45.7%) or high (higher education; 40.5%).

2.2 | Power analysis

An a priori power analysis using Gpower (Faul et al., 2007) indicated that a sample of 124 participants was needed to detect small effect sizes ($d = 0.2$) with a power of 0.90, with alpha at 0.05. This indicates that the sample of the current study was sufficiently large to ascertain small effects.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Social acceptance

Social acceptance was measured using a peer nomination procedure (Coie et al., 1982; also see Henricsson & Rydell, 2006; Rieffe et al., 2005). This procedure is frequently used in research into social relationships and requires participants to indicate who their friends are, with whom they like to work, and so forth. In the present study, children were first shown a picture of all classmates and were asked to name each one of them. Next, two questions were asked: (1) with whom do you like to play? (resulting in a positive nomination) and (2) with whom do you *not* like to play? (resulting in a negative nomination). In answering each question, children were asked to nominate at least one peer and no more than 10. They could nominate both same-sex and other-sex peers but were not supposed to nominate themselves. Test administration took approximately 5 min. The extent to which children were accepted by their classmates was measured by subtracting the number of received negative nominations from the number of received positive nominations. Differences in class sizes were controlled for by converting scores to z-scores within class. The reliability of the peer nomination procedure within the context of early childhood education has found to be strong (Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79, Wu et al., 2001).

2.3.2 | School well-being

Children's well-being in school was assessed by an adjusted version of the Leiden Inventory for the Child's Wellbeing in Day Care, a questionnaire used in day-care settings (De Schipper, Tavecchio, et al., 2004; also see De Schipper, Van IJzendoorn, & Tavecchio, 2004). The aim of this questionnaire is to measure the extent to which children feel at ease with their caregivers and peers and to which they are comfortable in the physical setting of the day-care centre (De Schipper, Van IJzendoorn, & Tavecchio, 2004). The Leiden Inventory for the Child's Wellbeing in Day Care consists of 12 statements and requires parents to indicate how often the situation to which the statement refers applies to their child. For the purpose of the present study, each item was rephrased so that it referred to the school setting

instead of the day-care setting. One statement of the original questionnaire is for example: 'My child feels at ease with his or her day-care practitioners'. This statement was rephrased as: 'My child feels at ease with his or her teachers'. Parents rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 ('this is never the case') to 6 ('this is always the case'). For each child, the level of school well-being was obtained by calculating the mean score on the 12 items (after recoding). Total scores could consequently range from 1 to 6 and high scores indicated a high level of school well-being.

In the present study, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the dimensionality of the adapted version of the Leiden Inventory for the Child's Wellbeing in Day Care. Outcomes indicated a one factor solution fitted the data best and fit indices indicated a good fit (TLI = 0.94; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04). The component loadings ranged from 0.30 to 0.74, with an average of 0.53. This confirms previous research in day-care settings in which a one factor solution was found as well and average component loading was 0.55 (ranging from 0.33 to 0.69; De Schipper, Van IJzendoorn, & Tavecchio, 2004). In addition, the reliability of the original scale has been found to be strong in previous research (Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, De Schipper, Tavecchio, et al., 2004). In the present study, the reliability of the adjusted scale was also satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha of 0.74).

2.4 | Procedure

The peer nomination procedure was administered individually in a quiet room in children's own school. This procedure was administered by test assistants who were trained in administering this test and were experienced in interacting with young children. Children's gender, age and school well-being were indicated by parent questionnaires.

2.5 | Data analysis

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS 27). On average, 2.3% of the scores on social acceptance and 6.2% of the scores on school well-being were missing. Missing data on social acceptance was due to the absence of children on the day of administration (e.g., because of illness) and therefore beyond control. Analyses were performed using pairwise deletion.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Descriptive analyses

The means, standard deviations and outcomes of independent samples *t*-tests (assessing gender differences) are reported in Table 1. Outcomes indicated gender differences in the standardized and unstandardized scores on social acceptance: On average, girls were better accepted by their classmates than boys.

The relations between social acceptance, school well-being and age were assessed by calculating Pearson's correlations (*r*; Table 2). Outcomes indicated that there was a small positive relation between social acceptance and school well-being, with high levels of social acceptance associated with high levels of well-being in school. In addition, there was a small positive relation between social acceptance and age: older children were better accepted than their younger peers.

