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RESEARCH REPORT

"Hidden Dropouts": A Reexamination of Student Disengagement in Israel
Executive Summary

Dalia Ben Rabi ✦ Ruth Baruj-Kovarsky ✦ Miriam Navot ✦ Viacheslav Konstantinov

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Dalia Ben Rabi   Ruth Baruj-Kovarsky
Miriam Navot   Viacheslav Konstantinov

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Executive Summary

1. Background and Introduction

School fills an important role in the life of youth, being, for most, the main framework for acquiring scholastic skills and maintaining social relations with peers. To leave school prematurely – to drop out – is a complex social problem with considerable socio-economic implications for both the dropouts and society. These may take the form of low earnings in the future, employment difficulties, health problems and low self-esteem.

Formerly, the main concern of policymakers was the students who quit school altogether. Recently, however, attention has also turned to students defined as "hidden dropouts": back in 1994, a Director General's Bulletin at the Ministry of Education already distinguished between "overt dropout," formally leaving school, and "hidden dropout," characteristic of students who are physically present in the classroom but do not function scholastically, disengage from existing frameworks, and feel alienated from the class and the school.

It is common today for the professional literature to speak of "disengagement" as a reflection of a student's behavior and feelings towards school. Disengagement may lead to overt dropout. Nonetheless, policymakers now accept the importance of intervention to improve a student's wellbeing before the hidden dropout can become overt. Thus, interventions that endeavor to improve the school climate, prevent violence or make the curriculum more relevant and meaningful are designed primarily to improve a student's learning experience and wellbeing at school although they may of course prevent overt dropping out as well.

In contrast to the data about overt dropouts – which are published yearly by the Ministry of Education and Central Bureau of Statistics – data about hidden dropouts are not published regularly, apparently because of the methodological difficulty in monitoring the phenomenon. In a study conducted by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) in 2001 for the Knesset Committee on the Rights of the Child, "hidden dropouts" were defined as students who are still formally enrolled at school but do not derive the anticipated benefit from the learning process. The study was the first attempt of its kind to estimate the extent of the phenomenon in Israel, through emphasis on the students' own perspective of school. Following the study, a Knesset Committee was established on the issue of dropouts, which submitted a series of recommendation (Special Committee for School Dropout 2002). In the years since the recommendations were published, and in their spirit, the Ministry of Education launched a number of activities and initiatives.

Given the importance attributed to reducing the number of hidden dropouts and the changes instituted in the education system, the need arose for a fresh look at the attributes and extent of the problem. Initiated by the chairperson of the Knesset Committee on the Rights of the Child and commissioned by the Knesset Research and Information Center, this study presents up-to-date estimates of the extent of hidden dropout.

2. Study Goal and Research Methods

2.1 Study Goal

The goal of the study was to provide educational professionals, program developers policymakers and researchers with an up-to-date picture of dropout and its attributes as a basis for developing policy and interventions. The study focused on these questions:

- What is the extent of the problem in Israel vs. other countries?

- What is the extent of the problem among different populations in Israel, among students of different backgrounds (age, sex, sector (Jewish or Arab), socio-economic status), and in different types of schools?

- Have there been changes in the extent of the phenomenon in Israel over time, in general and among different populations?

- What other difficulties characterize disengaged students?

2.2 Research Methods

The study examined the hidden dropout problem through three dimensions that are used in the literature today: behavioral, emotional and attitudinal:

- *Behavioral* – frequent absences, tardiness, difficulty following school rules, little involvement in studies and other school activities

- *Emotional* – a sense of alienation from, and little sense of belonging to, school; difficulties in relations with other students

- *Attitudinal* – a negative attitude to school including a sense that school contributes little and is not meaningful.

We used several data sources. The main one was the database of the 2012 PISA tests administered to a representative sample of 15-year-old students in Israel and in OECD countries[1]. These contained questions about school attendance and about feelings and attitudes towards school and studies, and made it possible to relate to the three dimensions of disengagement. In addition, we used:

- Data from the HBSC surveys of health and risk behaviors, which are administered every 2-4 years to grades 6-12 in Israel and other countries[2], and enable examination of the problem among different age groups over time.

