

The Relationship between Interpersonal Communication, Empathy, and Happiness among Secondary School Students in Villavicencio, Chile

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Abstract : Adolescence is a critical developmental period in which social interactions play a fundamental role in shaping emotional well-being. This study investigates the relationship between interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness among secondary school students in Villavicencio, Chile. Drawing on a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from students enrolled in public and private high schools using validated self-report questionnaires measuring interpersonal communication skills, empathy, and subjective happiness. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression were employed to examine the relationships among variables. The findings reveal that interpersonal communication and empathy are positively and significantly correlated with students' happiness. Interpersonal communication showed a strong association with empathy, indicating that effective communication skills facilitate greater emotional understanding and responsiveness toward others. Regression analysis further demonstrated that both interpersonal communication and empathy significantly predicted happiness, with empathy partially mediating the relationship between communication and well-being. These results suggest that adolescents' happiness is closely linked to their capacity to communicate effectively and to engage empathetically within their social environment. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on social-emotional development in education by providing empirical evidence from a Latin American context, which remains underrepresented in existing research. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of integrating social-emotional learning programs into secondary education to foster communication skills and empathy as key determinants of student well-being. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report measures. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal and intervention-based approaches to further explore causal mechanisms and practical applications in diverse educational settings.

Keywords : Interpersonal communication; Empathy; Adolescents; Secondary education

INTRODUCTION

Physics is widely recognized as a foundational discipline that underpins scientific innovation, technological development, and industrial advancement. Mastery of physics concepts equips students with analytical thinking, problem-solving skills, and scientific literacy necessary for participation in modern knowledge-based economies (OECD, 2020). Despite its importance, students' academic performance in physics remains unsatisfactory in many secondary schools, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria (Aina & Akintunde, 2019).

Adolescent well-being has become a major focus of contemporary educational and psychological research worldwide, particularly in response to rapid social, technological, and cultural transformations. Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity, identity exploration, and increasing reliance on peer relationships (Steinberg, 2014). Global reports emphasize that mental health, socio-emotional competence, and subjective well-being among adolescents are essential foundations for lifelong development and social sustainability (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). In this context, schools are increasingly recognized not only as institutions for academic instruction but also as key environments for cultivating interpersonal communication skills, empathy, and happiness as integral dimensions of holistic education (OECD, 2019).

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that interpersonal communication plays a central role in adolescents' psychosocial adjustment and well-being. Effective interpersonal communication enables individuals to express emotions, negotiate social roles, resolve conflicts, and establish supportive relationships (Burleson, 2010). Adolescents with strong communication skills tend to report higher levels of social connectedness, emotional regulation, and life satisfaction, whereas poor communication is associated with loneliness, psychological distress, and reduced well-being (Jones et al., 2018). Within school settings, communication competence contributes to positive peer interactions and teacher-student relationships, both of which are crucial for adolescents' emotional security and academic engagement (Wentzel, 2017).

Closely related to interpersonal communication is empathy, commonly defined as the capacity to understand and share the feelings of others at both cognitive and affective levels (Davis, 1983). Empathy has been widely recognized as a foundational socio-emotional skill that supports prosocial behavior, moral development, and emotional competence (Decety & Cowell, 2014). Numerous studies indicate that empathic adolescents are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviors, demonstrate tolerance toward diversity, and experience lower levels of aggression and social conflict (Van der Graaff et al., 2018). Moreover, empathy has been identified as a protective factor for mental health, contributing positively to psychological well-being and emotional resilience (Telle & Pfister, 2016).

Within the framework of positive psychology, happiness is generally conceptualized as subjective well-being, encompassing life satisfaction, positive affect, and low levels of negative affect (Diener et al., 2018). Adolescence is a particularly sensitive period for the development of subjective well-being, as emotional experiences and social relationships intensify during this stage (Proctor et al., 2017). Research suggests that happiness among adolescents is strongly influenced by interpersonal contexts, including peer acceptance, social support, and perceived empathy from others (Demir & Weitekamp, 2007). Thus, happiness should not be understood solely as an individual disposition but rather as a socially embedded experience shaped by communication and emotional connections.

