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## *Examining the Differences in School Satisfaction between Students and their Parents in Abu Dhabi*

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### **Abstract**

*There appeared to be no study in the extant literature that compared a student's school satisfaction with that of his/her parent. This study aimed to bridge this literature gap, drawing on data from a merged dataset of a student survey and a parent survey that were conducted in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi in 2013, involving 6,111 grade 5-12 public school students and their parents. The differences in school satisfaction between a student and his/her parent were examined through a paired analysis. The results showed that while student school satisfaction was highly correlated with parent school satisfaction, there was a statistically significant difference between a student and his/her parent in their ratings of school satisfaction, especially concerning the issues of school safety and parent involvement. Schools were reminded to factor in the potential differences in the opinions of different stakeholders in their stakeholder communication and school improvement effort.*

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## INTRODUCTION

School satisfaction and school climate surveys are becoming increasingly popular, as school administrators are keen to investigate the expectations and perceptions of stakeholders such as parents, students, and teachers about schools and schooling for improvement purposes (Bear, Yang, & Pasipanodya, 2015; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Parents' satisfaction with their children's school, for example, is often used as an important indicator for measuring school effectiveness.

While the importance of school satisfaction survey is emphasized, there is an evident gap in the extant literature in which students' school satisfaction is rarely compared with parents' school satisfaction and where it is, students' school satisfaction is examined separately from parents' school satisfaction. However, the assumption that students share the same views about the school or the same level of school satisfaction as their parents should not be taken for granted, as different stakeholders or constituents of the school system are bounded by their perceptual, cognitive, and cultural perspectives (Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011; Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1999). Moreover, cross-sectional comparisons based on independent analysis of student school satisfaction and parent school satisfaction do not factor in the between subject variability and thus may not meaningfully capture the differences of opinions between students and their parents.

### *Literature Review*

Existing research on school satisfaction attempts to understand the complex processes and factors accounting for the perceptions of the quality of school life (Huebner, Ash, & Laughlin, 2001). School climate has attracted much research attention in recent years and has been largely found to positively affect student's behavior and academic achievement (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Loukas & Murphy, 2007). Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil (2003) maintained that school social environment and practices, such as positive teacher-student relationships, successful peer relationships and a positive social climate, led to increased pupils' school satisfaction. This developmental ecological perspective for examining school satisfaction has received empirical support, as various research has indicated that supportive teacher-student relationships, teacher support, and a caring and supportive school climate are positively related to school satisfaction (Baker, 2006; Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009).

Within the school climate research, the role of the social and relational aspect of school climate has been explored by a number of researchers. In their multilevel analysis of Dutch elementary school students, Verkuyten & Thijs (2002) found that school satisfaction was dependent on the academic and social settings of the classroom. Several studies indicated that teacher support and peer relationship were among the strong predictors of student satisfaction (Danielsen *et al.*, 2009; Hui & Sun, 2010; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998; Zullig, Koopman, & Patton, 2011). Other school and classroom contextual factors that influence student satisfaction include student performance (Hui & Sun, 2010; Zullig *et al.*, 2011), perceived social and academic competence (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002), safe classroom environments (Samdal *et al.*, 1998), and order and discipline (Zullig *et al.*, 2011). In summary, school and classroom environments that are perceived as friendly, supportive, and safe by students are positively associated with their school satisfaction (OECD, 2006).

In addition to the effect of school climate, the school satisfaction literature focuses on identifying other determinants of school satisfaction and the differences among groups (Friedman, Bobrowski, & Geraci, 2006; Griffith, 2000; Thompson, 2003). Gender appears to be associated with student satisfaction, as girls

are generally more satisfied with school than boys (Ding & Hall, 2007; Gibbons & Silva, 2011; Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Student age and grade level influence student satisfaction with younger students expressing higher levels of satisfaction (Karatzias, Power, Flemming, Lennan, & Swanson, 2002; Nickerson & Nagle, 2004; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Teacher likeability, teacher gender, and class size could also be strong predictors of students' overall satisfaction with schooling (Karatzias *et al.*, 2002; Randolph, Kangas, & Ruokamo, 2010).