- Data collected as part of 360^0, the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk in 2009, based on teachers' reports of the extent of various types of risk (including, disengagement and
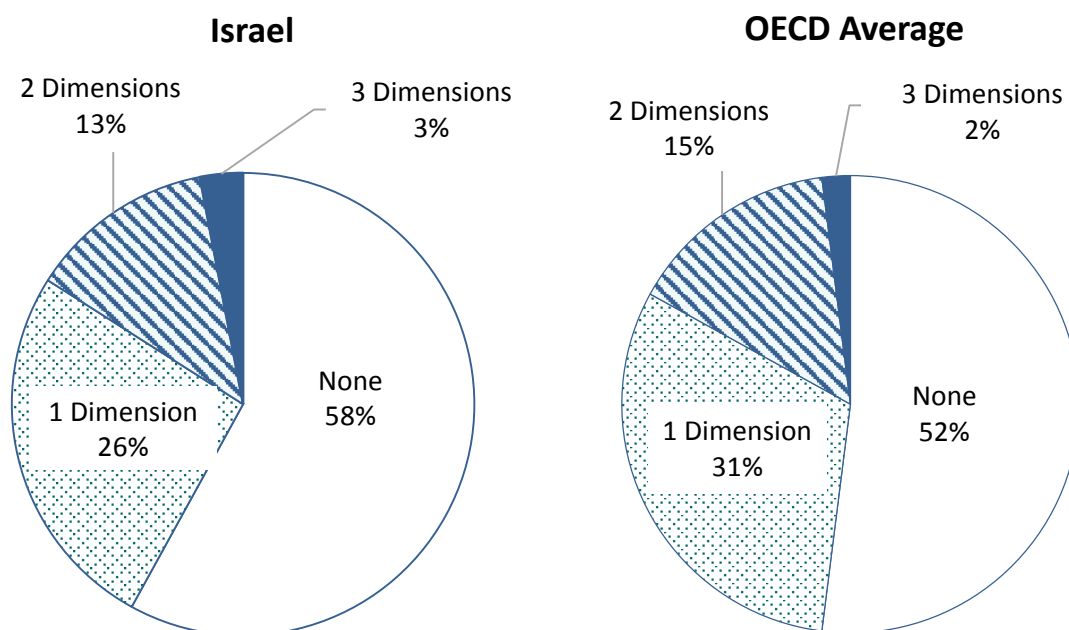
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[1] OECD 2012. Data: http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/datafiles.asp
[2] http://www.biu.ac.il/soc/hbsc/books.html

hidden dropouts) among students in grades 1-12, in some 70 localities characterized by low socio-economic status[3].

3. Main Findings

3.1 Extent of Disengagement in Israel and OECD Countries

- ◆ 42% of Israeli 15-year-olds reported at least 1 dimension of disengagement; 13% – 2 dimensions; and 3% – all 3 dimensions (See Figure 1).

- ◆ The rate reporting any disengagement was lower in Israel than the average rate for OECD countries (42% vs. 48%, respectively) (See Figure 1). However, the percent of students reporting all three types of disengagement – 3% - was higher than the OECD average – 2%

- ◆ In Israel vs. OECD countries, more students reported behavioral disengagement (measured here by reports of considerable absenteeism and tardiness): 15% in Israel vs. the 8% OECD average; and fewer students reported emotional disengagement (a sense of alienation from, and not belonging to, school): 24% in Israel vs. the 35% OECD average. The extent of attitudinal disengagement (perceiving school as not contributing to a student's life and future) was similar: 22% for Israeli students and 24% for the OECD average (See Figure 2).

Figure 1: Distribution of Number of Disengagement Dimensions in Israel and OECD Countries (Average) among 15-Year-Old Students, by PISA Tests 2012 (%)

