

Academic and Social Needs of Students of Grades 7–9 in Erbil Center

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ABSTRACT

The research delves into the issues and challenges facing students in grades 7–9 in the governmental schools in Erbil center. The majority of literature tackles these student groups combined with the other stage categories in the Erbil center. On the contrary, students at the secondary school levels, i.e., stage 7–9, are not investigated separately as needed since they have been a part of the larger sample populations. This research paper uses the transitional theory as the conceptual framework for the study. Issues like bullying, substance use, smoking, and peer pressure. A qualitative approach was used and focus groups were employed in addition to secondary data analysis in order to support the qualitative analysis. The research concluded that the above-stated challenges were evident among the study group in addition to the vital role of school social workers in dealing with these challenges. The boundary of the role of school social worker and low teacher-student ratio impacted the academic and social skills and achievement due to the limited authority in schools and the inability to participate in the formulation of Ministry of Education policy and programs. This research recommends raising the student-teacher ratio and sustainable training for teachers on communication and dealing with students at these grades.

KEYWORDS: Students' Academic Needs, Students' Social Needs, Public Schools, Education Policy, School Social Work

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition theory, which serves as the conceptual framework for this study, contends that, generally speaking, students at this stage (7 through 9) go through a significant developmental process on both psychological and physiological levels, pointing to issues that require careful consideration by scholars and experts in the field. An integrative systemic model that considers the interplay between biological, psychological, social, and environmental elements can help to explain adolescence (Cairns and Cairns, 1994, as cited in Overton et al., 2006). Growth takes place within the framework of systemic interactions with peers, parents, other family members, the neighborhood, the school, and the larger community. Adolescence is a time of change, but unless societal circumstances force it to be, it

doesn't always have to be turbulent and troublesome (Jessor, 1993; Petersen and Leffert, 1995 as cited in McClure, M., 2005).

The majority of literature tackles student groups in the basic schools or the preparatory schools, i.e., students at the 1-6 and 10-12 stage categories, respectively, in Erbil city center. On the contrary, students at the secondary school levels, i.e., stage 7–9, are not investigated as needed, or they have been a part of the larger sample population, i.e., stages 7 through 12. This paper investigates students at 7, 8, and 9 levels in terms of their academic and social needs and their challenges. This transitional stage from childhood to teenage requires much attention and investigation. Therefore, this pilot study is conducted to shed light on this issue.

In the Erbil city center (as classified by the ministry of education), there has not been much research about this group of students addressing their needs and challenges. Therefore, this research paper is designed to tackle the following questions:

1. What are the major academic needs of students from grades 7 through 9?

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2. What are the major social needs of students from grades 7 through 9? What are the major steps that social workers should take into their consideration when dealing with students from grades 7 through 9?

1.1 The research is aiming to:

1. Identify the academic needs of students from grades 7 through 9?
2. Identify the social needs of students from grades 7 through 9?
3. Understand the role of social workers in relation to the needs of students of grade 7 - 9.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 School Types in Erbil City Center

According to the KRG's education system (2009) schools in Kurdistan are classified into two types: basic and preparatory. The basic education is divided to three levels: first level includes grades 1,2 and 3. The second level of basic education includes grades 4,5 and 6. And the third level of basic education includes grades 7,8 and 9, which is the target of this research.

2.2. Social Needs

The literature review concluded that social needs pertain students from grades 7 through 9, can be demonstrated in the social engagement and support of family, teachers and social workers. Insufficient engagement and support can lead to challenges affecting this group of students. Another social challenge at this stage includes peer pressure, bullying, and smoking such as vaping and other substances.

Social engagement and support of family, teachers, and social workers can have a significant role within this group of students. Sufficient engagement and support from the community and family can lead to improvements among this group of students, as this has been conceptualized and investigated by Michael, Dittus, and Epstein (2007). Therefore, community support can lead to achievements in the academic perspective, which include academic achievement of students, better school attendance, and improved school programs and quality (Michael, Dittus, and Epstein, 2007).

