

RESEARCH BRIEF

SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN'S LEARNING- AND HEALTH-RELATED BEHAVIORS

Antje von Suchodoletz, New York University Abu Dhabi

This study found variation in school-aged children's learning- and health-related behaviors. A substantial proportion of students reported physical and mental health problems. Students who reported higher school connectedness were less likely to report health problems. In addition, a strong relationship between motivation and aspirations for completing school was found that was influenced by students' perceived school connectedness.

During middle childhood and adolescence young people develop learning-related skills, coping resources, and health-related behavioral habits that influence their later physical health, wellbeing, and success in life. Because children and adolescents spend a substantial proportion of their lives in school, their school experiences have lasting impacts on their academic development, as well as on their emotional wellbeing and health. Consequently, there have been increased efforts to extend schooling outcomes beyond academic outcomes, but to also incorporate social-emotional, motivational, and health outcomes (physical and mental health). These efforts become increasingly important as research has found that physical and mental health problems in school-aged children may compromise their academic functioning. For these reasons, it is important to identify factors associated with school-aged children's learning- and health-related behaviors.

The purpose of the study was therefore to (a) describe variation of learning- and health-related behaviors of Abu Dhabi school students, (b) investigate associations between learning- and health-related behaviors and students' reported school connectedness, and (c) examine its effects on students educational aspirations.

Learning-related behaviors refer to students' motivation and ability to comply with classroom rules and routines, complete tasks without distraction and control impulses in favor of doing what is required by the teacher (Brock et al., 2009).

Health is defined as a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing. Health-related behaviors include the actions and strategies an individual takes to keep oneself physically, emotionally and socially fit, including but not limited to eating right, getting physically fit, emotional wellness as well as prevention (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2009).

Indicators of **school connectedness** include liking school, a sense of belonging at school and positive relations with teachers and friends at school (Thompson et al., 2006).

Participants were over 1700 students from private and public schools in Abu Dhabi (450 students in public schools and 1290 students in private schools). Students (55% girls) were between 10-18 years of age, with an average age of 13 years. Nationalities included a vast range: 37% from the UAE and the larger Middle East region, 25% from Europe, 17% from Asia, 7% from North America, 7% from Africa, and 8% from other regions.

Students completed a survey to assess their self-reported learning- and health-related behaviors. The survey was presented in one of two languages (Arabic or English), depending on the school’s primary medium of instruction. It took approximately 45 minutes to complete the survey.

Findings

While the majority of students reported having no or “only rarely” health problems, a substantial proportion of students reported health problems at least sometime during the last six months, particularly students in public schools (Figure 1). Students’ food consumption frequency is shown in Figure 2. In addition, students reported about their physical activity. On average, they were physically active on four days per week with boys being more active than girls. Like in past studies, eating habits were associated with physical activity: Students with healthy eating patterns reported to be more active.

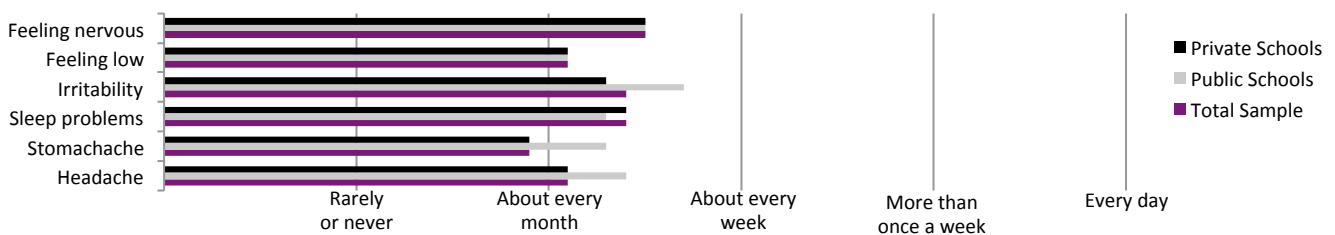


Figure 1. Frequency of self-reported health problems.