Research shows that parents' school satisfaction is driven by various school climate factors and their experience with their child's school. Teacher quality, parent participation, school communication, school safety, school facilities, and dining services all tend to affect parent satisfaction (Bond & King, 2003; Cooper & Letts, 2002; Friedman, Bobrowski, & Markow, 2007). School safety, in particular, tops the list of the most significant predictors of parent satisfaction in a number of studies (Cooper & Letts, 2002; Friedman *et al.*, 2006). Badri *et al.* (2011) largely confirmed the impact of various aspects of a child's schooling on parent satisfaction in the context of Abu Dhabi.

Parents' school satisfaction is also demonstrated to associate with their ethnical, cultural, and socioeconomic background (Friedman *et al.*, 2006; Rätty, Kasanen, & Honkalampi, 2006; Thompson, 2003). It is worth noticing that there is a gap between parental preferences for school characteristics and the information about the school that parents are able to access (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). Using a mix of field and natural experiments, Hastings & Weinstein (2008) showed that the provision of additional information on school characteristics did change the school choices of families.

Only a few studies have attempted to compare the differences in satisfaction reported by parents and students. Griffith (2000) examined the consensus between parents and their children related to school learning and social environment, and noted that several structural variables such as the characteristics of student population were related to the consensus. Gibbons & Silva (2011) studied the relation between school quality and the measures of enjoyment reported by pupils and their parents in England. Their results showed that parents cared more about school quality measured by test scores and their judgements of school quality and satisfaction were only moderately correlated with their child's enjoyment. Newgent *et al.* (2009) compared ratings of victimization from students, parents, teachers, school counselors, and principals, and revealed important discrepancies among those constituents. More recently, Beck, Maranto, & Lo (2014) examined student and parent school satisfaction in a cyber-charter school and found significant differences in school satisfaction among different demographical groups of students but not among parent groups. Nevertheless, there appears to be no paired analysis of students and parents school satisfaction in the extant literature.

### ***The Empirical Context***

The P-12 education in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi is comprised of public schools and private schools. While public schools in Abu Dhabi mainly cater for the schooling of Emirati students, they do enroll non-Emirati students who are selected based on achievement and merit. In the 2012/2013 academic year, there were 265 public schools across the three education districts - Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, and Al Dhafra, with a total enrolment of over 125,000 students. Student enrollment records showed that Emirati students accounted for nearly three quarters of the total, students from other Arab countries such as Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Sudan constituted more than 20 percent, and the remaining were non-Arab students.

The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), the authority that oversees the education system in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, has continued its journey towards enhancing students' learning experience and parent satisfaction since 2008. Since the introduction of the 'Abu Dhabi School Model', ADEC has introduced many school modernization and quality improvement initiatives with a view to raising the effectiveness of the public school system (Badri & Al Khaili, 2014). Sweeping changes have taken place in areas including

curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher professional development, school administration, and school inspection, as the new school model has been gradually rolled out (Macpherson, Kachelhoffer, & ElNemr, 2007). During this process, it is of vital importance for ADEC and educators to understand Abu Dhabi parents' expectations and their children's experience of schooling, which is essential to better align ADEC's school improvement effort with parents' and students' preferences.

### ***Purpose of the study***

This paper attempts to bridge the literature gap through working on a unique survey dataset where an identifier is available to link a student with his/her parent. Given that the pair (a student and his/her parent) live in the same family environment, the between subject variability can be substantially reduced. Therefore, the differences between their school satisfaction, if any, are likely to be caused by school factors or individual characteristics. Identifying and understanding such differences in school satisfaction among school stakeholders (students and parents in this case) can help schools to take more targeted actions and to better organize their communication strategies, which will contribute effectively to their school improvement effort.

As an exploratory research, this study draws on the results of two large surveys of students and parents carried out in 2013 in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It aims to contribute to the stream of school satisfaction research by conducting a paired analysis of pupil's and parent's school satisfaction and by focusing on the correlates of pupil's and parent's satisfaction in relation to their perceived school quality.

As the above literature review suggests, some school climate factors, structural and individual elements may affect the school satisfaction of parents and students differently. While parents' school satisfaction may be primarily resulted from their child's schooling experience and outcome, parents also have their own observations about the school and experience with the school, which may influence their school satisfaction level. More importantly, students and parents may perceive various aspects of schooling differently and attach different level of importance to them. The aim of this present study is to examine the differences in school satisfaction between students and their parents. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a strong positive relationship between parent satisfaction and student satisfaction with school.

H2: The level of a student's school satisfaction differs from that of his/her parent.