3.2 | Hierarchical multiple regression analyses

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis using the enter method was performed to assess how much of the variance in school well-being could be explained by social acceptance (Table 3). Gender and age were entered at stage

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for social acceptance and well-being in school ($N = 311$).

	Mean (SD)			Gender differences (t)
	Total sample	Boys	Girls	
Social acceptance (unstandardized)	0.95 (3.38)	0.17 (3.55)	1.60 (3.09)	3.75***
Social acceptance (standardized)	0.00 (1.46)	-0.34 (1.54)	0.28 (1.33)	3.78***
School well-being	4.96 (0.46)	4.94 (0.49)	4.98 (0.43)	0.53

Note: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

TABLE 2 Intercorrelations between social acceptance, school well-being and age ($N = 311$).

	Social acceptance	School well-being	Age
Social acceptance	-		
Well-being	0.19**	-	
Age	0.20**	0.12	-

Note: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

TABLE 3 Hierarchical regression analysis for the predictors of well-being in school ($N = 311$).

	Terms	B	SE B	95% CI	β	R^2	ΔR^2
1	Constant	4.76	0.25	4.26 to 5.26		0.02	
	Gender	-0.01	0.06	-0.12 to 0.10	-0.01		
	Age	0.10	0.04	0.01 to 0.18	0.14*		
2	Constant	4.84	0.25	4.34 to 5.34		0.05	0.03*
	Gender	0.01	0.06	-0.10 to 0.13	0.02		
	Age	0.07	0.05	-0.02 to 0.15	0.10		
	Social acceptance	0.05	0.02	0.01 to 0.09	0.17*		
3	Constant	4.69	0.25	4.20 to 5.18		0.10	0.05**
	Gender	0.04	0.06	-0.07 to 0.15	0.05		
	Age	0.09	0.04	0.00 to 0.18	0.13*		
	Social acceptance	0.18	0.06	0.07 to 0.29	0.63**		
	Gender ^a * social acceptance	-0.08	0.03	-0.15 to -0.01	-0.46*		
	Age * social acceptance	-0.07	0.03	-0.13 to -0.01	-0.16*		

Note: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

^a1 = girl 2 = boy.

1 of the analysis to statistically control for their potential effects. At stage 2, social acceptance was added to the model. Finally, the interaction terms of gender with social acceptance and of age with social acceptance were added at Stage 3.

As depicted in Table 3, at the first stage, gender and age did not contribute significantly to the regression model, $F(2) = 2.34$, $p = 0.099$, explaining 2.0% of the variance in well-being in school. Including social acceptance at stage 2 resulted in an additional 2.8% of explained variance in well-being and this change in R^2 was large and significant, $F(3) = 6.79$, $p = 0.010$. Including the interactions between gender and social acceptance