Israel

2 Dimensions
13%

3 Dimensions
3%

1 Dimension
26%

None
58%

OECD Average

2 Dimensions
15%

3 Dimensions
2%
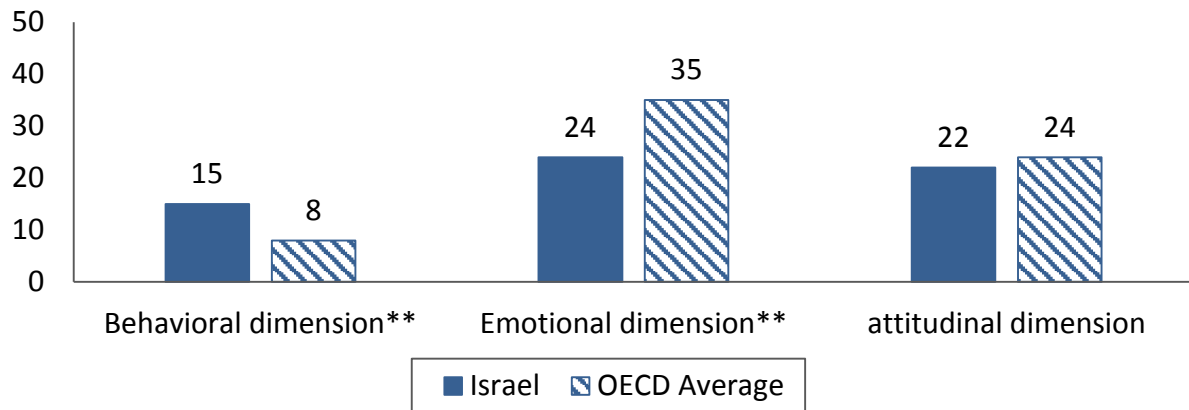
1 Dimension
31%

None
52%

Number of respondents: Israel- 3,126; OECD- 191,042

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3   http://brookdaleheb.jdc.org.il/_Uploads/PublicationsFiles/RR-589-Characteristics-of-children-and-youth-at-risk-FINAL-b-heb.pdf

Figure 2: Prevalence of Disengagement Dimensions in Israel and OECD Average among 15-Year-Old Students, by PISA Tests 2012 (%)

**P<0.01

3.2 Extent of Disengagement among Different Populations in Israel

The extent of disengagement was especially high among boys in Arabic schools (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Prevalence of Disengagement Dimensions in Israel, by Sex and Sector, according to PISA Tests 2012 (Age 15); (%)
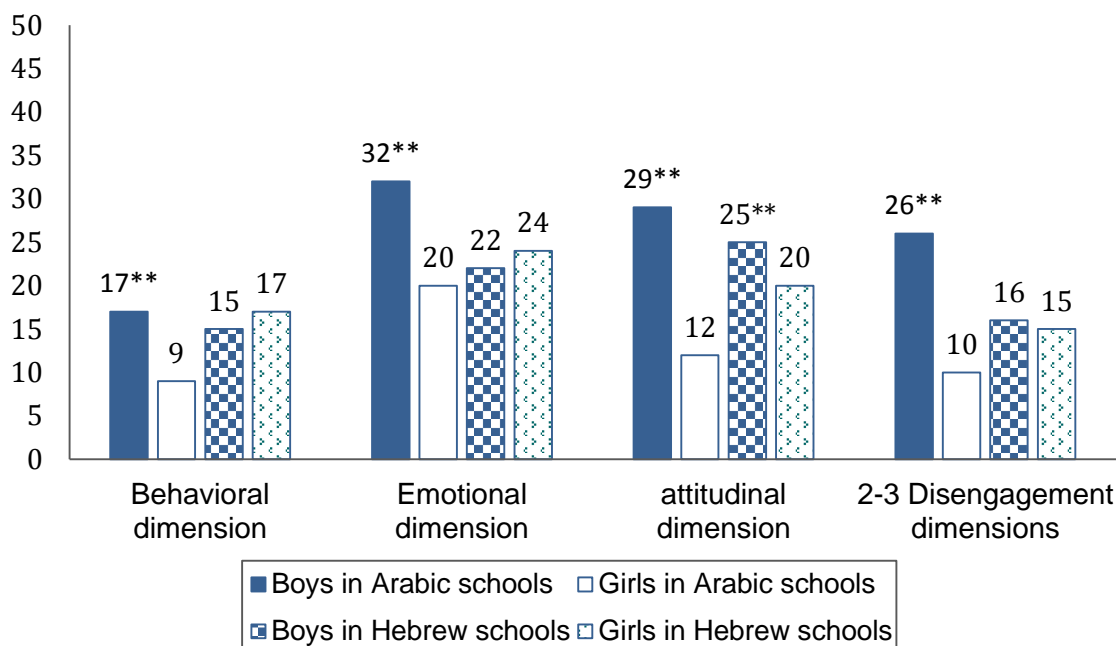
**P<0.01 (Asterisks denote significant differences between boys and girls in each sector)
  Number of respondents: Boys, Hebrew schools – 1,082; girls, Hebrew schools – 1,334; boys, Arabic schools – 323; girls, Arabic schools – 387

- The extent of behavioral disengagement (absenteeism and tardiness), and emotional disengagement (a sense of alienation and non-belonging) was greater among girls in religious schools than among other groups (boys in religious schools, and boys and girls in non-religious schools). The extent of attitudinal disengagement (perceiving school as non-contributive) was greater among boys in non-religious schools than among other groups.

