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Academic Procrastination among First-year Student Teachers

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Summary

This dissertation is about academic procrastination among first-year student teachers in the Netherlands. Academic procrastination is a problem experienced by many students in higher education. Students with academic procrastination have problems with study related tasks, for example with starting on time with preparing for exams, or they find it hard to stay focused on their study tasks and to persevere. Instead of starting on time with preparing for exams or studying during the intended time, they shift their attention to other activities. They do so although they know that the conditions for succeeding become unfavorable and their procrastination behavior might lead to not finishing their assignment on time or to not passing their exams.

The first study

The first study was conducted to get more insight into the interplay of factors influencing academic procrastination. In a quantitative study among 238 first-year student teachers we examined the influence of the intrapersonal factors academic attributional style, dispositional optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem on academic procrastination and we investigated how academic procrastination influenced students' academic achievements. For this study students completed three different questionnaires at three moments in time during the academic year.

We found that academic procrastination played an important role by directly influencing students' academic achievements throughout the year. We also found that students' academic attributional style only influenced students' achievements via their academic procrastination. Students' self-efficacy and self-esteem both indirectly influenced their academic procrastination, as well as directly influenced their achievements. The direct effect of procrastination on achievements proved to be much larger than the direct effect of self-efficacy and self-esteem on achievements.

The third finding from study 1 was that the influence of students' self-esteem was different from our expectation. Based on previous studies (Ferrari, 1994; Van Eerde, 2003) our expectation was that students with a negative self-esteem would put less effort into performing study activities and would be more inclined to give up. However, the results from study 1 indicated that students who perceived themselves more positively, had a

higher risk of academic procrastination and of lower academic achievements. Finally, study 1 showed that the influence of students' intrapersonal factors and academic procrastination on their academic achievements became only visible to its full extent after a period of time. In the first period of the academic year, the intrapersonal factors and academic procrastination had the least influence on students' academic achievements. In this first period factors other than intrapersonal factors and procrastination may play a more important role, most likely because students have to get used to their new degree course. Over time the influence of students' intrapersonal factors and academic procrastination on their academic achievements seems to double, with students' academic procrastination, self-efficacy, and self-esteem becoming decisive for their academic achievements.

The second study

With the second study we aimed at an understanding of how first year student teachers with different procrastination levels dealt with various factors that might influence their learning process, and how this worked out in practice. We conducted a qualitative study in which first-year elementary teacher education students ($N = 22$) with different levels of academic procrastination were interviewed. The selection of the participants into three groups of students (low procrastination, $n = 8$; average procrastination, $n = 8$; high procrastination, $n = 6$) was based on their scores on a questionnaire measuring the students' levels of academic procrastination.

This study showed that students' intrinsic motivation to become a teacher had a strong influence on the levels of their procrastination and influenced procrastination in different ways. Students with low and average levels of procrastination had a clear goal of becoming a teacher, which worked as a strong intrinsically motivational drive to work on study activities and finish them. Students with high levels of procrastination lacked this intrinsic motivation to become a teacher. These students set preconditions for tasks which worked as an external motivation for them to start study activities and/or to continue these activities.

Within the three groups of procrastinators, students' engagement during study activities was determined by various factors. Students with low levels of procrastination were most engaged because they were

are intrinsically motivated for study tasks and were eager to expand their knowledge. For the engagement of students with average levels of procrastination, the relevance of the task for the profession was very important. The engagement of students with high levels of procrastination was determined by the utility and usefulness of study activities, and the pleasure the performance of tasks brought. If these conditions were not met, students procrastinated, turning to more appealing non-school activities.

Cognitive awareness and control of mental thoughts played an important role in handling negative study situations. All groups of procrastinators experienced moments of failure while working on study activities. However, there were clear differences between the three groups in how students reacted to failure and how failure impacted their learning. In moments of failure, student with low levels of procrastination relied on their capacity and encouraged themselves to continue. Average procrastinators experienced a sense of failure, thinking they were wasting their time, and did less. Their negative thoughts and feelings made them procrastinate for a while, but despite these feelings, they remained hopeful that they would manage the task and would complete the task in the end. Students with high levels of procrastination seemed unable to regulate negative feelings in moments of failure. They then judged themselves negatively, gave up, and procrastinated.

Study 2 showed differences between the three groups of students in how they valued themselves as a person in general. In other words, they varied in their self-esteem. It is noteworthy that students with low and average levels of procrastination both had a positive self-esteem but differed in their confidence about passing or failing exams and differed in the degree to which they experienced nerves about exams. Prior to exams, students with low levels of procrastination believed that they would pass the exams and experienced no stress for these exams. Students with average levels of procrastination sometimes had doubts about whether they would pass the exam. They also were nervous and felt pressure to perform.

Although students with low and high levels of procrastination were fairly equally confident about their study results and did not experience fear or nerves about exams, they differed in their self-esteem. Students with high levels of procrastination had frequent moments of negative self-esteem, whereas low procrastinators had a positive self-esteem.