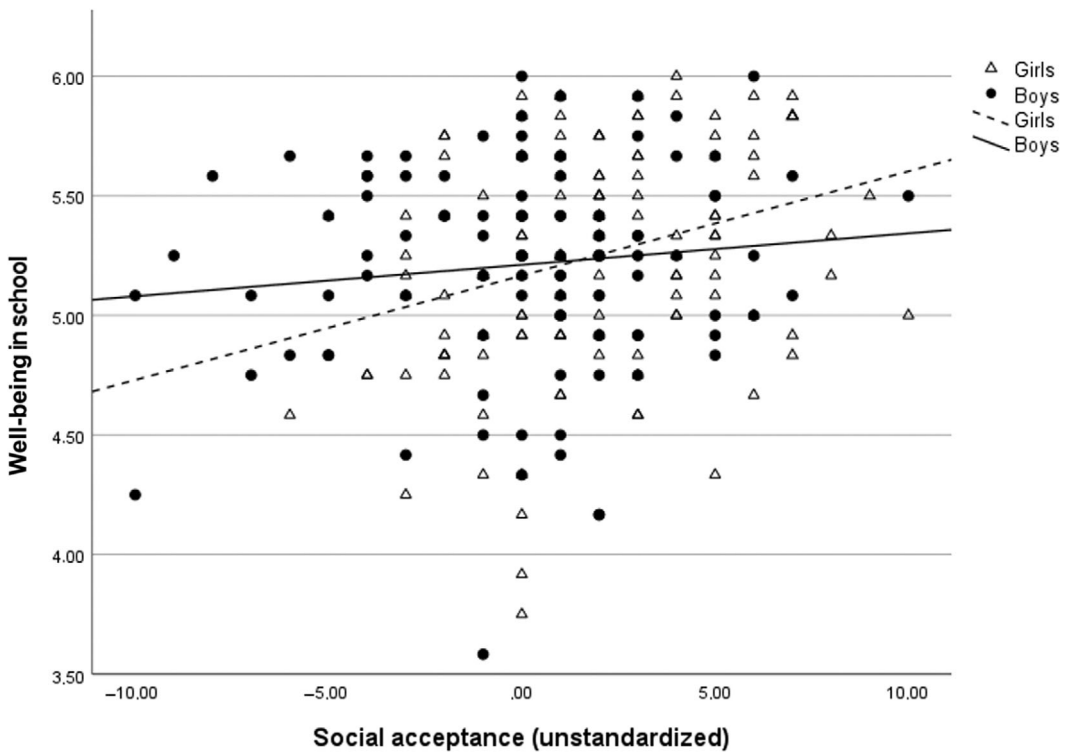


FIGURE 1 Scatterplot of the relation between social acceptance and school well-being for boys and girls separately.

and between age and social acceptance in the third stage resulted in an additional 4.9% of explained variance and this change in R^2 was also significant, $F(5) = 6.33$, $p = 0.002$. The model containing three stages explained the data best. Together, the five terms of this model explained 9.7% of the variance in school well-being. The standardized coefficients of this three-stage model indicated that, compared to gender, age and the interactions between gender and social acceptance and between age and social acceptance, social acceptance explained the largest percentage of variance.

As a final step, post hoc analyses were performed to gain more insight into the interaction effect of gender and social acceptance and of age and social acceptance on school well-being. As can be seen in Figure 1, the relation between social acceptance and school well-being was stronger for girls ($y = 5.17 + 0.04 \cdot x$) than for boys ($y = 5.21 + 0.01 \cdot x$). This is in line with outcomes of post hoc correlation analyses, indicating a significant, positive correlation between the two variables for girls ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and a non-significant correlation for boys ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.448$).

Regarding age, children were divided in two groups: one group of children with ages below the median ($Mdn = 5.09$) and one group of children with ages above the median. Figure 2 indicates that the relation between social acceptance and school well-being was stronger for younger children ($y = 5.15 + 0.04 \cdot x$) than for older children ($y = 5.26 + 0.02 \cdot x$). This coincides with findings of post hoc correlation analyses, which indicated that social acceptance was significantly and positively correlated with school well-being for younger children ($r = 0.25$, $p = 0.007$), but this relation was not significant for older children ($r = 0.08$, $p = 0.355$).

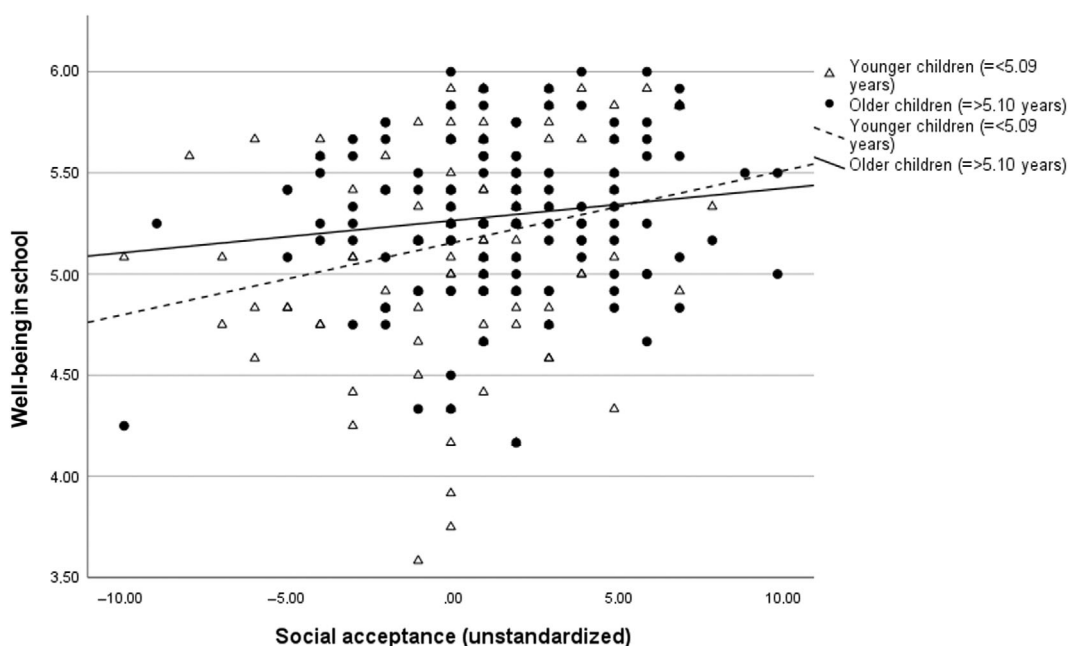


FIGURE 2 Scatterplot of the relation between social acceptance and school well-being for younger and older children separately.