- Various manifestations of disengagement already appear in elementary school and increase with age (notably behavioral disengagement – absenteeism and tardiness).

- More students from a low than a high socio-economic background reported 2-3 dimensions of disengagement – mainly behavioral and emotional (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Prevalence and Number of Disengagement Dimensions, by Socio-Economic Level among 15-Year-Olds, by PISA Test 2012 (%)
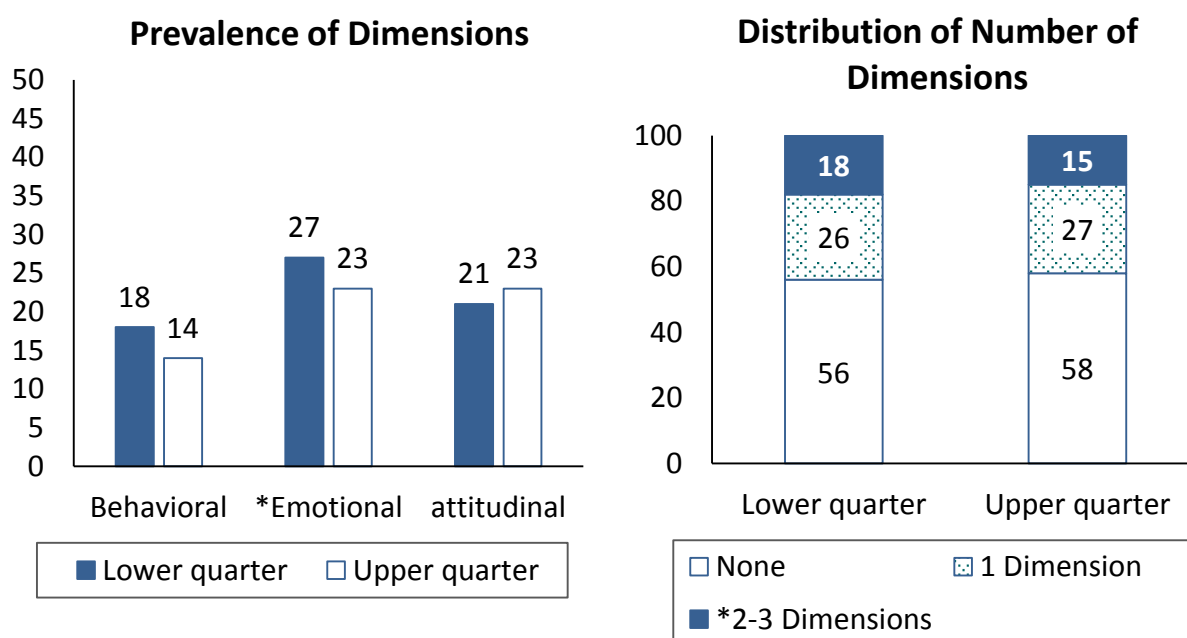
*P<0.05
Number of respondents: Lower quarter = 771, upper quarter = 775

- In Arabic schools, more students in socio-economically weak schools than in stronger schools reported disengagement on 2-3 dimensions, and more emotional and attitudinal disengagement. In Hebrew schools, no differences were found by socio-economic level.

- More students with college-educated parents than less educated parents reported attitudinal disengagement (perceiving school as non-contributive to their lives and future).

3.3 Changes in Extent of Disengagement Dimensions over Time

- The analysis was based on HBSC surveys (which only examined behavioral and emotional dimensions). It found that from 1998 to 2010 in Hebrew schools, there was a decrease in reports by students in grades 6, 8 and 10 of behavioral disengagement (absence from school

for whole days or lessons). On the other hand, in Arabic schools, there was an increase in the extent of behavioral disengagement. This finding may be explained by the presence in Arabic schools of more students with difficulties due to the increase in the past decade in the number of students who complete high school. (See Figure 5).