Research has shown that family and community involvement in schools is highly associated with changes in social anxiety. Additionally, adolescents with social anxiety were more likely to report reduced social engagement, which was associated with lower science achievement. Teens who suffer from social anxiety also typically receive less social support from their peers, which lowers their social involvement and, ultimately, their science achievement. (Scanlon, Del Toro, and Wang, 2020)

A cross-sectional multilevel analysis was carried out in the Netherlands to investigate the relationship between

students and teachers regarding their societal involvement in secondary schools. The study also looked at the impact of parents on adolescents' societal involvement and the degree to which positive relationships between students and teachers mitigated differences in societal involvement resulting from differences in parental backgrounds. The findings demonstrated a positive correlation between student-teacher and student-student relationships and societal involvement. Even while parental approaches didn't seem to have anything to do with societal involvement, students from households with lesser incomes, levels of education, and jobs differed in their level of involvement. It was discovered that students with better-educated parents benefited more from these good teacher-student relationships. It may be argued that this benefit accentuates the disparities in students' societal involvement. (Wanders, Dijkstra, Maslowski, R. and Van der Veen, 2020)

Peer pressure is one of the other social problems at this stage. Abderrahim E. (2016) found in his research that "peer influence has a greater impact on academic performance, both positively and negatively, depending on the makeup of the group." (Cited in Sarkar et al., 2022) Peer pressure can also affect job selections in a variety of ways, including peer education, peer support, and peer guidance. Students disputed that they look to their peers for approval of their professional choices in spite of this (Mtemeri, 2020). Peer pressure has a detrimental effect on one's level of self-esteem. However, there is a negative association between their exposure to direct or indirect peer pressure and their level of self-esteem, and additional study reveals a positive correlation between the two. (Uslu, 2013).

A study using a qualitative methodology examined how secondary students perceived and dealt with bullying (and victimization) in Greek schools, emphasizing the similarities and differences between the sexes. The findings demonstrated the significant impact that gender-based bullying interpretations and meanings have on actual behavior. Additionally, adolescents keep bullying and victimization from their parents and instructors a secret because they perceive them as uncaring and incompetent. The findings have significant ramifications for antibullying initiatives and are suggestive of a bullying-friendly school culture. (Athaniades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzi, 2010)

Smoking, such as smoking vapes and other substances, is a critical issue among this group. "Normal adolescent developmental stage is affected by a high level of peer pressure that can influence risk-taking behaviors, including substance use. (Tomé et al., 2012)

2.3. Academic Needs

The literature review concluded that academic needs pertain to students from grades 7 through 9; there have not been sufficient evaluations of the current curriculum in terms of extracurricular activities to combat bullying and build social cohesion and integration among the students.

Additionally, sufficient staff (teachers and social workers) is crucial for the higher academic achievements among this group. Therefore, academic challenges among this group of students can include dropping out of school or lower academic achievement.

Sufficient staff (teachers and social workers) is crucial for the higher academic achievements among this group. A study conducted in an urban area of Nigeria investigated the effect of student-teacher ratio on the academic performance of selected secondary school students. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between students' perceptions of the student-teacher relationship and their academic performance in mathematics. The results also suggested that teachers' years of experience and qualifications had a significant positive association with students' mathematics achievement. Based on these findings, recommendations were made to the government and education stakeholders on how to deal with this unpleasant situation. (Ajani and Akinyele, 2014.)

Research suggests a positive relationship between schools' efforts to involve parents and parents' involvement in their children's education. The authors examined school socioeconomic status, school size, grade level, and student-teacher ratios as predictors of schools' efforts to engage parents of students receiving special education services. Results showed that student-teacher ratio was the strongest predictor of parents' perceptions of school engagement. It provides conclusions about how all schools, including those with high student-teacher ratios, can improve collaboration with parents of students receiving special education services. (Rodriguez and Elbaum, 2014)

Teacher effectiveness plays an important role in education and is usually evaluated based on student performance. Teacher effectiveness has primarily focused on teacher quality and teacher teaching methods. However, there are also external factors that influence teacher effectiveness, such as the number of students per teacher. The purpose of this study was to find out whether there is a significant relationship between the number of students per teacher and student achievement. Results suggest that Turkey needs to hire more teachers to reduce the number of students per teacher and improve student performance. (Koc and Celik, 2015) These simulations show that significant reductions are needed to maintain a positive environment for students and teachers. This can be achieved by reducing class sizes, as this is a function of the student-teacher ratio. (Diaz, Fett, Torres-Garcia, and Crisosto, 2003)

Therefore, academic challenges among this group of students can include dropping out of school or lower academic achievement. Although many studies have addressed the problem of school dropout in both girls and boys, patterns of dropout vary significantly depending on the gender of the student.

