School performance and social behavior in adolescents

Desempenho escolar e comportamentos sociais em adolescentes

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To analyze the association between school performance, age, gender, economic classification and social behaviors – strengths and difficulties – according to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire - SDQ-Por, of students enrolled in junior high school. **Methods:** The sample consisted of 124 adolescents of both genders, enrolled in junior high school, aged between 11 and 14 years of age. All students answered the Participant Characterization Questionnaire and the – SDQ-Por questionnaire and their parents or guardians answered the Brazil Economic Classification Criteria (CCEB). The school performance analysis was determined by simple arithmetic average of the final grades obtained by the students. The instruments used for data collection in this study were available through online forms in Google Forms. Descriptive and bivariate data analyzes were performed. **Results:** Most participants presented adequate results regarding the analysis of the total SDQ score, which refers to the difficulties and the analysis of pro-social behavior. Regarding school performance, most of the participants presented very good or excellent results as well as an association with age, gender and school year of the students. **Conclusion:** Female students, 11 years old, performed better and adolescents with larger behavioral difficulties were in the lowest category in the school performance classification.

Keywords: Academic performance; Socioeconomic factors; Social behavior; Learning; Population characteristics; Child; Adolescents

RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar a associação entre o desempenho escolar, idade, gênero, classificação econômica e comportamentos sociais - capacidades e dificuldades - de acordo com o instrumento Questionário de Capacidades e Dificuldades - SDQ-Por (*Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* - SDQ), de escolares matriculados no ensino fundamental. **Métodos:** A amostra foi composta por 124 adolescentes, de ambos os gêneros, matriculados no ensino fundamental II, com idades entre 11 e 14 anos. Todos os estudantes responderam ao Questionário de Caracterização dos Participantes e ao SDQ-Por e seus pais ou responsáveis, ao Critério de Classificação Econômica Brasil - CCEB. A análise do desempenho escolar foi determinada pela média aritmética simples das notas finais obtidas pelos estudantes. Os instrumentos utilizados para a coleta de dados foram viabilizados por meio do formulário *on-line*, *Google Forms*. Foram realizadas as análises descritiva e bivariada dos dados. **Resultados:** A maioria dos participantes apresentou resultados adequados, em relação à análise do escore total do SDQ, que se refere às dificuldades, e à análise do comportamento pró- social. Quanto ao desempenho escolar, verificou-se que grande parte dos estudantes apresentou resultado muito bom ou excelente e que houve associação com a idade, o gênero e o ano escolar. **Conclusão:** Os estudantes do gênero feminino, de 11 anos de idade, apresentaram melhor desempenho e os adolescentes com maiores dificuldades de comportamento estavam na categoria mais baixa de classificação do desempenho escolar.

Palavras-chave: Desempenho acadêmico; Fatores socioeconômicos; Comportamento social; Aprendizagem; Características da população; Crianças; Adolescentes

INTRODUCTION

School performance is understood as a set of competencies acquired in the teaching-learning process, allowing the expression of students regarding the knowledge obtained in this process. Academic development is a concern for the various levels of the social system[1] and, in this context, it is understood that students, the teaching staff, parents and the community perform key roles in the idealization of a concrete knowledge base, allowing the student to develop social skills and critical thinking about the constructions that surround them.

Learning is a product of multiple determinants[2] and may happen due to the influence of several directly or indirectly related factors. The literature shows poor academic performance as a consequence of multiple personal, family, emotional, educational and social etiologies[3], justifying the student's failure. Literature points out the following main factors: motivation to learn; learning environment; teachers' characteristics; family environment's resources; students' abilities to deal with challenges, and factors related to socioeconomic variables and the socio-cultural environment[4].

