

How Do Social Skills, School Factors, and Problem Domains Differ Between Urban and Non-Urban High School Freshmen Students?

Jenna Mathews

University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

Addressing students' social-emotional learning needs is critical for their success, particularly during their transition into high school. This paper examines the associations among social skills (e.g., communication, assertion), problem areas (bullying, hyperactivity, externalizing and internalizing problems), and school factors (sense of school membership, commitment to school) between urban and non-urban freshmen students during their first semester in high school. Ninth grade students in one urban New Jersey high school (63.9% Hispanic, 31.2% Black; n=285) and another non-urban high school in Central Illinois (44.4% White, 41.1% Black; n=270) completed the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) survey. Composite measures of social skills and problem domains were used for the analysis. Independent sample t-tests revealed urban students reported significantly lower levels of social skills and sense of school membership, and higher levels of problem domains as compared to non-urban students. Additionally, correlation analyses found among urban students, higher levels of social skills were positively associated with higher commitment to school and sense of school membership, and lower problem areas. However, for non-urban students, only social skills were significantly negatively correlated with problem areas. Findings suggest greater attention on the school context is needed for urban students when they enter high school. The discussion highlights areas for future research, including longitudinally understanding the social-emotional learning needs of students through high school, and examining for gender and race/ethnicity differences with other outcomes (e.g., grades, attendance, disciplinary referrals).

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Jenna Mathews; Kevin Tan, PhD; Yang Wang, Doctoral Student; Esther Shin, Doctoral Student
School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

INTRODUCTION

Social skills (SS) are important in understanding problem behaviors (PB). Yet, little is known how the relations among SS, PB, and the school context differ across urban and non-urban high school freshmen students.

SS such as assertion are important during the transition to high school, because students are at a higher risk of encountering difficult social situations. Urban students may experience different challenges as compared to their non-urban counterparts. Schools play an important role in addressing the link between poor SS and PB.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What associations can be derived from the correlation between social skills, problem domains, and school factors amongst urban and non-urban freshmen students?

DATA

Two cohorts of 9th grade students in one urban high school in New Jersey and another in non-urban Central Illinois. Data is collected in Semester 1.

Demographics (Class of 2021)	Urban High School (N=274)	Non-Urban High School (N=274)
Gender		
Male	50.36%	51.50%
Female	49.64%	48.50%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	0.40%	44.40%
African American	33.25%	41.10%
Hispanic	63.50%	N/A
Asian	0.40%	13.30%
Other	4.39%	1.10%

MEASURES

Social Skills: Based on the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS). Mean of 7 domains: communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement, and self-control ($\alpha = .95$)

Problem Domains: From the SSIS and Mean of 4 domains: Externalizing, Bullying, Hyperactivity, Internalizing ($\alpha = .91$)

Commitment to School: 9 questions: Homework is a waste of time, Getting good grades is important ($\alpha = .81$)

Sense of School Membership: 18 questions: People at school are friendly to me, I can really be myself at this school, People are friendly to me ($\alpha = .80$)

METHOD

Compared Mean Scores of SS, PB, and School Context:
→ t-tests
Identified Relations Among SS, PB, and School Context:
→ Correlation Analysis

RESULTS

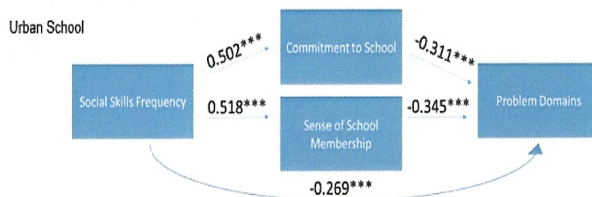
Mean Scores of Social Skills, School Factors, Problem Domains Between Urban and Non-Urban School

	Urban	Non-Urban
Social Skills Frequencies †	1.86 (0.50)	1.93 (0.44)
Commitment to School	2.95 (0.47)	2.99 (0.46)
Sense of School Membership***	3.37 (0.50)	3.55 (0.46)
Problem Domains *	0.76 (0.53)	0.66 (0.40)

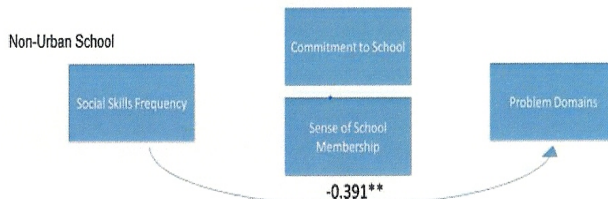
p ≤ 0.001 ***; p ≤ 0.01 **; p ≤ 0.05 *; p ≤ 0.10 †

Findings highlight that urban students, when compared to non-urban students, reported statistically significant lower scores on social skills ($p \leq 0.10$), sense of school membership ($p \leq 0.001$) and problem domains ($p \leq 0.05$).

Correlations Among Social Skills, School Factors, Problem Domains For Urban and Non-Urban School



For the urban school, all hypothesized relationships were significantly correlated



For the non-urban school, only social skills were significantly correlated with problem domains.

LIMITATIONS

Student self-reports could reflect socially driven answers

Cross-sectional correlation study does not allow for longitudinal inferences to be made

Results are based on Semester 1

Did not account for gender/racial differences

Study conducted in one urban and one non-urban location. The results were collected in two different states. They are not necessarily generalizable to other school contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary Finding: Highlights the differential role of school in the relation between SS and PB amongst urban and non-urban context

Findings may suggest: Although urban students reported lower scores than non-urban students, school may be more important among urban students as they enter high school. Why? Maybe related to population density. School may be a safe haven for students.

Why school may not be related to SS and PB in non-urban setting? Maybe students already have better school supports in this non-urban school.

AREA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Continued testing: Mediation analysis using structural equation modeling to understand the direct effects of SS and PB and the indirect effects through school context

Looking at other outcomes: Grades, Attendance, Disciplinary Referrals and differences in gender, Race/ethnicity

Longitudinal study: Understand how the relations among SS, PB, school context evolve through 12th grade

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