The third study

In the third study we wanted to explore whether an intervention with elements from positive psychology could be beneficial for students to overcome academic procrastination. We conducted a field experimental design in which we examined the effects of a newly developed strengths-based training to overcome procrastination (the STOP training). Students in the intervention group followed four three-hour group meetings, spread over a period of six weeks. The strengths-based training approach was based on the principles of core reflection (Korthagen, 2013, 2014). The approach was based on two central tenets, namely (1) making students aware of their inner potential that can be found in character strengths and ideals and (2) making students aware of internal obstacles that prevent the enactment of their inner potential. In the STOP training students learned to become aware of their ideals and their core qualities and of their tendency to follow obstructive patterns. Factors influencing students' procrastination can be different for every student. Therefore students were supported to choose their own set of core qualities, counterbalancing inner obstacles that influenced their procrastination.

We have dealt with the issue of taking control by making the students aware of the difference between their control-self and their procrastination-self, which represent different states of being. This required that they were fully present in the here and now and were aware of their actual state of being. Therefore being present in the here-and-now was a central focus in the STOP training.

With a field experimental design (two experimental groups: $n = 31$, control group: $n = 23$) the effect of the STOP training on academic procrastination was studied. To determine the effect quantitatively, students completed questionnaires to measure their academic procrastination. They did so before the intervention started and 1, 11, and 24 weeks after the intervention ended.

The main finding of study 3 is that an intervention based on the core reflection approach proved to be helpful for students to handle personal factors influencing their procrastination, and as a result diminished students' academic procrastination. The significant results of the intervention were only visible in the short term (one week after the intervention). In the long term (after 11 and 24 weeks) the mean test scores of the students in the experimental group remained almost

the same, as whereas the procrastination scores of the students in the control group decreased over time. This indicated that in the long term the students in the control group also seemed to improve their academic procrastination tendency.

Discussion

The studies described in this dissertation filled important gaps in the literature on academic procrastination. Study 1 provided insight into four important intrapersonal factors influencing academic achievements and into the interactions between these factors. This study showed the mediating role of academic procrastination between these intrapersonal factors and students' academic achievements. Therefore, when researching the influence of intrapersonal factors on academic procrastination, the functioning of mediating factors should be taken into account and the interaction between factors should receive attention. Study 1 also showed the importance of looking at the influence of academic procrastination on students achievements during the academic year.

Study 2 showed the processes that are going on in students with low, average, and high levels of academic procrastination. The three groups differ in their intrinsic motivation, their self-esteem, their level of engagement, and their ability to control negative thoughts and handle failure. These resulting processes lead to differences in whether or how factors influencing procrastination play out in practice, and whether or how this influences student learning.

A comparison of the outcomes regarding self-esteem in study 1 and study 2, showed that in study 1, students with a positive self-esteem procrastinated more, as whereas in study 2, frequent moments of negative self-esteem were reported by student with high levels of procrastination. This difference may be explained by the fact that in study 1 students' self-esteem was measured with a questionnaire, whereas where in study 2 the results regarding self-esteem among students with high procrastination levels, were based on quotes which indicated that these high procrastinators frequently experienced moments of not being satisfied with themselves. These results of study 2 reflect momentary experiences. Hence, the construct of self-esteem has been measured differently in the two studies, what might be the methodological explanation for the discrepancy we found between study 1 and study 2.

The discrepancy might also be explained by the period of the academic year in which self-esteem was measured. In study 1 self-esteem was measured at the start of the academic year. In study 2 students were interviewed at the time they had already been already in their degree program for about eight months.

Study 3 is the first randomized controlled experiment examining the effectiveness of a strengths-based approach to overcome academic procrastination in which elements of positive psychology are deliberately and successfully applied in a training program for students. Therefore this study is important for the research field of academic procrastination. This study is also the first study showing that the research field of academic procrastination can be fruitfully connected with the research field of positive psychology.

Limitations and further research

An overall limitation of the studies in this dissertation is that all the studies were conducted among first-year elementary teacher education students in the Netherlands, of whom most were women. Therefore the results cannot be generalized to male students, to other degree courses and/or other years of study. Further research in higher education among students taking other degree courses and/or among students in study years other than the first study year, seems important.

Practical relevance

This dissertation is relevant for teaching staff, leaders and policy makers in higher education. Academic procrastination and the risk of educational drop-out in higher education are important issues, considering the increase of study time and the extra costs this involves, and the impact of student drop-out for students themselves, as well as for institutions.

If educational institutions want to influence students' academic procrastination, an early approach aimed at diminishing students' academic procrastination is important. Study 1 showed that academic procrastination is a mediator between these intrapersonal factors and students' academic achievement. This implies that interventions could be directly targeted at overcoming procrastination instead of being targeted at intrapersonal factors. Based on this insight educational institutions can

develop their educational policy to diminishing academic procrastination and support students with procrastination.

Study 2 showed that students' intrinsic motivation is an important factor in dealing with their procrastination behavior. Especially for average procrastinators it makes sense when study activities are practice-oriented. When students recognize the relevance and practical foundation of study activities they have to do, they are more motivated for these study activities.

Finally, study 3 showed how the core reflection approach, which is a practical elaboration of elements from positive psychology, can support students in dealing with their procrastination.

In summary, we believe that our research contributes to developing new ways and opportunities to address the difficult problem of academic procrastination, which is in the interest of both students and organizations.

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