

SCHOOL WELL-BEING AND PROBLEM BEHAVIORS: EXPLORING THE CORRELATION IN PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS

BENESSERE SCOLASTICO E COMPORTAMENTI PROBLEMA: ESPLORARE LA CORRELAZIONE NEGLI STUDENTI DEGLI ISTITUTI PROFESSIONALI



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ABSTRACT

School well-being is a key protective factor against disengagement and deviant behaviors. This study investigates the relationship between school well-being and problem behaviors in a sample of 110 students from professional schools and their parents. Data are collected through the QBS (Questionnaire on School Well-being), administered to both students and parents, the SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), completed by students, and the SBI (School Burnout Inventory), used to assess students' perceived school-related distress. The analysis explores whether lower well-being scores correlate with higher levels of emotional distress, conduct problems and peer difficulties. Findings aim to highlight early risk factors for school disengagement and marginalization, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Il benessere scolastico rappresenta un importante fattore protettivo contro il disimpegno e i comportamenti devianti. Il presente studio indaga la relazione tra benessere scolastico e comportamenti problema in un campione di 110 studenti provenienti da istituti professionali e nei loro genitori. I dati sono stati raccolti mediante il QBS (Questionario sul Benessere Scolastico), somministrato sia agli studenti sia ai genitori, lo SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), compilato dagli studenti, e lo SBI (School Burnout Inventory), utilizzato per valutare il disagio scolastico percepito dagli studenti. L'analisi esplora se punteggi più bassi di benessere siano correlati a livelli più elevati di disagio emotivo, problemi di condotta e difficoltà relazionali con i pari. I risultati mirano a mettere in luce precoci fattori di rischio per il disimpegno scolastico e la marginalizzazione, sottolineando la necessità di interventi mirati a promuovere ambienti di apprendimento inclusivi e di supporto.

KEYWORDS

School well-being; Problem behaviors; Marginalization; Vocational education

Benessere scolastico; Comportamenti-problema; Marginalizzazione Istruzione professionale

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1. Introduction

School well-being is a multidimensional construct that encompasses a wide range of factors. As a result, its definitions and methods of assessment vary significantly, placing the responsibility on the researcher to determine which dimensions to prioritize. Nonetheless, the literature identifies several recurring variables, such as self-efficacy, the quality of peer and teacher relationships, and emotional well-being (Schütte et al., 2021; Steinmayr et al., 2023).

Well-being at school depends on the interaction between individual and contextual variables: on one side, the student's personal characteristics and family environment; on the other, school-related factors such as the quality of teaching, relationships with teachers, and institutional policies. Difficulties in one or more of these areas may manifest as problem behaviors observable within the school context, making the school a privileged setting for the early detection of psychological distress (Joing et al., 2022).

Problem behaviors are generally categorized as internalizing (e.g., social withdrawal, anxiety, sadness) and externalizing (e.g., hyperactivity, defiance, aggression). If not properly addressed, these behaviors may evolve into deviant or antisocial conduct during adolescence or adulthood. Studies also show that such dynamics are associated with other critical variables, such as school dropout, affiliation with deviant peers, and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Wang & Degol, 2022). These relationships appear to be especially pronounced in the presence of specific learning disabilities (SLDs).

This article presents the first phase of a research project conducted in a vocational school in Northern Italy, aimed at investigating the correlations between perceived school well-being and the presence of problem behaviors among students. The study also recorded the presence of Personalized Didactic Plans (PDPs) and collected parents' perceptions of school well-being, although the latter will not be addressed in this article.

The central hypothesis is that a significant relationship exists between school well-being and problem behaviors. More specifically, the study hypothesizes: 1) negative correlations between internalizing/externalizing behaviors and self-efficacy or the relationship with teachers; 2) an association between low academic achievement and behavioral problems; 3) a link between poor academic performance and weak relationships with teachers; and 4) correlations between the presence of a PDP and: a) more frequent problem behaviors, b) lower self-efficacy, c) poorer emotional and motivational well-being.