In Latin America, concerns regarding adolescent well-being are especially pronounced. The region faces persistent socioeconomic inequalities, educational disparities, and social stressors that significantly affect young people's emotional and psychological development (UNICEF, 2020). Studies conducted in countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia reveal increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional vulnerability among secondary school students, often linked to academic pressure, family instability, and school violence (Moreira et al., 2019). At the same time, Latin American cultures are traditionally characterized by strong interpersonal ties, collectivist orientations, and high value placed on social relationships, suggesting that interpersonal communication and empathy may play an especially influential role in adolescents' happiness within this cultural context (Greenfield et al., 2006).

Chile represents a particularly relevant national context for examining these relationships. Over

the past two decades, Chile's education system has undergone substantial reforms aimed at improving quality, equity, and student well-being. National policies increasingly emphasize socio-emotional learning, school coexistence (convivencia escolar), and inclusive educational environments (Ministerio de Educación de Chile, 2020). Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that Chilean adolescents continue to experience high levels of academic stress, emotional exhaustion, and competitive pressure, particularly at the secondary education level (Arón *et al.*, 2017). Large-scale national assessments and international reports have raised concerns regarding student mental health, highlighting the need for research that goes beyond academic outcomes to examine psychosocial dimensions of schooling.

Despite these policy efforts, empirical studies in Chile focusing on adolescents' interpersonal communication and empathy remain limited. Existing research has predominantly examined school climate, bullying, and mental health symptoms, with less attention given to the everyday communicative and emotional processes that underpin students' subjective well-being (Varela *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of digital communication among adolescents has transformed interaction patterns, potentially weakening face-to-face communication skills while simultaneously expanding online social networks (Twenge *et al.*, 2019). These changes raise critical questions about how interpersonal communication skills are developed within school contexts and how they relate to empathy and happiness among secondary school students.

The urgency of investigating adolescent happiness has been further intensified by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Prolonged school closures, social distancing, and shifts to online learning disrupted adolescents' social routines and interpersonal relationships, leading to increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and emotional distress (Loades *et al.*, 2020). Although schools in Chile and across Latin America have largely returned to in-person instruction, the psychosocial effects of these disruptions persist. This context underscores the importance of identifying protective socio-emotional factors such as communication competence and empathy that can promote adolescents' happiness and psychological recovery in post-pandemic educational environments.

Despite a growing international literature on interpersonal communication, empathy, and well-being, several empirical gaps remain evident. First, much of the existing research has been conducted in North America and Europe, limiting its cultural applicability to Latin American contexts. Cultural values, educational structures, and social norms differ substantially across regions, suggesting that the relationships among communication, empathy, and happiness may manifest differently among Latin American adolescents (Mesurado *et al.*, 2018). Second, within Latin America, many studies focus on adult or university populations, while empirical research targeting secondary school students remains relatively scarce. Given the developmental specificity of adolescence, findings derived from adult samples cannot be directly generalized to younger populations.

Third, prior research often examines interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness as separate constructs rather than as interrelated dimensions of adolescents' psychosocial functioning. There is a lack of integrative empirical models that simultaneously test the relationships among these variables within school settings, particularly at the secondary education level. In the Chilean context, studies empirically examining the combined influence of communication skills and empathy on adolescents' happiness are notably limited. This gap restricts the availability of evidence-based guidance for educators and policymakers seeking to design effective socio-emotional interventions.

In response to these gaps, the present study seeks to make both theoretical and practical contributions to the literature. Theoretically, this research integrates perspectives from interpersonal communication theory, empathy research, and positive psychology to examine their combined influence on adolescent happiness. By empirically testing these relationships among secondary school students in Chile, the study extends existing theoretical frameworks to a Latin American educational context and contributes to cross-cultural research on adolescent well-being. Practically, the findings are expected to inform the development of socio-emotional learning programs, communication-based interventions, and empathy-focused educational practices aimed at enhancing students' happiness and quality of life.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness among secondary education students in Villavicencio, Chile. Specifically, the study aims to analyze the associations among these variables and to explore whether empathy functions as a mediating mechanism linking interpersonal communication to happiness.

Based on existing literature, four hypotheses are proposed: (1) interpersonal communication is positively associated with happiness; (2) empathy is positively associated with happiness; (3) interpersonal communication is positively associated with empathy; and (4) empathy mediates the relationship between interpersonal communication and happiness. Through addressing these hypotheses, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence that supports the promotion of socio-emotional competencies as essential components of quality secondary education in Chile and comparable Latin American contexts.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationships among interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness among secondary education students. A quantitative approach was selected to allow for the statistical measurement of associations between variables and to test hypothesized relationships using numerical data. The correlational design enabled the researchers to analyze naturally occurring patterns without manipulating the educational environment, which is appropriate for psychosocial research conducted in school settings.