4 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relation between social acceptance and school well-being in early childhood. Additionally, it was explored whether this relation depended on gender and age. Outcomes indicated that social acceptance was positively related to school well-being: children who were better accepted by their peers showed higher levels of well-being in school. Moreover, this relation was only significant for girls (not boys) and younger children (not older children).

The fact that, within the present study, social acceptance was found to be positively related to school well-being is in line with previous research in which peer relationships and other constructs related to social acceptance (e.g., social competence and loneliness) appeared to be associated with well-being (Demir & Davidson, 2013; Giske et al., 2018). Together, the outcomes of the present study and those of previous research indicate that social acceptance is one of the correlates of children's well-being (Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Giske et al., 2018; Guhn et al., 2016). The current study's findings add to previous research by showing that being accepted by peers is related to children's *school* well-being in early childhood already.

The finding that the extent to which children are accepted by their peers is positively related to their level of school well-being raises the question of what mechanism underlies this relation. The principle of ingroup support might be useful in answering this question. That is, the principle of ingroup support indicates that one is inclined to support other members of the group of which one is part (Geraci, 2020; Jin & Baillargeon, 2017). Previous research has indicated that this principle is already observed among toddlers (Geraci, 2020; Jin & Baillargeon, 2017). The principle of ingroup support indicates that children who are included in their peer group (i.e., who are socially accepted) are supported by other members of their group (Geraci, 2020). As social support has been found to contribute to well-being (Siedlecki et al., 2014), social support might mediate the relation between social acceptance and school well-being and might thereby be an underlying mechanism.

There are several theories that provide further explanation for the relation between social acceptance and school well-being. That is, according to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978), social interactions (for which social acceptance is likely to be a prerequisite; Rubin et al., 2015) support children's learning and development. Being able to learn together with peers and having the opportunity to develop oneself is in turn likely to contribute to child well-being (Clarke, 2020; Miller et al., 2013). Hence, the fact that social acceptance is found to be related to school well-being could be explained by the learning opportunities that derive from it. Besides socio-cultural theory, the relation between social acceptance and school well-being can also be understood from the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Specifically, being accepted by peers is likely to satisfy the need of relatedness, which is one of the three basic needs distinguished within the self-determination theory. As the satisfaction of (one of) these needs is expected to positively affect one's well-being (Church et al., 2013; La Guardia et al., 2000; Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011; Véronneau et al., 2005), the fact that social acceptance seems to satisfy the need of relatedness might explain why social acceptance is related to school well-being.

Besides a relation between social acceptance and school well-being, the present study's findings indicated that gender moderates this relation. The outcome that the two main variables were related to one another only for girls seems consistent with the study of Løhre et al. (2014) in which loneliness (indicating a lack of social acceptance; Coplan et al., 2007) was a predictor of school well-being for girls but not for boys. In addition, the outcome regarding gender differences in the relation between social acceptance and school well-being also might be in line with the finding of previous research in which friendship quality (strongly associated with social acceptance; Peters et al., 2011) affected well-being especially for girls (Cuadros & Berger, 2016).

Gendered parenting (i.e., parents' messages about how boys and girls should behave; Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018; Morawska, 2020) could provide an explanation for the finding that social acceptance was related to school well-being only for girls. That is, gendered parenting is known to cause gendered preferences of children (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Halim et al., 2017). Previous research into the gendered preferences of children has demonstrated that girls tend to place more importance on peer relationships than boys (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). That is why their level of school well-being might decrease when they are unsatisfied with their relationships (e.g., because they are not accepted; Baiocco et al., 2019; Fehr, 1996). Conversely, as boys are expected to respond to notions of masculinity that reinforce independency (Way, 2004), their well-being might be less dependent on the extent to which they are accepted by peers.