Individuals' ability to organize and execute actions in order to achieve certain objectives, the so-called self-efficacy, may not have any influence on the student's gender, color, socioeconomic level and school gap[5]. However, studies have shown that gender is a factor associated with the adolescents' school development, since girls may present advantages in performance and social skills compared to boys[6,7]. At the same time, students in a situation of social vulnerability tend to have an academic performance lower than the correspondent to the school year they attend[8]. Thus, it can be said that the socioeconomic level of families has a significant interference in the self-concept and academic performance of children and adolescents[3] and that the increase in investments in education has a direct association with the improvement of educational coverage[9]. Therefore, it may be deducted that the differences related to social skills and socio-demographic variables, gender and socioeconomic level are closely associated with low levels of school performance.

Among the deficits related to poor school performance, it is possible to highlight antisocial and aggressive behaviors, learning difficulties and social isolation[10]. The literature states that behavioral issues can negatively affect and impair adolescents' school performance[11]. Students' learning difficulties and academic performance are deeply related to emotional and behavioral problems, which can interfere in adolescent relationships, at different levels and contexts[10-12].

Studies demonstrated that boys present more externalizing behavior problems[6] than girls, who tend to have more internalizing difficulties[13,14]. Externalizing behavior problems are more evident in the environment, as they generate annoyances. On the other hand, internalizing problems interfere less in the social and educational context, therefore these children are said to be "shy" or "well-behaved"[14].

Taking into account that school performance is related to social behaviors, the present study aimed to analyze the association between school performance, age, gender, economic classification and social behaviors - abilities and difficulties - according to the SDQ instrument, of enrolled students in elementary education.

METHODS

This is an observational, analytical and cross-sectional study. All ethical aspects were complied with, and all adolescents who participated in the research signed the Informed Assent Form (IAF) and their parents or guardians, an Informed Consent Form (ICF). The Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, under opinion number 2.422.795, approved this project.

The sample consisted of 124 adolescents, of both genders, enrolled in a private 2nd grade junior high school, located in the south-central region of Belo Horizonte (MG). The inclusion criteria accepted adolescents enrolled in 2nd grade junior high, aged between 11 and 14 years, 11 months and 29 days, who had answered the proposed questionnaires and signed the Informed Consent Form and their parents or guardians. The exclusion criteria were those adolescents who did not understand the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ-Por) and those who presented cognitive, neurological or psychiatric changes that could impede the research.

The sampling procedure was performed, considering a 15% estimate of poor school performance in the population found in the literature and used as a reference for calculating the sample size[15]. A final sample of 114 individuals was considered as a way to obtain 80% of statistical power; 9% sampling error and 95% confidence interval. The precision used in the sample calculation was 15% and the significance level was 5%. The test to estimate a proportion used was the one in the *Minitab Release* software.

All instruments used for data collection in this study were made available through the online form, Google Forms.

The researchers developed the first instrument, the Participant Characterization Questionnaire as a structured, self-applicable guide that aims to obtain sociodemographic and school information, such as age, gender and current school year. To complement the characterization data of the students, those responsible for the adolescents answered the Brazil Economic Classification Criterion - CCEB[16]. This is an economic classification based on the estimation of the purchasing power and education level of the head of the family, varying between classes A and E.

The other instrument, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire - SDQ-Por[17], was proposed to detect psychiatric disorders related to the social behavior of children and adolescents aged 4 to 16 years. It consists of 25 items, divided into five subscales: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, relationship problems with colleagues and pro-social behavior, with five items in each subscale. Each item can be answered as "not true", "somewhat true", or "certainly true". The score for each of the scales is obtained by adding the points of the five items, which will result in a score ranging from 0 (zero) to 10. The scores on the scales of hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, behavior problems and issues regarding relationships with colleagues are added to generate the total points related to the difficulties, varying between 0 and 40 points. Total score greater than or equal to 20 is considered as altered (probable psychiatric disorder), between 16 and 19, borderline and less than or equal to 15, normal. The scale's interpretation of pro-social behavior differs from other scales in that higher scores mean more capacities, in contrast to the total score, in which higher values represent more difficulties. Parents, teachers and the teenagers (if above 11 years old) by themselves, can answer the SDQ. For this study, the adolescents answered the questions.

School performance was computed by the simple arithmetic mean of the final grades obtained by the students. For analysis of the results, a score below 60 was classified as insufficient, between 60.00 and 69.99 points regular, between 70.00 and 79.99 points, good, between 80.00 and 89.99 points, very good and between 90.00 and 100 points the students were classified as excellent.