2.Methodology

The research was conducted in a vocational school in Northern Italy, with informed consent obtained from parents. Students completed three questionnaires via Google Forms. The first was the Questionnaire on School Well-being (QBS), consisting of 27 items investigating five dimensions: school satisfaction, relationship with teachers, relationship with peers, emotional attitude at school, and self-efficacy (Tobia & Marzocchi, 2015). The second was the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), in its validated Italian version, composed of 25 items divided into five subscales: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial behavior (Tobia, Gabriele and Marzocchi, 2013). The third was the School Burnout Inventory (SBI), composed of 9 items, used as an indicator of perceived school-related distress (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru et al., 2009).

The collected data were coded according to the official guidelines of the respective manuals. Subscale scores were calculated for each questionnaire, along with total scores (e.g., total difficulties for the SDQ). Statistical analyses were performed using spreadsheet and statistical software (e.g., Excel/SPSS/Python), and included, in addition to basic descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) for each scale:

1. Pearson correlation analyses between:
 - a) the QBS subscales and the SDQ subscales
 - b) QBS and SBI
 - c) SDQ and SBI
2. Independent samples t-tests, comparing average well-being and behavioral difficulty scores between:
 - a) students with and without a PDP
 - b) male and female students

Results were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

3.Results

The data analysis provided a detailed overview of students' perceptions of school well-being, behavioral difficulties, and school-related burnout.

3.1 School Well-being (QBS)

The overall average score on the Questionnaire on School Well-being was 1.12 out of 2, indicating a moderately positive level of perceived well-being. The areas perceived most favorably were peer relationships and satisfaction with academic performance. Conversely, notable weaknesses emerged in the emotional experience at school and the perception of self-efficacy.

3.2 Problem Behaviors (SDQ)

The average SDQ scores revealed a generally moderate situation, though with some critical areas. The average total difficulties score was around 8–9 points, placing it in the “normal” range, albeit with some exceptions.

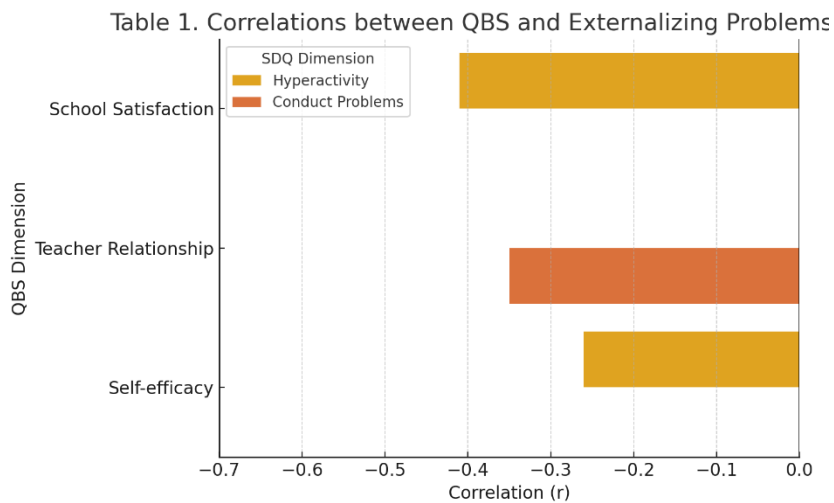
In particular: emotional symptoms showed the highest average (~1.9), followed by conduct problems (~1.3) and hyperactivity (~1.2). Peer relationship problems were lower (~0.9), though still present. Prosocial behavior showed a good level (~2.1), suggesting a general tendency toward cooperation.

Risk classifications indicated that while most students fell within the normal range, a non-negligible proportion exhibited borderline or abnormal profiles, especially in the internalizing area (anxiety, withdrawal, insecurity).