◆ As regards emotional disengagement, there was some decrease among boys in Hebrew schools and girls in Arabic schools. Among girls in Hebrew schools and boys in Arabic schools, there was no significant change in the extent of emotional disengagement.

Figure 5: Changes in the Extent of Disengagement Dimensions in Hebrew and Arabic Schools Grades 6, 8, 10, by HBSC Surveys in 1998, 2004 and 2010/11 (%)
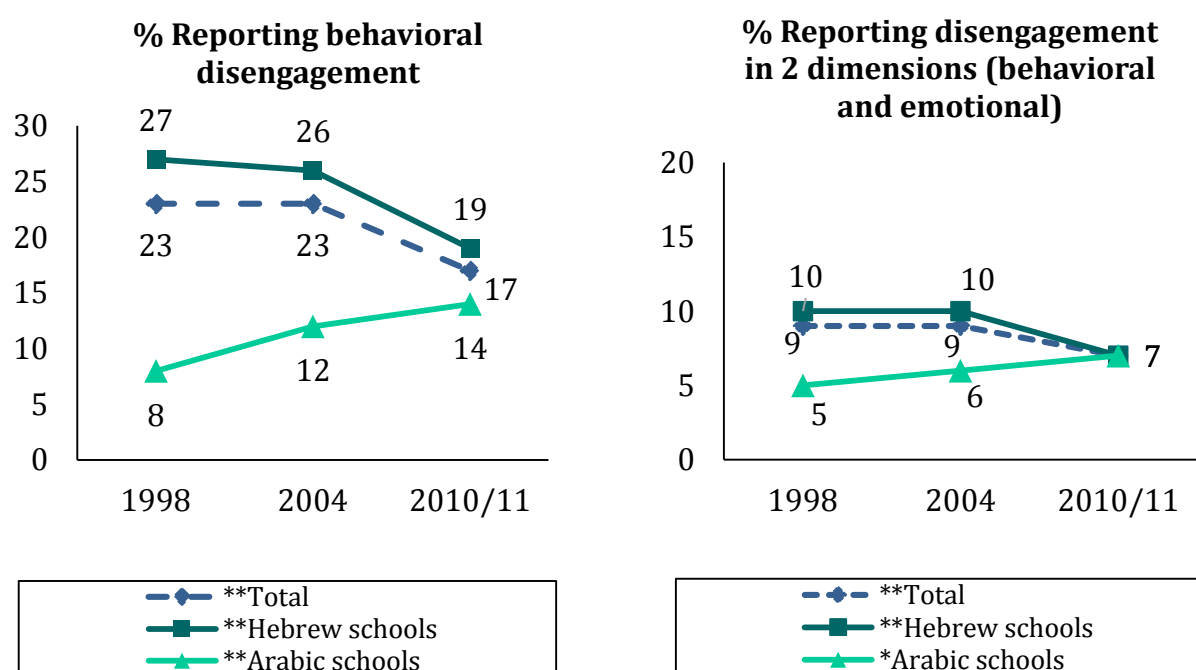
**p<0.05; *,P<0.01

3.4 Additional Difficulties of Students Reporting Disengagement

◆ The more dimensions of disengagement reported by students (2-3 vs. 1 vs. none), the higher the percentage that scored low on the PISA tests of literacy performance (See Figure 6). However, among girls in Hebrew schools, there was no difference in achievements by the number of disengagement dimensions.

◆ In general, the percentage of students who reported 2-3 disengagement dimensions and also scored low on achievement tests was higher among boys in Arabic schools, among students from weaker socio-economic backgrounds, and among students whose parents were not college-educated.

- More students reporting 2 disengagement dimensions (than those reporting 1 or none) also reported risk behavior, communication problems with parents. and emotional difficulties (according to the HBSC survey). However, not all students who reported 2 dimensions also reported risk behavior (See Figure 7). The percentage reporting 2 disengagement dimensions and risk behavior was especially high among boys in Arabic schools (compared with the other groups). All in all, the percentage of students reporting 2 dimensions and also risk behavior was higher in Arabic (than Hebrew) schools and among boys (than girls).