The hypotheses are tested using data from surveys of grade 5 to grade 12 public school students and their parents in Abu Dhabi. This study also investigates the individual, classroom, and school factors that contribute to the differences.

## **METHOD**

In 2013, ADEC administered a student survey to explore students' views about various aspects of their school environment and their schooling. Conducted once in two years, the student survey followed the school climate research (Cohen *et al.*, 2009) and covered grade 5 to grade 12 students in all Abu Dhabi public schools. The student survey was run in parallel with ADEC's annual parent survey targeting parents of both public and private schools, which was developed to measure the key dimensions of parent school satisfaction. Both surveys were designed in English and reviewed by a panel of school administrators and

researchers to ensure the content validity of the survey items. The questionnaires were then translated into Arabic and reverse translation was followed to check for consistency.

The total enrolment of grades 5-12 students in public schools was 74,238 in the 2012/2013 academic year. 18,774 students participated in the student survey, which represented a response rate of 25.3 per cent. The number of returned parent survey questionnaires was 52,534, with an estimated response rate of 43.2 per cent. For the public school parents, their survey ID was linked with their child's student survey ID, which enabled the merge of a sample of 7,763 public school students whose survey responses were matched with those of their parents.

The sample data were further inspected and cleaned through two procedures. First, missing values in the student survey were analyzed. One of the concerns when dealing with multivariate data with missing values is whether the missing data are missing completely at random (MCAR). Little's MCAR test is the most common test for analyzing missing cases. The results of Little's MCAR test indicated that the missing values appeared to be missing completely at random. Thus, the missingness of data was assumed not to matter for the analysis and cases with significant missing values were then removed from the database. Second, the student survey and the parent survey asked a few student demographic questions that are identical. Cases with inconsistent answers to student gender were removed. These two data cleaning procedures resulted in a final sample of 6,111 cases.

44.3 percent of the students in the sample were located in the Abu Dhabi School District, 47.3 percent in the Al Ain School District, and 8.3 percent in the Al Dhafra School District. 46.1 percent of the students were males and 53.9 percent were females. The ethnic composition of the sample was: UAE 62.9 percent, other Arabs 22.6 percent, and other nationalities 14.5 percent (Table 1). Overall, the sample well represents the grades 5-12 student population of Abu Dhabi's public schools in terms of distribution by district, gender, and grade, while it has a moderate under-representation of Emirati students and a moderate over-representation of students from non-Arab countries (Table 1). As for the profiles of parents, 34.9 percent of the sample completed high school, 18.0 percent acquired a bachelor degree, and 27.0 percent did not complete high school. The majority of parents were in the age range between 30 and 49.

Six items were taken from both the student and the parent survey to construct student satisfaction and parent satisfaction. As shown in Table 2, these questions are either identical or very similarly phrased. These items reflect several aspects of school climate or school satisfaction, including parent involvement, school safety, school physical environment, and general satisfaction. The responses to these questions were measured by a five point Likert rating scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

The development of these variables was based on the previous student and parent satisfaction surveys, as well as on relevant research. They were able to capture important and valid dimensions of student and parent school satisfaction. The internal consistency of the items was evaluated to be satisfactory (Table 2).

Correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between student school satisfaction and parent school satisfaction, followed by a paired analysis to examine the difference between the scores of student satisfaction and parent satisfaction. Regression analysis was conducted to test the differences in school satisfaction between student and parent regressed on some school and classroom factors and individual characteristics predictors.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	Sample Statistics		Population Parameters *
	Number	Per cent	Per cent
<b>School District</b>			
Abu Dhabi	2708	44.3	49.7
Al Ain	2893	47.3	42.0
Al Dhafra	510	8.3	8.3
<b>Student Gender</b>			
Male	2791	46.1	47.7
Female	3265	53.9	52.3
<b>Student Grade</b>			
5	752	12.3	12.8
6	957	15.7	13.5
7	977	16.0	12.6
8	794	13.0	13.2
9	804	13.2	12.1
10	634	10.4	11.3
11	684	11.2	12.0
12	509	8.3	12.6
<b>Student Nationality</b>			
UAE	3845	62.9	71.8
Other Arab countries	1380	22.6	21.1
Other countries	886	14.5	7.1
<b>Parent Gender</b>			
Male	3135	51.7	--
Female	2928	48.3	--
<b>Parent Education Level</b>			
Below high school	1621	27.0	--
High school	2092	34.9	--
Diploma after high school	569	9.5	--
Bachelor	1079	18.0	--
High diploma	211	3.5	--
Master	244	4.1	--
PhD	182	3.0	--
<b>Parent Age</b>			
Less than 20	173	2.8	--
20-29	256	4.2	--
30-39	2144	35.2	--
40-49	2376	39.1	--
50 or more	1134	18.6	--

\* Authors' own calculations based on ADEC's school data.