Through a detailed review of the available literature, this article identifies factors that contribute to the increased

dropout rate of children, especially girls. Most studies to date regarding early withdrawal have been conducted without regard to the student's gender. Some related research has been conducted on the issue of girls dropping out of school in specific regions and cultures of the world.

This article identifies factors and presents a conceptual model of girls' school dropout. We show that although several factors can lead to increased dropout rates regardless of student gender, these factors primarily contribute to increased dropout rates, especially for female students. Our conceptual model attempts to explain how a number of specific factors influence students' educational success, which then commonly leads to female students dropping out of school.

Finally, we provide some recommendations that policymakers can adopt to reduce girls' school dropout rates. (Shahidul and Karim, 2015). The purpose of this study was to identify the unique contribution of a comprehensive set of predictors and key predictors of school dropout in a nationally representative sample of students with learning disabilities (LD). A comprehensive set of theoretically and empirically relevant factors was selected for investigation. Analyses were conducted to examine the unique contribution and relative importance of these factors in predicting school dropout. As a result, the main predictors of school dropout include modifiable individual (grades and engagement in risky behaviors), family (parental expectations), and school (quality of relationships with teachers and peers) factors. It has been shown that results validate a multicomponent dropout prevention and intervention model for this population, highlighting specific key factors that appear to be particularly important for the dropout of students with LD. (Doren, Murray, and Gau, 2014)

4. METHODS

Current research targeting this transitional stage is not sufficient. Research has been targeting all age stages without segregation, i.e., combining this age group of students with the other ages as a target group. Therefore, this pilot study is conducted. This research paper targeted students from grade 7 to grade 9 from both genders (boys and girls) in Erbil center schools under the authority of the Directorate of Education / Erbil center. Employing mixed methods—convergent parallel (Creswell Plano- Clark, 2006, p.62)—this paper tackled the research questions through secondary data analysis for quantitative analysis and focus groups for gathering qualitative information. Quantitative information was analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

The field aspect of this study

The Director of Educational Planning in the General Directorate of Education/Erbil (GDoE) prepared all the necessary data through the Statistics Department and

identified the people who should participate in the group discussions, including two directors, two researchers, supervisors, program directors, a program expert, and a follow-up director. However, the follow-up director was unable to participate due to other duties. After sending an official letter by the College of Arts to the (GDoE), in order to obtain the necessary data and group discussions about the social and academic needs of third-level (grade 7-9) students.

According to the statistics obtained from the Directorate of Educational Planning Statistics section, it was found that the Teacher-Students Ratio (TSR) is high compared to primary schools in the first and second levels and high schools in Erbil. As shown in the table below, there are 1092 teachers in 43 schools in the third level out of 15,456 students. The teacher-student ratio is 14.15. However, 44% of third-level schools have more than 15 students per teacher. Otherwise, 40% of schools in the first and second levels have less than 10 students per teacher. Similarly, 40% of preparatory schools have fewer than 10 students per teacher.

Table No. 1:
Statistics of Students, Teachers, and Schools

School Level	# of Students	# of Teachers	TSR Female	TSR Male	Teacher - Students Ratio
1 to 6	95846	8390	7.29	24.32	11.42
7 to 9	15456	1092	11.31	20.51	14.15
10 to 12	29013	2261	12.762	12.48	12.831

Table 2:
Teacher-Students Ratio

School Level	Number of Schools by TSR			Number of Schools
	Less than 10 Students per a Teacher	10 - 15 students per a teacher	more Than 15 students per a teacher	
1 to 6	84 Schools = %40	79 Schools = %37	50 Schools = %23	213
7 to 9	5 Schools = %12	19 Schools = %44	19 Schools = %44	43
10 to 12	29 Schools = %40	28 Schools = %39	15 Schools = %21	72

To analyze the differences in the data, in the group discussions we asked what the differences were. In response, the participants said that the Ministry of Education has decided that holders of bachelor's degrees must teach third level subjects. However, graduates of vocational preparatory and high schools teach in first and second cycle schools.