For the purposes of data analysis, descriptive analyzes of the variables were carried out through the distribution of absolute and relative frequency of categorical variables and numerical synthesis of the continuous variables. For the association analysis, the variable "school performance" response was condensed into two categories: 1- regular and good performance; 2- very good and excellent performance. The SDQ variable total score and pro-social behavior was also grouped into two categories: not normal/borderline and normal.

The association analysis was performed considering the variable school performance response in two formats: 1- categorical, which corresponds to regular and good performance and very good and excellent performance; 2- continuous. The explanatory variables were gender, age, school year, economic classification (CCEB), SDQ - total score (average and classification) and SDQ – pro-social behavior (average and classification). Pearson's Chi-square test, Fisher's exact test and Mann-Whitney test were used to analyze the association between the categorical response variable and the explanatory variables. The analysis of the continuous response variable was done through the t test and the analysis of variance (ANOVA). For all analyzes, the significance level of 5% was considered.

Additionally, in relation to the SDQ, the medians of the total scores and pro-social behavior were compared, according to the categories of school performance, using the Mann-Whitney test.

The school performance variable was also applied in a continuous format to compare averages, due to the fact that it presented a normal distribution, according to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Therefore the average of school performance was compared between the categories of explanatory variables, using the t test (variables with two categories) and ANOVA (variables with more than two categories) and multiple comparisons using the Tukey test.

The research used the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS), version 21.0 for all analyzes.

RESULTS

The sample included 124 adolescents in this study, most of them female (54.8%). Regarding age, the highest proportion was aged 11 years (27.4%), although all age groups have very close proportions, varying between 22.6% and 27.4% of the total. The largest group of adolescents was in the 6th grade (32.3%) and the majority, 66.9%, belonged to economic class A.

The descriptive analysis of the SDQ total score, referring to the subscales of emotional symptoms, behavior problems, hyperactivity and relationship issues with colleagues, presented a percentage of 28.68%, 19.24%, 38.03% and 14.05%, respectively. The association analysis was performed only with the SDQ total score and pro-social behavior, as recommended by the instrument[17].

The total SDQ score presented an average of 10.09 (standard deviation - SD = 5.65) and a median 9. When distributed in categories, most students had a "normal" result. The pro-social behavior had an average of 8.30 (SD = 1.53) and a median of

8 - 95.2% of the students had a "normal" result. Finally, school performance averaged 80.35 (SD = 8.36) and median of 81. Most students performed very well (40.3%), with emphasis also on students with good performance (33.1%). No student in the sample had insufficient school performance (Table 1).

For the analysis of the association, the variable re-grouped the school performance response into regular /good and very good/excellent and SDQ – pro-social behavior was re-categorized in not normal/borderline and normal. It was observed that 47.6% of the students had a regular or good performance and 52.4%, very good or excellent. In the pro-social behavior of the SDQ, 95.2% of the students had a "normal" classification.

The association between school performance and the age of the participants (p = 0.001) and between school performance and the school year (p = 0.005) was verified. The explanatory variables gender and CCEB were not associated with school performance (Table 2).

According to the analysis of the association between school performance in two categories and the SDQ result categorized

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire - total, pro-social behavior and school performance of students (n = 124)

SDQ – Total score		
Average		10.09
Standard Deviation		5.65
Median		9.00
Minimum		1.00
Maximum		29.00
SDQ - Total score (classification)		
	n	%
Not normal	9	7.3
Borderline	12	9.7
Normal	103	83.1
Total	124	100
Pro-social behavior		
Average		8.30
Standard Deviation		1.53
Median		8.00
Minimum		1.00
Maximum		10.00
Pro-social behavior (classification)		
	n	%
Not normal	1	0.8
Borderline	5	4.0
Normal	118	95.2
Total	124	100
School Performance (average score)		
Average		80.35
Standard Deviation		8.36
Median		81.00
Minimum		62.00
Maximum		97.00
School Performance (classification)		
	n	%
Regular	18	14.5
Good	41	33.1
Very Good	50	40.3