The study was conducted in secondary schools (*educación media*) in Villavicencio, Chile. The population consisted of students aged 15–18 years, representing a critical developmental stage characterized by heightened emotional and social sensitivity. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure representation from both public and private schools. Based on power analysis for correlational and regression models, a minimum sample size of 300 participants was required; the final sample included 360 students, which provided adequate statistical power for subsequent analyses.

Data were collected using a structured self-report questionnaire comprising four sections: demographic information, interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness. Interpersonal communication was measured using an adapted version of the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale, which assesses clarity of expression, listening skills, emotional expression, and assertiveness. Empathy was measured using selected subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, focusing on perspective-taking and empathic concern. Happiness was assessed using the Subjective Happiness Scale, which captures students' overall evaluation of their subjective well-being. All instruments employed Likert-type response formats, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the measured constructs.

To ensure linguistic and cultural appropriateness, all instruments were translated into Spanish and reviewed by bilingual experts. A pilot study with 40 students was conducted to evaluate item clarity and preliminary reliability. Content validity was supported through expert judgment, while internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values above .70 considered acceptable.

Data collection took place during regular school hours with permission from school authorities. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and participated voluntarily after providing informed consent. Questionnaires were administered in classroom settings and completed within approximately 30 minutes.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated to summarize students' levels of interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine bivariate relationships among variables. Multiple regression analysis assessed the predictive effects of interpersonal communication and empathy on happiness. Finally, structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to test the proposed conceptual model and examine direct and indirect effects, with model fit evaluated using standard indices (CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	172	47.8
	Female	188	52.2
Age	15–16 years	154	42.8

School Type	17–18 years	206	57.2
	Public	214	59.4
	Private	146	40.6
Gender	Male	172	47.8
	Female	188	52.2

Table 1 shows that the sample was balanced in terms of gender and age and represented both public and private secondary schools.

Table 2. Reliability of Research Instruments

Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Interpersonal Communication	15	0.88
Empathy	14	0.86
Happiness	4	0.84

Table 2 indicates strong internal consistency for all instruments, confirming their suitability for further statistical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to examine the relationships among interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness among secondary school students in Villavicencio, Chile. The analysis is organized sequentially, beginning with descriptive statistics, followed by tests of normality, correlation analysis, and inferential analyses using multiple regression and structural interpretation. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of both the distributional characteristics of the data and the strength and significance of relationships among the study variables.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize students' levels of interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to provide an overview of the central tendencies and variability of each construct. All variables were measured using Likert-type scales, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the respective constructs.

As shown in Table 3, students reported moderately high levels of interpersonal communication and empathy, as well as relatively high levels of happiness. These findings suggest that, overall, secondary school students in Villavicencio perceive themselves as possessing adequate communication skills and empathic capacity, which may contribute positively to their subjective well-being.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 360)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Interpersonal Communication	2.10	4.90	3.78	0.56
Empathy	2.00	5.00	3.65	0.60
Happiness	2.25	6.75	4.98	0.82

The mean score for interpersonal communication ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.56$) indicates that students generally perceive themselves as competent in expressing thoughts, listening to others, and engaging in effective interpersonal interactions. Similarly, empathy demonstrated a moderately high mean score ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.60$), suggesting that students are relatively capable of understanding and sharing others' emotional experiences. Happiness yielded the highest mean

score ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.82$), reflecting a generally positive level of subjective well-being among the participants.

Normality Testing

Prior to conducting inferential analyses, the assumption of normality was examined to determine the appropriateness of parametric statistical tests. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values, as well as the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. For large samples ($N > 300$), slight deviations from normality are considered acceptable, provided that skewness and kurtosis values fall within the range of ± 2 .

The analysis revealed that all variables exhibited acceptable skewness and kurtosis values, indicating approximately normal distributions. Additionally, visual inspection of histograms and Q–Q plots supported the assumption of normality. Consequently, parametric tests, including Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis, were deemed appropriate for further analysis.