3.3 Correlations between school well-being and behavioral difficulties

Significant negative correlations emerged between externalizing behaviors (hyperactivity and conduct problems) and the dimensions of school well-being. In particular:

Students with higher levels of hyperactivity tended to report lower school satisfaction ($r = -0.41$) and lower self-efficacy ($r = -0.26$). Conduct problems were associated with more conflictual relationships with teachers ($r = -0.35$). These findings suggest that more oppositional or impulsive students feel less recognized and supported by adult figures and have a less positive perception of their academic role.

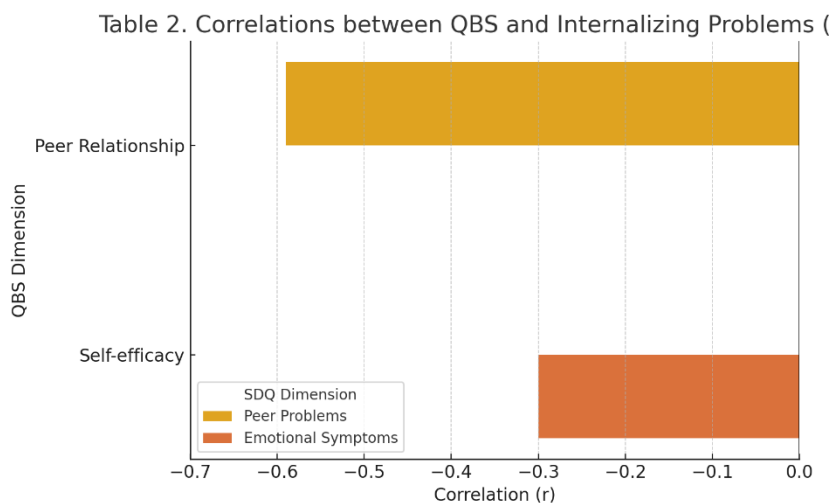


Tab. 1 Correlations between QBS and Externalizing Problems, SDQ

Internalizing behaviors

Peer relationships were the most affected dimension in cases of emotional distress. A strong negative correlation was observed between peer problems and the quality of peer relationships ($r = -0.59$), as well as a significant correlation between emotional symptoms and low self-efficacy ($r = -0.30$).

In summary, students with greater emotional vulnerability tend to feel isolated and less capable of managing academic demands.



Tab. 2 Correlations between QBS and Internalizing Problems, SDQ

3.4 School burnout

School burnout showed a moderately strong negative correlation with school well-being ($r = -0.51$). In particular, the perception of academic inadequacy was associated with low self-efficacy and low satisfaction with academic results. Burnout thus appears as a transversal indicator of school-related distress, reflecting generalized emotional and motivational discomfort.

3.5 PDP and behavioral difficulties

A particularly significant finding concerns students with a Personalized Didactic Plan (PDP). One hundred percent of these students displayed significant behavioral or emotional difficulties. Among students without a PDP, the percentage of distress remained high (over 80%), suggesting the presence of many cases of unmet or unrecognized needs.

Internalizing vulnerability was more evident among female students, while male students showed similar levels of difficulty but were generally less likely to be formally identified.

3. Discussion

The results confirm the initial hypothesis of a significant relationship between school well-being and problem behaviors. In line with international literature (Goodman et al., 1997; Caprara et al., 2000), the dimensions of school well-being appear to be sensitive to the presence of both internalizing and externalizing behavioral and emotional difficulties.

Students exhibiting externalizing behaviors (impulsivity, disobedience, hyperactivity) tend to report lower levels of school satisfaction, weaker relationships with teachers, and a diminished sense of personal efficacy. The negative correlations found between hyperactivity and satisfaction ($r = -0.41$), and between conduct problems and teacher relationships ($r = -0.35$), suggest that the vertical relational dimension (i.e., relationships with adults) represents a critical point in the school experience of these students (cfr. Smith & Thompson, 2024).