Subtitle: SDQ = *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*; n = number of subjects; % = percentage

Table 2. Analysis of the association between school performance and sociodemographic variables (n = 124)

Characteristics	School Performance			
	Regular/Good (n= 59)		Very Good/Excellent (n= 65)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Female	30	50.8	38	58.5
Male	29	49.2	27	41.5
Total	59	100.0	65	100.0
P-value*		0.395		
Age				
11	7	11.9	27	27.4
12	20	33.9	10	24.2
13	19	32.2	13	25.8
14	13	22.0	15	22.6
Total	59	100.0	65	100.0
P-value*		0.001		
School Grade				
6th	11	18.6	29	32.3
7th	22	37.3	12	27.4
8th	16	27.1	10	21.0
9th	10	16.9	14	19.4
Total	59	100.0	65	100.0
P-value*		0.005		
CCEB				
A1	36	61.0	47	72.3
B1/B2	23	39.0	18	27.7
Total	59	100.0	65	100.0
P-value*		0.182		

*Pearson Chi-square test

Subtitle: CCEB = Brazil Economic Classification Criteria; A1 = economic classes A1; B1/B2 = economic classes B1/B2; n = number of subjects; % = percentage

as not normal, borderline and normal, there was no statistically significant association between school performance and SDQ results (Table 3).

The analysis of the association between school performance and SDQ variables, showed a significant difference between the medians of the total SDQ score (difficulties) and the categories of school performance, with a higher value among students who had regular or good school performance (11.0) and lower median value among those who had very good or excellent school performance (8.0), with a p = 0.021. Regarding the score of pro-social behavior (capacities), there was no statistically significant difference between the medians. According to the categories of school performance, both were equal to 8.0, considering a p-value = 0.617 (Figure 1).

Comparing school performance averages and sociodemographic variables, there was a significant difference between school performance averages and gender, since the highest average was found among girls (81.6), when compared to boys (78.4), with a p-value of 0.018. Regarding age, a significant difference was found between the ages of the participants (p-value <0.001), since the youngest students, 11 years old, had higher average scores (85.0) than those of years: 12 (78.1; p = 0.001), 13 (78.0; p = 0.010) and 14 (79.2; p = 1,000). A similar pattern was observed in relation to the school year, with significant differences between the averages of school performance (p = 0.002). The students in the 6th year obtained higher average grades (84.5) than those in the 7th (77.9) and 8th (77.8) years, with p = 0.008 and 0.134, respectively. No significant differences were found regarding the CCEB (Figure 2).

Comparisons of the averages of school performance, according to the categories of SDQ - total score and SDQ - pro-social behavior indicated that, in spite of the averages of school performance were higher for participants classified as normal, no significant statistical differences were found (Table 4).

Table 3. Analysis of the association between school performance and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire variables (categorical) (n = 124)

Characteristics	School Performance			
	Regular/Good (n= 59)		Very Good/Excellent (n= 65)	
	n	%	n	%
SDQ – Total score				
Not normal	6	10.2	3	4.6
Borderline	7	11.9	5	7.7
Normal	46	78.0	57	87.7
Total	59	100.0	65	100.0
P-value*		0.329		
SDQ – Pro-social behavior				
Not normal	1	1.7	0	0
Borderline	4	6.8	1	1.5
Normal	54	91.5	64	98.5
Total	59	100.0	65	100.0
P-value*				
SDQ - Pro-social behavior				
Not normal/Borderline	5	8.5	1	1.5
Normal	54	91.5	64	98.5
Total	59	100.0	65	100.0
P-value**		0.083		