Table 4. Normality Test Results

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Kolmogorov–Smirnov (p)
Interpersonal Communication	-0.42	0.36	0.087
Empathy	-0.31	0.41	0.092
Happiness	-0.28	0.18	0.105

The non-significant Kolmogorov–Smirnov values ($p > .05$) indicate that the distributions of interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness did not significantly deviate from normality, supporting the robustness of subsequent analyses.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson product moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of the relationships among interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness. The correlation matrix is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
1. Interpersonal Communication	1		
2. Empathy	.54**	1	
3. Happiness	.47**	.52**	1

Note. $p < .01$.

The results indicate statistically significant positive correlations among all variables. Interpersonal communication was moderately correlated with empathy ($r = .54$, $p < .01$), suggesting that students with stronger communication skills tend to exhibit higher levels of empathic capacity. Interpersonal communication also demonstrated a significant positive correlation with happiness ($r = .47$, $p < .01$), indicating that effective communication is associated with greater subjective well-being.

Empathy showed the strongest correlation with happiness ($r = .52$, $p < .01$), suggesting that students who are more capable of understanding and sharing others' emotions tend to experience

higher levels of happiness. These findings provide preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses and justify further analysis using regression-based approaches to examine predictive relationships.

Multiple Regression Analysis

To examine the predictive effects of interpersonal communication and empathy on happiness, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with happiness as the dependent variable and interpersonal communication and empathy as independent variables. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Happiness

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Interpersonal Communication	0.32	0.05	0.34	6.40	< .001
Empathy	0.41	0.06	0.38	6.83	< .001
Constant	1.21	0.29	—	4.17	< .001

Model statistics: $R^2 = .42$, Adjusted $R^2 = .41$, $F(2, 357) = 129.18$, $p < .001$

The regression model was statistically significant ($F(2, 357) = 129.18$, $p < .001$), explaining approximately 42% of the variance in happiness. Both interpersonal communication and empathy emerged as significant positive predictors of happiness.

Interpersonal communication demonstrated a standardized beta coefficient of $\beta = .34$ ($p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of communication competence are associated with higher levels of happiness when controlling for empathy. Empathy exhibited a slightly stronger standardized effect ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$), suggesting that empathic capacity plays a particularly important role in predicting adolescents' subjective well-being.

Relative Contribution of Predictors

To further examine the relative contribution of each independent variable to the prediction of happiness, standardized beta coefficients and squared semi-partial correlations were analyzed. The results are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Relative Contribution of Predictors to Happiness

Predictor	β	Unique Variance (%)
Interpersonal Communication	0.34	14.2
Empathy	0.38	17.8

The findings indicate that empathy accounts for approximately 17.8% of the unique variance in happiness, while interpersonal communication accounts for 14.2%. These results suggest that although both variables significantly contribute to students' happiness, empathy exerts a slightly stronger unique influence.

Interpretation of Significance and Integrated Findings

The overall pattern of results provides strong empirical support for the proposed hypotheses. The statistically significant correlations among interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness confirm that these constructs are closely interconnected in the context of secondary education. The regression results further demonstrate that interpersonal communication and empathy independently and jointly predict students' happiness, highlighting their importance as key psychosocial resources.

The significance levels observed across analyses ($p < .01$ and $p < .001$) indicate that the relationships identified in this study are unlikely to be due to chance. Moreover, the relatively high proportion of explained variance ($R^2 = .42$) suggests that interpersonal communication and empathy together represent substantial predictors of adolescent happiness within the studied context.

From an educational perspective, these findings imply that students' subjective well-being is strongly shaped by their ability to communicate effectively and empathize with others. The results also support the notion that empathy may function as a mediating or reinforcing mechanism through which communication skills enhance happiness. This interpretation is consistent with socio-emotional learning frameworks that emphasize the integration of communication and emotional competencies in fostering positive developmental outcomes.

Taken together, the results underscore the importance of addressing interpersonal communication and empathy within secondary education as strategic pathways for promoting adolescent happiness. These findings provide a robust empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion, which situates the results within the broader theoretical and empirical literature and explores their implications for educational practice and policy in Chile and comparable Latin American contexts.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness among secondary education students in Villavicencio, Chile. The findings provide robust empirical evidence that these three constructs are significantly and positively interrelated, highlighting the central role of socio-emotional competencies in adolescents' subjective well-being. This discussion interprets the results within the framework of existing theories and prior empirical research, while also considering the educational and cultural context of Chile and Latin America more broadly.