Figure 6: Level of Scores of 15-Year-Old Students for Reading in their Mother Tongue on PISA Test 2012, by Number of Disengagement Dimensions Reported (%)
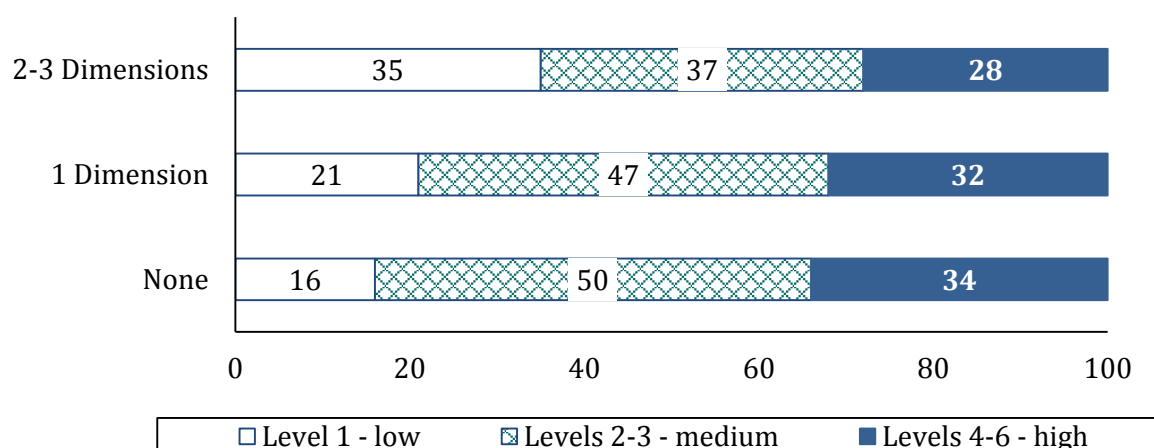
**P<0.01

Figure 7: Risk Behaviors among Students of Grades 6, 8, 10-12, by Number of Disengagement Dimensions, according to HBSC Survey 2010-11 (%)
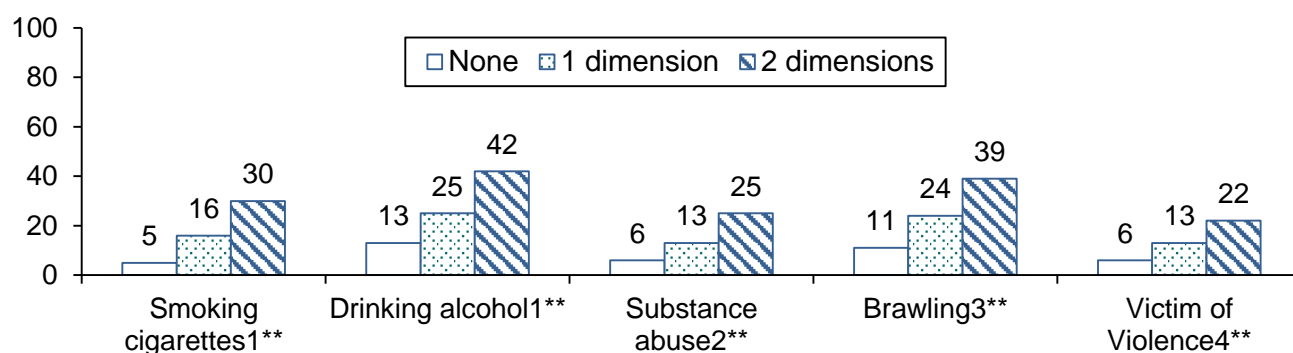
Number of respondents: None = 2,535; 1 dimension = 1,711; 2 dimensions = 428;
[1] At least once a week
[2] At least once in the past year, only grades 10-12
[3] At least one of the following three: brawling at least three times in the past year, bullying other students on school grounds at least 3 times in the past two months, carrying a weapon at least once in the past month.
[4] Victim of violence/bullying on school grounds at least three times in the past two months.
**p<0.01

4. Main Issues Emerging from the Findings

◆ The study showed that substantial rates of students in Israel report various dimensions of disengagement from school and studies. According to the findings, many more of the students reporting more than 1 disengagement dimension (as opposed to 1 or none) were characterized by risk behaviors and low scholastic achievement, and as such are an object of great concern. But even those reporting only 1 disengagement dimension may find their wellbeing seriously impaired and be unable to take full advantage of most scholastic and social activity at school.