Participants believe that very talented teachers go to high schools to make a name for themselves through courses or private lessons to earn more money.

According to the data received, the teachers in the third level are more women. So, we asked if men are better teachers therefore, they are teaching in high school. The overall response of the participants was that women teachers are capable enough to teach in high school. Rather, it is because women are responsible for raising children and families in addition to teaching, and in our society, women are not easily allowed to go home to teach private lessons.

4.1. Social Needs

Participants in the discussions highlighted several themes as described below:

4.1.1. Changes in age and educational level

Obviously, students in this level start at the age of 12, during which hormonal and biological changes occur. At this age, students want to prove themselves and show their strength. Likes to showcase his/her abilities and likes to be independent. That is not easily accepted by them. Because neither in the family nor at school, there was no preparation for how to deal with this stage. However, students should be encouraged to demonstrate their abilities and develop their own personalities by thinking critically to become creative.

4.1.2. Mix Third Level with The First and Second Levels

Mixing with minors is one of the social problems they encounter. Because this age group likes to show off, in schools with the first and second levels, they test their strength over their minors, which becomes a social problem.

4.1.3. Emotional Attachment and Behavioral Change.

That age needs to express affection to connect with the school and teachers so that they can take their subjects more easily. and correcting their inappropriate behavior. However, due to the lack of expertise of many teachers in how to deal with this age, lack of teacher staff and gaps in lessons, it is observed that behavioral deviation starts and develops at this age. For example, smoking begins at this age, and sexual relations between boys and girls begin and develop at this age. At the same time, the ridicule and arrogance of some students over others begins at this age. However, the shortage of property has been addressed by lecturers. However, the lecturers have not attended any pedagogical courses to know how to deal with students. The technology screens and peer groups educate that stage.

4.2. Academic Needs

In the same discussion, the academic needs were identified in several needs.

4.2.1. Programs

The programs do not take into account the current needs of the stage, but provide some information to the students, many of which may not be necessary. Therefore, the programs have not become of interest to the students. Only in the science textbooks in grade nine, some attention has been paid to this sensitive stage, but it needs to be revised. Social workers are also not involved in developing programs to address students' academic and social needs.

4.2.2. Teacher Staff and Teacher Ability

Because the teacher-student ratio is lower than in other stages of education, the lack of pedagogical courses and how to deal with this stage has become a problem in schools.

4.2.3. Technology

One of the academic needs of the time is technology, which is available to all students. However, due to the lack of electronic education and the inexperience of many teachers, technology has not been used as a modern and academic need, but has caused major problems in educational institutions, especially in the third level. That is one of the problems that schools are trapped with. However, the Ministry of Education has begun to digitalize all its work in stages. It started with *E-Parwarda*, then e-library and e-training. The process of electronic education in the Kurdistan Region is currently in its infancy. However, financial problems and the ability of teachers to use technology have made the process slow to believe and implement.

4.3. Social Worker

Because of their preoccupation with school problems and student problems related to student relationships, social workers have not been able to explore the content of needs and find solutions for them. Because they have limited authority in schools and cannot participate in the formulation of Ministry of Education policy and programs. Sometimes social workers have reportedly raised the needs of students but it has not been acted upon. This has disappointed social workers.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper addresses the needs (social and academic) of students in grades seven to nine. This paper concludes that there is a gap in addressing and meeting these needs. This paper suggests the role of the school social workers be expanded when dealing with these stage groups. The Epstein's Framework on Involvement can be utilized effectively with these stage groups, which include the following:

1. Parenting. Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age

and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.

2. Communicating. Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home that are effective and reliable.

3. Volunteering. Improve recruitment and training to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school. Provide meaningful work and flexible scheduling.

4. Learning at Home. Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities.

5. Decision Making. Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and other organizations.

6. Collaborating with the Community. Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities." (Van Roekel, D., 2008).

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