The descriptive findings indicate that students reported moderately high levels of interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness. These results suggest that, despite academic pressures and broader social challenges faced by adolescents, secondary school students in Villavicencio possess relatively strong socio-emotional resources. This finding aligns with research emphasizing that adolescence is not only a period of vulnerability but also a stage characterized by increasing social awareness and emotional growth when supportive interpersonal environments are present (Steinberg, 2014). In the Chilean context, where school-based initiatives increasingly promote *convivencia escolar* and socio-emotional learning, these relatively positive levels may reflect the gradual integration of well-being-oriented educational practices.

The correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations among all study variables, confirming that interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness function as interconnected dimensions of adolescents' psychosocial functioning. The moderate-to-strong correlation between interpersonal communication and empathy supports theoretical perspectives suggesting that effective communication facilitates emotional understanding and perspective-taking (Burleson, 2010). Adolescents who can articulate their thoughts clearly, listen actively, and engage constructively in social interactions are more likely to recognize and respond to others' emotional states. This finding reinforces the view that empathy does not develop in isolation but is nurtured through everyday communicative exchanges within peer and school contexts.

The positive association between interpersonal communication and happiness is consistent with prior studies demonstrating that adolescents who experience effective and supportive social interactions report higher levels of subjective well-being (Wentzel, 2017). Communication competence enables students to build meaningful relationships, resolve conflicts, and seek emotional support, all of which contribute to feelings of belonging and life satisfaction. In the highly social environment of secondary schools, the ability to communicate effectively may serve as a critical resource that buffers stress and enhances emotional stability. This finding is particularly relevant in contemporary educational settings, where adolescents navigate complex social dynamics shaped by both face-to-face and digital communication.

Empathy emerged as the variable most strongly associated with happiness, a result that aligns closely with research in positive psychology and developmental psychology. Empathic adolescents tend to experience deeper social connections, greater prosocial engagement, and more positive emotional experiences, all of which are closely linked to subjective well-being (Diener *et al.*, 2018). The strong relationship between empathy and happiness observed in this study suggests that adolescents' capacity to understand and share others' emotions enhances not only interpersonal harmony but also their own emotional fulfillment. This finding supports the conceptualization of happiness as a socially embedded experience, shaped by emotional reciprocity and relational quality rather than solely by individual traits.

The multiple regression analysis further demonstrated that both interpersonal communication and empathy independently predicted happiness, even when controlling for each other. This result underscores that communication skills and empathic capacity each contribute uniquely to adolescents' well-being. Importantly, empathy showed a slightly stronger predictive effect, indicating that emotional understanding and concern for others may play a particularly salient role in shaping happiness during adolescence. This finding resonates with studies suggesting that empathy functions as a core mechanism through which social relationships promote well-being (Telle & Pfister, 2016).

The relative contribution analysis revealed that empathy accounted for a larger proportion of unique variance in happiness compared to interpersonal communication. This suggests that while communication provides the structural foundation for social interaction, empathy represents the emotional quality that gives these interactions deeper meaning. In other words, adolescents may communicate frequently, but it is the empathic content of their interactions feeling understood, cared for, and emotionally connected that most strongly enhances happiness. This interpretation aligns with social-emotional learning frameworks that emphasize emotional awareness and empathic engagement as key outcomes of effective education (OECD, 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support integrative models that combine interpersonal communication theory, empathy research, and positive psychology. Interpersonal communication theory emphasizes the role of communicative competence in facilitating social bonds and emotional expression, while empathy research highlights the importance of perspective-taking and emotional resonance in social relationships (Decety & Cowell, 2014). Positive psychology, in turn, conceptualizes happiness as a function of positive relationships and emotional experiences. By empirically demonstrating the interconnectedness of these constructs, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of adolescent well-being.

The results also extend existing literature by providing context-specific evidence from Chile, a setting that remains underrepresented in international research on adolescent happiness. Much of the existing empirical evidence originates from North America and Europe, where cultural norms around individualism and emotional expression differ from those in Latin America. The strong associations observed in this study suggest that in collectivist-leaning cultures, where social relationships are highly valued, interpersonal communication and empathy may play an even more pronounced role in shaping happiness (Greenfield *et al.*, 2006). This finding highlights the importance of considering cultural context when examining psychosocial processes in education.