◆ The education system has adopted various initiatives and activities in recent years, in the effort to reduce disengagement. A comparison of the data over the years points to a decrease in behavioral disengagement in Hebrew schools (as expressed by absence from school and lessons), and in emotional disengagement among boys in Hebrew schools and girls in Arabic schools. Given the implementation of reforms and new policies – such as Ofek Hadash (New Horizon), Oz LeTmura (Courage to Change), and the emphasis on "meaningful learning" – follow-up should continue of changes in the extent of disengagement (especially emotional and attitudial).

◆ While absenteeism in Hebrew schools has decreased somewhat over the years (alongside increased absenteeism in Arabic schools), its extent in Israel is still rather high compared with OECD averages. Influenced by culture, absenteeism is nevertheless relatively easy to address through enforcement and suitable policy. However, strict attention to regular attendance should be accompanied by the strengthening of student involvement in learning processes (such as participation in classroom discussions), which are another aspect of behavioral disengagement.

◆ Apart from relating to the dimensions of disengagement, attention should be paid to risk situations and difficulties that are reported more frequently among students reporting disengagement, especially in more than 1 dimension – scholastic difficulties, violence, substance abuse, emotional difficulties, and communication problems with parents.

◆ The findings, like others from around the world, revealed that even students characterized by disengagement in more than 1 dimension do not constitute a uniform group. Alongside students reporting disengagement and additional needs, as noted above, the study pointed to a group reporting multiple areas of disengagement whose scholastic achievements were nonetheless appropriate. This finding applied mainly to Hebrew schools and was more common among girls and students with college-educated parents. There were also students who reported both emotional and behavioral disengagement yet displayed no risk behavior (again, true mainly of Hebrew schools and girls). Closer attention should be paid to identifying these students. As they exhibit no prominent difficulties, they are harder to detect yet their wellbeing is also at risk from disengagement, as is their ability to take full advantage of scholastic and social activity at school.

◆ While disengagement from school was found among all the population groups, certain groups warrant special consideration:

- *Students in Arabic schools* – There were substantial differences in the rates of disengagement of boys and girls in Arabic schools. However, in the past decade, both reported increased absenteeism and tardiness (behavioral disengagement). Concomitantly, there was a substantial decrease in overt dropout, meaning that many more students with learning/adjustment difficulties now remain in school. These students, apparently, need assistance to maintain a high level of attendance.

- *Boys in Arabic schools* – Substantially higher percentages of boys in Arabic schools (vs. girls in Arabic schools and both boys and girls in Hebrew schools) reported a considerable extent of disengagement (2-3 dimensions), notably emotional and attitudinal. Among boys in Arabic schools (whether or not they reported disengagement, although more so if they did), risk behaviors were more common and scholastic achievements were lower than in all other groups. It is important to understand the reasons for these findings and explore the implementation of interventions directed specifically at this group.

- *6th-graders* – As in the higher grades, about a third of the students in 6th grade reported emotional or behavioral disengagement. Moreover, some 6th-graders reported both, and were characterized by a sizable rate of different risk behaviors. Presumably, students so characterized at a young age will face greater risk of disengagement situations as they grow older. This group demands special attention in order to intervene as early as possible and prevent the increase of disengagement and risk. To learn more about this group, its characteristics and difficulties, more studies are needed along with follow-up over time.

- *Students from a low socio-economic background* – These students, vs. students from a high socio-economic background, reported more dimensions of disengagement, particularly behavioral and emotional. There were no substantial differences between this and other groups as regards attitudinal disengagement (regarding school as non-contributive).

◆ *Monitoring and Measuring* – There is room for examining ways to sustain ongoing data collection on disengagement at different ages. This is particularly true for emotional and attitudinal disengagement, which are difficult to appraise from administrative reports. Furthermore, data collection should be expanded on additional aspects of behavioral disengagement, such as participation in discussions in class and in school activities beyond the curriculum. Follow-up over time of the same students would make it possible to learn of the development of situations of disengagement and their implications for the learning outcomes of the students.

Acknowledgments

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