The Relationship between Perceptions of School Climate and Involvement in Violence, Risk Behaviors and Hidden Dropout: A Comparative Analysis between Arab and Jewish Students in Israel

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Abstract

Positive perception of school protects from risk behavior and promotes physical health and well-being, while negative perception of school usually encourages risk behavior. However, research in Israel provides contradicting findings; while higher rates of risk behavior were found among Arab youths compared to Jewish youths, the reported perception of schools is more positive in the Arab sector than in the Jewish sector. According to the socio-ecological model, risk behavior is the product of the complex relationship between the individual and different systems in his life, including school (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Harel, 1999; Swearer & Espelage, 2011). In accordance with the socialization approach, the individual judges issues relative to the standards and conventions of the society in which he lives (Hurrelmann, 1989; Kohlberg, 1981). Consequentlyה, raises the question, why do Arab students provide positive experiences at school while being reported to have higher rates of involvement in violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout?

Research aims. Therefore, the current research objectives are: (a) to examine the gap in perceptions of school climate between the Arab and Jewish populations; (B) to examine the difference among Arab and Jewish students' correlation between the perception of school and involvement in violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout indices; (C) to test whether it is possible to explain the more positive perception of school climate reported by Arab students, in the context of cultural sensitivity of this sector towards the school as an institution and towards teachers as professionals.

The main hypothesis was that in the Arab sector, students will express more positive perceptions of school than Jewish students, since they are influenced by the Arab culture which is very sensitive and respectful of school as an institution, teaching as a profession and teachers as valued adults in the Arab society. In addition, rates of involvement in violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout indices will be higher in the Arab sector, while the relationship between perception of school climate and involvement in violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout indices will be strong and similar in both sectors.

Method: The first part of the study is based on quantitative data analysis of the World Health Organization multinational Survey in 2011 (HBSC - Health Behaviors in School-aged Children). The data of 7,486 students were analyzed (29.5% in the Arab sector and 70.5% in the Jewish sector) from grades six (25.3%), eight (23.1%) and ten to twelve (51.6%). The aim of the quantitative part of the study was to examine the research hypothesis.

The second part of the study was conducted in a qualitative method of focus groups. After a preliminary exploratory study, an interview guide was constructed and discussions were held with 16

focus groups (eight in the Arab sector and eight in the Jewish sector), ten students in each group. The aim of the qualtitative part of the understand in-depth the cultioral and social reasons for the differences between sectors in the daily experiences in schoo, by focusing on cultural sensitivoity towards school as an institute and teachers as a profession.

Key findings from the quantitative analyses:

(A) Indeed, Arab students reported more positive perceptions of school climate than Jewish students;

(B) The correlation between perception of school climate and engaging in violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout indices: unjustified absence and low academic achievements, is negative and strong in both sectors. In addition, the correlation between perceptions of school climate and academic achievements was found negative in both sectors.

(C) Despite the finding reported in section (A), the findings regarding involvement in violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout indices: unjustified absence and academic achievement – indicate a more severe state in the Arab sector than in the Jewish sector.

Key findings from the qualitative research:

In the focus groups we studied the reasons for the gap between Arab and Jewish students in the context of school climate perception. Arab students and Jewish students of the religious sector only, explained this with a positive theme of "respect for teachers and school". Only in the Arab sector, a negative theme of schools' management's influence on students' responses revealed, which is perceived as an inadequate conduct on behalf of the schools' management.

In the **Arab** sector, the gap between the positive and negative themes towards daily experience at school was much **larger** compared to the gap in the **Jewish** sector. Content analysis revealed four key topics: (a) a sense of belonging to the school, (b) teacher-student relationship, (c) relationship between students and (d) Rules and regulations. In both sectors, most students expressed positive feelings towards school, but a third of them have expressed negative feelings. Especially in the Arab sector, students described bad feelings in school, which leads to thoughts about leaving school and dropping out. The student-teacher relationship was shown prominently as associated with the perception of the climate, while in the Arab sector, discomfort of teachers' attitude and even themes of abusing students, intolerance, insensitivity, closed nature, lack of listening and unresponsiveness to requests, were expressed. They also mentioned discrimination based on the family / clan background.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in adding another layer in the national and international literature discussing the influence of culture on the perceptions of students about vast aspects of their lives in the context of school in general, and the relationship between climate perception and involvement in violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout in particular.

The practical contribution of this study is the need to raise awareness to the need to consider cultural characteristics while investing efforts to develop effective intervention strategies, aimed at improving the school climate and the well-being of the students, in order to reduce phenomena of risk behaviors in the Arab sector.

The uniqueness of this study lies in the integration of quantitative and qualitative research paradigms, which complement each other and enable a wider and more reliable and credible view, since this combination sheds light on the subjectivity dimension and allows to interpret quantitative data obtained from surveys in light of the distortion in measures of school climate in the Arab sector which are caused by cultural bias.

The main conclusion of this study is, that for understanding the complex relationship between the perception of school climate by students and their involvement in violence, risk behaviors and hidden dropout in the Arab sector, risk behavior should be seen as a product of the complex relationship between the individual and various aspects of his life, including school. In light of cultural sensitivity which is needed to understand these complex relationships, educators, principals and teachers should talk to students and student groups in order to reveal their interpretation of the complex relationships which lead and nurture their well-being in the school, as part of the Arab society, as well as their sense of belonging and security in school.