Classroom related predictors used in the regression model included six constructs of students' view of teacher's classroom instruction and management practices – the 6Cs (Confer, Consolidate, Clarify, Challenge, Control, and Care) (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012). The measure of 'challenging instruction', for example, was built on the responses of students to seven questions concerning teacher's endeavor to push students to study hard. All these constructs have a high Cronbach alpha above 0.9.

Table 2. Summary of questionnaire items

Items	Reliability	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Student Satisfaction</b>	0.663	21.18	4.703
I think this is a good school		3.62	1.276
My parents attend school activities if they are invited to		3.57	1.182
My parents call my teachers when they have concerns		3.61	1.214
I have been teased, made fun of, or called names more than once		3.39	1.456
My school building is kept clean		3.43	1.291
My school building is kept in good condition		3.56	1.268
<b>Parent Satisfaction</b>	0.754	21.83	4.660
Overall I am very satisfied with the school		3.63	1.121
I always attend any parents meeting that the school invites me to		3.62	1.098
It is easy for me to contact my child's teacher when I need to do so		3.71	1.103
My child has been repeatedly verbally hurt at school by other students (for example, teasing, name-calling, or spreading rumors)		3.72	1.281
My school building is kept clean		3.59	1.160
My school building is kept in good condition		3.57	1.189

From the parent survey, the construct of 'satisfaction with quality of learning' was comprised of five questions that asked parents to give their opinion about the quality of teaching and academic help that their child received at school. Representative questions included "the teachers at this school do an excellent job encouraging my child to become a highly engaged student in the classrooms" and "the teachers at this school encourage students to produce a high standard of work". From the student survey, the measure of 'school interpersonal relationships' was derived from students' report of their agreement with seven statements concerning the social and interpersonal sphere of school environment, including "people at this school are friendly to me" and "I'm included in lots of activities at school". In addition, students' responses to five statements such as "school work is interesting" and "we have interesting homework" led to the construct of 'students' interest in school work'. The responses to these questions are all measured by a five point Likert rating scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. These constructs all have a Cronbach alpha above 0.8.

Student and parent characteristic variables included student gender (male = 1, female = 2), student nationality (UAE = 1, other Arab countries = 2, and other countries = 3), and parent age (less than 20 years old = 1, 20-29 years old = 2, 30-39 years old = 3, 40-49 years old = 4, 50 years old or above = 5).

## FINDINGS

The relationship between the school satisfaction of a student and the school satisfaction of his/her parent was investigated using Pearson correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

As Table 3 shows, there is a strong, positive correlation between student satisfaction and parent satisfaction,  $r = .595$ ,  $n = 6111$ ,  $p < .0005$ . Student satisfaction helps to explain nearly 35 per cent of the variance in parent satisfaction scores. Therefore, H1 is supported.

The results of a paired-samples t-test (Table 4) show that there is a significant difference between the scores of student satisfaction and parent satisfaction, with evident decrease in school satisfaction from student ( $M = 21.18$ ,  $SD = 4.70$ ) to his/her parent ( $M = 21.83$ ,  $SD = 4.66$ ),  $t(6110) = -12.16$ ,  $p < .0005$  (two tailed). Thus, H2 is also supported. The eta squared statistic (.0236), however, indicates a small effect

size. This suggests that the difference between student and parent school satisfaction is meaningful only in a statistical sense.

**Table 3. Correlations between student school satisfaction and parent school satisfaction**

		Student school satisfaction	Parent school satisfaction
<b>Student school satisfaction</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.595**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	6111	6111
<b>Parent school satisfaction</b>	Pearson Correlation	.595**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	6111	6111

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 4. Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
S_SAT6 - P_SAT6	-.656	4.214	.054	-.761	-.550	-12.162	6110	.000

Specifically, the mean differences of those school satisfaction items suggest that students tend to differ from their parents concerning issues such as school safety, parental involvement, and the cleanness of school buildings, where parents’ rating of school safety is significantly lower than that of students (reversed coding) and their satisfaction with parental involvement and school cleanness are higher.