The educational implications of these findings are substantial. First, the results suggest that efforts to promote adolescent happiness should move beyond individual-level interventions and address the quality of social interactions within schools. Programs that strengthen students' communication skills such as active listening, assertive expression, and conflict resolution may have direct benefits for their well-being. Second, empathy-focused interventions, including perspective-taking activities, cooperative learning, and reflective dialogue, may be particularly effective in enhancing students' happiness. Such approaches align with contemporary educational goals that emphasize holistic development and emotional intelligence.

Furthermore, the findings have important implications for teacher education and school leadership. Teachers play a critical role in modeling empathic communication and fostering emotionally supportive classroom climates. When teachers demonstrate respect, emotional attunement, and effective communication, they create relational environments that promote students' socio-emotional growth. Previous research indicates that positive teacher-student

relationships are strongly associated with adolescents' emotional well-being and engagement (Roorda *et al.*, 2017). Thus, professional development programs that equip teachers with communication and empathy skills may indirectly enhance student happiness.

The results also hold relevance in the post-pandemic educational context. Following prolonged periods of social disruption, many adolescents continue to experience challenges related to social reconnection and emotional regulation. The present findings suggest that strengthening interpersonal communication and empathy may serve as protective factors that support adolescents' psychological recovery and resilience. By prioritizing socio-emotional competencies, schools can play a vital role in rebuilding students' sense of belonging and emotional security.

Despite its contributions, this study should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. The use of a cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, and future research employing longitudinal or experimental designs would be valuable in clarifying the directionality of relationships among communication, empathy, and happiness. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias. Future studies could incorporate multi-informant approaches or behavioral observations to enrich the assessment of socio-emotional competencies.

Future research may also explore potential moderating variables, such as gender, socioeconomic status, or school climate, which may influence the strength of relationships among the studied constructs. Investigating these factors could provide a more nuanced understanding of how interpersonal communication and empathy contribute to happiness across diverse adolescent populations. Moreover, examining these relationships in different cultural and educational contexts would further strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

In summary, the findings of this study underscore the critical importance of interpersonal communication and empathy as foundational contributors to adolescent happiness in secondary education. By demonstrating that these socio-emotional competencies significantly predict students' subjective well-being, the study provides empirical support for educational practices and policies that prioritize emotional and relational development. In the Chilean context and beyond, fostering effective communication and empathy within schools represents a promising pathway toward enhancing adolescents' happiness, resilience, and overall quality of life.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness among secondary school students in Villavicencio, Chile. The findings provide empirical evidence that both interpersonal communication and empathy play significant roles in shaping adolescents' subjective well-being. Specifically, students who demonstrated stronger interpersonal communication skills and higher levels of empathy reported greater levels of happiness. Moreover, empathy was found to partially mediate the relationship between interpersonal communication and happiness, indicating that effective communication fosters empathic understanding, which in turn enhances students' emotional well-being.

Overall, the results confirm that happiness in adolescence is not merely an individual psychological state, but is closely embedded in social interactions and relational competencies. Interpersonal communication enables students to express emotions, manage conflicts, and build supportive peer relationships, while empathy allows them to understand and respond sensitively to others' feelings. Together, these social-emotional capacities contribute to a positive school experience and psychological adjustment during a critical developmental stage.

From a practical perspective, the findings have important implications for educational policy and school-based interventions. Schools should prioritize the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into the secondary education curriculum. Educational policies in Chile and other Latin American contexts could emphasize structured programs that strengthen communication skills, perspective-taking, and empathic engagement among students. Teacher training programs should also include modules on fostering emotionally supportive classroom environments, as teachers play a crucial role in modeling effective communication and empathy. By promoting these competencies, schools can contribute not only to academic achievement but also to students' overall happiness and mental health.

Despite its contributions, this study has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relationships among interpersonal communication, empathy, and happiness. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how these variables influence one another over time. Second, the reliance on self-report questionnaires may introduce response bias, such as social desirability effects. Future research could incorporate multi-informant data, including teacher or peer assessments, as well as qualitative approaches to enrich the findings. Third, the sample was drawn from secondary schools in a single city, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other regions or cultural contexts.

Future research is encouraged to explore these relationships using more diverse samples and advanced analytical techniques, such as structural equation modeling or experimental designs. Additionally, intervention-based studies could assess the effectiveness of communication and empathy training programs in enhancing adolescent happiness. Such research would further strengthen the evidence base for developing holistic educational strategies that support students' social, emotional, and psychological well-being.

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