School self-efficacy emerges as a transversal factor: students with externalizing behaviors feel less capable of coping with academic demands (Zhao & Wang, 2022). This perception may not only be a consequence of their distress, but also a maintaining factor in a dysfunctional cycle of oppositional behavior and perceived failure.

In the case of internalizing behaviors (anxiety, withdrawal, insecurity), distress seems to manifest primarily in the horizontal relational dimension, namely peer relationships. The strong correlation between peer problems and the quality of peer interactions ($r = -0.59$) suggests that social withdrawal and difficulties in integration are the main indicators of distress in students with emotional vulnerability (cfr. Wang & Degol, 2022; Chen & Li, 2024).

In this group as well, perceived self-efficacy is reduced ($r = -0.30$), confirming Muris et al.'s (2003) findings regarding the interdependence between perceived competence and psychological distress.

The School Burnout Inventory proved to be a useful bridging indicator between psychological distress and a negative perception of school life. Burnout, understood as a chronic feeling of exhaustion, inadequacy, and detachment from school, showed a significant correlation with reduced school satisfaction and self-efficacy ($r = -0.51$). In this regard, burnout may serve as an early warning sign, even in the absence of overt behavioral problems (cfr. Gonzalez & Perez, 2022).

The association between the presence of a Personalized Didactic Plan (PDP) and behavioral or emotional difficulties is clear: all students with a PDP scored critically on the SDQ. However, the high percentage of distress also found among students without a PDP raises important questions. These may represent cases not identified by the school system, or forms of distress that, while not formalized, are equally impactful. Furthermore, the greater internal vulnerability observed among girls with PDP supports the hypothesis of selective underdiagnosis or gender-based differences in how distress is expressed.

Conclusions

The findings support the idea that school well-being is not a secondary or accessory construct, but rather a central element in preventing the emergence of dysfunctional behaviors (Steinmayr et al., 2023; Joing et al., 2022). In particular, the educational relationship with teachers appears to be a crucial protective factor, especially for students with externalizing tendencies. This becomes even more significant considering that those who exhibit externalizing behaviors are often not positively received by teachers, who may unintentionally contribute to the development of a negative self-image in the student (Zanetti, 2018). Developing programs that foster improved relationships between teachers and students with such difficulties could therefore become a powerful protective factor for both parties. Students may find significant adults they can rely on, while teachers could

benefit from reduced stress levels if the most problematic students began to place greater trust in them (e.g. Yada & Savolainen, 2023).

Peer relationships, on the other hand, are central in understanding internalizing distress—often less visible, yet equally pervasive.

School self-efficacy emerges as a bridge dimension between emotional and behavioral distress, making it a strategic target for educational interventions (Zhao & Wang, 2022). Although this dimension is often cited—perhaps excessively—in both psychological and pedagogical literature, the data confirm its foundational role in shaping individual and school well-being. It also serves as a key protective factor against the development of deviant and criminal behavior in adulthood (Aazami et al., 2023).

This issue becomes even more important when referring to students with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs). The data appear to confirm what is already documented in the literature: students with SLDs exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy, greater risk of school dropout, and poorer emotional well-being (Mammarella et al., 2016; Nelson & Harwood, 2011). Furthermore, an increasing body of research explores possible correlations between undiagnosed SLDs in childhood and the commission of criminal offenses in adulthood (e.g. Zanetti, 2024). While such studies often focus on the adult population—likely educated in a time when schools paid less attention to these difficulties—they prompt reflection on the actual effectiveness of inclusive policies and whether they are truly designed to prevent such behavioral escalation. This study, albeit based on partial data, demonstrates that the combined use of instruments such as the QBS, SDQ, and SBI allows for an integrated mapping of the school experience, which proves valuable both for preventive and diagnostic purposes.

In conclusion, schools—particularly in vocational contexts where the risk of disengagement is higher—should invest in ongoing monitoring practices and in educational strategies that strengthen students' socio-emotional skills, self-efficacy, and the quality of teacher-student relationships.

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