Apart from the above differences, the results of linear regression show that parent satisfaction with quality of learning (beta = -.564, p < .001), student view of school interpersonal relationships (beta = .495, p < .001), teacher instructional clarity (beta = -.103, p < .001), teacher continuous feedback (beta = -.080, p < .01), student interest in school work (beta = .064, p < .01), student gender (beta = -.034, p < .01), and parent age (beta = -.033, p < .01) make a statistically significant, unique contribution to the differences in school satisfaction between a student and his/her parent. Other classroom variables, as well as student nationality, do not make a significant unique contribution to the explanation of variance in school satisfaction between a student and his/her parent.

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This research has attempted to question an often taken-for-granted assumption, that is, students share the same views about the school as their parents. Indeed, many parent also often say ‘I am happy with the school if my child is happy’. However, while it sounds reasonable to assume that students and their parents are likely to have the same perceptions about the school, such an assumption needs to be tested.



The results of a paired analysis in this study revealed a statistically significant difference between a student's and his/her parent's reports of school satisfaction. Students tend to be less sensitive to the issue of bullying at school and less satisfied with parental involvement and school cleanliness, which their parent view a little more positively. Parent satisfaction with the quality of learning, student perceived school interpersonal relationships, teacher instructional clarity are among the school and classroom predictors that also contributed, to some extent, to the differences.

The findings of this study are generally consistent with the school choice literature which suggests that parents place priority on academics, safety, and some other school characteristics (Denessen, Driessen, & Slegers, 2005). In Abu Dhabi, a safe school environment, the quality of teaching, a strong curriculum in reading and mathematics, high academic standards and behavior standards, are all on the top of Abu Dhabi parents' list of school preferences (Yang, 2015). This research confirms that when parents are more satisfied with their child's quality of learning, the difference in school satisfaction between them and the children tends to be smaller. The important role of the social and relational aspect of school climate in student school satisfaction (Hui & Sun, 2010) is also supported.

People's perceptions are shaped by their experience and by different perspectives and concerns, and are bounded by their cognitive capability and the amount of accessed information (Varela *et al.*, 1999). Given information asymmetry, students and parents, especially the latter, may have to rely on each other to form individual perceptions about the school environment. Parents usually do not have enough chances to observe and assess teacher's classroom instruction practices and they have to rely more on their children's feedback. Thus, their opinions in this regard are more likely to converge. This may explain why four of those six classroom variables failed to contribute to the difference in school satisfaction between a student and his/her parent. Besides, communication between students and their parents may not always be effective. Results of this study also suggest that older parents who are likely to have their children attending higher grades tend to have less differences in school satisfaction with their children.

Following social comparison and social identity theories, Griffith (2000) argues that parent and student school satisfaction is partly based on group perceptions rather than individual experience. Understanding the socialization of individual perceptions or how social forces impact the formation of individual perceptions may help improve the research on differences in school satisfaction among stakeholders.

This study is based on a paired analysis of six identical/similar survey items concerning school satisfaction or school climate adopted in the 2013 student and parent surveys in Abu Dhabi. It compares the school satisfaction of students in grades 5-12 with that of their parents to examine whether students perceive school climate in a similar way to their parents. With the reduction of between subject variability (home and community environment), this study is able to reveal some small but statistically significant differences between student and parent school satisfaction. This study also offers support to the emerging consensus (OECD, 2006) that it is important to create a school environment which students perceive to be safe and supportive, in order to enhance their school satisfaction.

The differences in school satisfaction between an individual student and his/her parent, while may be small, are likely to exist. Importantly, when and where they exist, such differences possess policy and practical significance for education administrators. One of the contributions of this study is that it identifies the school satisfaction areas where the opinions of parents and students are more likely to differ. Schools administrators may find it necessary to strengthen their home communication strategies and methods to assure parents that their school is safe, as parents in this study showed some level of over-anxiety about school safety issues. Schools may also take more actions to encourage further direct parent involvement, which is to be recognized by students but seemingly overestimated by parents. With regard to some other school policies and practices, schools should bear in mind that different stakeholders have different expectations and views, and thus more targeted communication and implementation strategies are useful.

As indicated, most statistically significant differences reported in this paper have a small effect size, which indicates the limited practical significance of the findings. Another limitation is that only a few items are examined in this study, which offers restricted perspectives on student and parent school satisfaction.

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