Besides gender, outcomes of the current study showed that age also moderates the relation between social acceptance and school well-being. Specifically, outcomes indicated that this relation only held for younger children and not for older children. This finding does not seem to be in line with findings of previous research that suggested the opposite. For example, in the study of Baiocco et al. (2019), loneliness was found to be stronger related to happiness for older than for younger children. As loneliness usually reflects a lack of social acceptance (Baiocco et al., 2019; Løhre et al., 2014) and happiness is closely related to well-being, these findings seem to suggest that the relation between social acceptance and school well-being is stronger for older children than for younger children. Then how come, in the present study, this relation only held for younger children and not for older children? First, it is important to note that Baiocco et al. focused on children aged 7–14, whereas the present study was conducted within the context of early childhood classrooms, containing children between the ages of 4 and 6 years. Second, the study of Baiocco et al. assessed children's happiness with their life in general. In contrast, the current study focused specifically on children's well-being in school. These differences in samples and study focus between the current study and Baiocco et al.'s study could explain the differences in findings. In fact (a lack of) social acceptance might be more strongly related to well-being or happiness for older children in middle to late childhood (Baiocco et al.), whereas social acceptance might be related to school well-being only for younger children in early childhood (as demonstrated by the present study).

The fact that most children start formal schooling during early childhood might explain this latter finding. As previously described, in the Netherlands, children enter early childhood education when they are 4 years old and are usually placed in a mixed-age group of 4- to 6-year-olds. This transition to early childhood education is known to be

a potential stressful event for children (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 2000). Previous research has demonstrated that such transitions are easier if one experiences social support from others (e.g., from peers; Eckert et al., 2008; Stormont et al., 2005; Szydlo & Farnsworth, 2023). As social support is often provided to children who are included by the peer group (i.e., who are socially accepted), this might explain why being accepted by peers is related to the school well-being of young children. In contrast, as older children are often already acquainted with the challenges that accompany the transition to formal schooling, being accepted by peers might play less of a role in their school well-being.

Although this study yielded interesting outcomes, it also had several limitations. First, school well-being was measured with a parent questionnaire, but how well can parents estimate their child's well-being in school? On the other hand, in early childhood education, there is frequent contact between parents and school, so parents tend to be aware of what happens at school (Murray et al., 2015; Powell et al., 2012). Moreover, parent questionnaires are commonly used in research with young children (De Schipper, Tavecchio, et al., 2004) and there is substantial agreement between children's self-report and parents' ratings of child well-being (Berman et al., 2016). Still, future research should use multiple informants and both subjective and objective measures focusing on multiple domains of well-being (Baiocco et al., 2019; Kerr et al., 2007).

Second, this study was cross-sectional and has limitations regarding causality. In fact, although it was assumed that social acceptance contributes to school well-being, it has been suggested that the relation between acceptance and well-being is bidirectional, with both variables impacting one another (Dougherty, 2006; Oberle et al., 2010). Future research with a longitudinal and experimental design should clarify the direction of the studied relation (Giske et al., 2018). Additionally, such research should examine whether correlates of well-being differ across ages (Baiocco et al., 2019).

Third, there are multiple correlates of well-being. It has been indicated that, for example, language disorder is associated with well-being in preschool (Levickis et al., 2018). Moreover, Cuadros and Berger (2016) pointed to the significance of friendship quality for well-being. Future research should include multiple correlates of school well-being to investigate the unique contribution of each correlate and their potential interrelatedness (Baiocco et al., 2019). Furthermore, mediating mechanisms explaining the relation between social acceptance and school well-being should be examined (Clarke, 2020).

If future research demonstrates that social acceptance predicts well-being in early childhood education, teachers should pay explicit attention to improving their pupils' level of acceptance. For example, teachers could provide children with opportunities to exhibit prosocial behaviour and develop sociability, which may help them in learning how to gain acceptance from peers. The present study indicates that well-being promotion in schools should take both gender differences and age differences into account (Baiocco et al., 2019).

To conclude, this study showed that social acceptance is positively related to well-being in early childhood education. This relation only held for girls and not for boys and for younger and not for older children. Future research should adopt a longitudinal and experimental design to investigate the direction of the relation between social acceptance and school well-being. This could result in important implications for early childhood education practices.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Femke van der Wilt: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available upon request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Study was part of a larger research project for which ethical approval was obtained from the Permanent Committee for Science and Ethics of the Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam [file number: VCWE-2018-146].

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