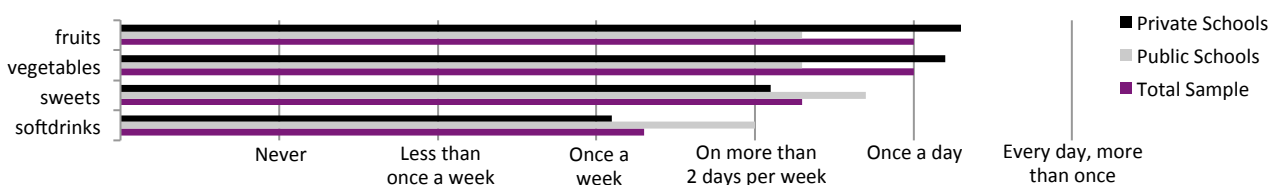


Figure 2. Frequency of students' food consumption.

In general, students reported positive feelings about school. School connectedness was greater among younger students and among students in public schools. However, a substantial proportion of students reported emotional problems, peer problems and behavior problems, particularly older students and students in public schools. Girls reported more emotional problems than boys. Students who reported higher school connectedness and positive feelings about school were less likely to report emotional and behavior problems. It was also found that physical activity, healthy eating habits, and subjective physical health were associated with fewer emotional problems, peer problems and behavior problems.

In schools, motivation is directly linked to learning behaviors and influenced by the way the outcome of a task is framed. Similar to previous studies, results showed that students in the positive outcome framing condition reported higher short-term and long-term educational aspirations than students in the negative outcome framing condition. Moreover, students' school connectedness influenced this association (Figure 3). Students reporting low school connectedness had lower educational aspirations when the outcome framing was negative compared to a positive outcome framing. However, when school connectedness was high there was no difference in students' educational aspirations between the positive and negative outcome framing conditions.

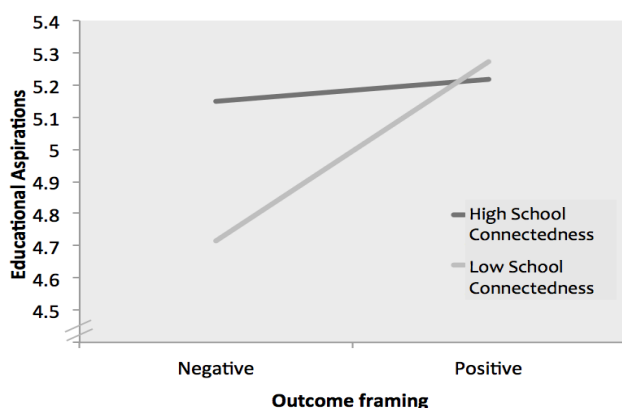


Figure 3. Interaction between motivation and perceived school connectedness.

Implications

Consistent with evidence from other countries and from research among adults, results showed great variation in school-aged children's learning- and health-related behaviors. We found a consistent pattern of associations between various indicators of health-related behaviors: Physical and mental health problems were associated with a higher frequency of sweets and soft drink consumption, limited physical activity and low perceived school connectedness. Moreover, a strong relationship between motivation and aspirations for completing school work was found that was influenced by students' perceived school connectedness. Results revealed that motivation can actually be manipulated, with an effect on aspiration. Consequently, targeted efforts in schools might help improving students' motivation and, in turn, their academic performance and higher education attainment goals.

Overall, these results suggest that schools can be potentially supportive settings in which students can develop the skills necessary for a successful and healthy life. Based on the results, it seems particularly important to increase the awareness to the current state of students' learning- and health-related behaviors and its importance for both academic and health outcomes. Mental health professionals, such as school counselors, might take extra steps in addressing the needs of students who report physical and mental health problems and/or low school connectedness. In particular, fostering positive relationships with teachers and between peers might help decrease depressive symptoms, risks of violent or deviant behavior, and increase health and emotional wellbeing (Thompson et al., 2006). Additionally, encouraging greater parental involvement may increase school connectedness. For example, a study using the same survey found that the lack of parental involvement was a risk to bullying and low satisfaction with school (Due et al., 2005). Regular feedback to parents can aid creating a comfortable and safe environment for the child both at home and at school.