*Pearson Chi-square test; **Fisher exact test

Subtitle: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; n = number of subjects; % = percentage
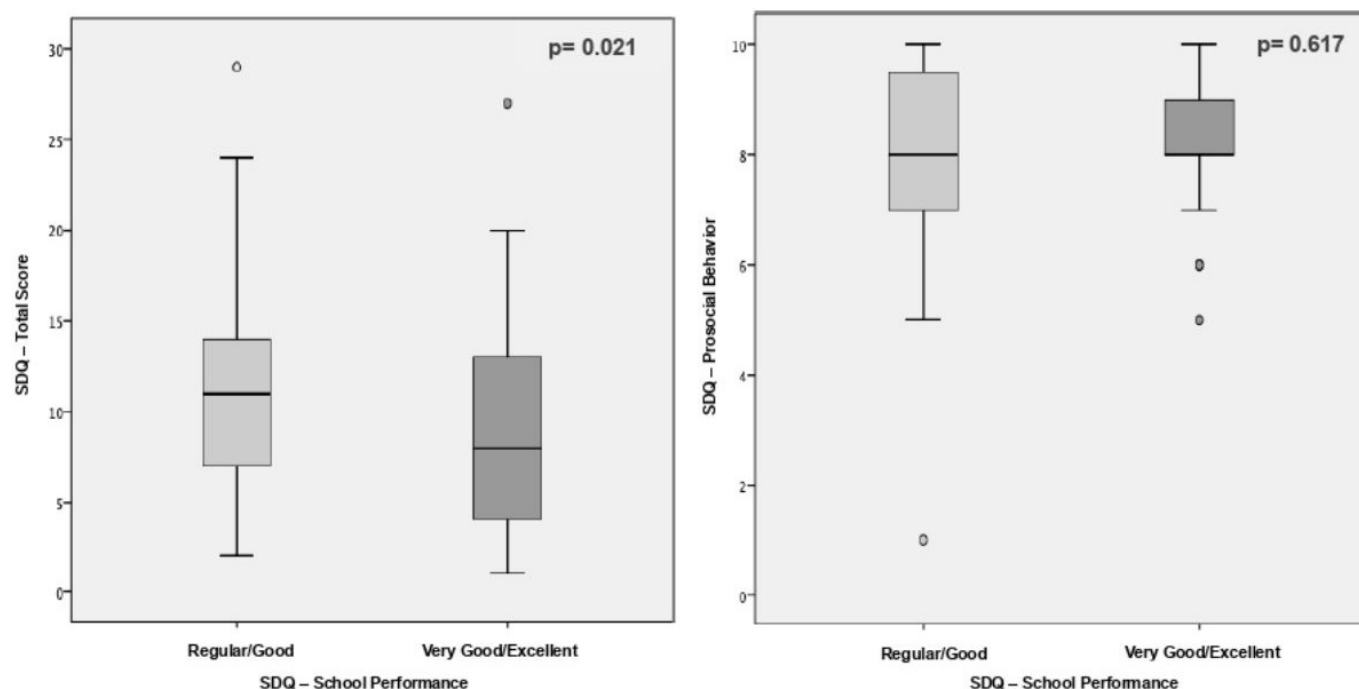
Figure 1. Distribution of the total scores and pro-social behavior of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, according to the categories of school performance (n = 124)
Subtitle: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; n = number of subjects

Table 4. Analysis of the association between the average of school performance and variables of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (categorical) (n = 124)

Characteristics	School Performance		
	Median	Average	Standard deviation
SDQ - Total			
Not normal	74.0	76.1	6.9
Borderline	77.0	77.5	9.5
Normal	81.0	81.1	8.3
valor de p**		0.109	
SDQ – Pro-social behavior			
Not normal/Borderline	71.0	72.5	5.5
Normal	81.0	80.8	8.3
P-value*		0.715	

*T test; **ANOVA.
Subtitle: SDQ = *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*; n = number of subjects

DISCUSSION

Factors both intrinsic and extrinsic to the student are fundamental and determinant for academic success, as shown by the literature. Learning is related to the processing of information, depending on the integration of cognitive, memory, linguistic, attention skills and emotional and behavioral development[18]. The school trajectory is impacted by multiple factors related to individual characteristics, such as family, school and community facets, as well as by social, economic and political circumstances. There are increasingly frequent studies concerned with determining the dimension of the effect of sociodemographic variables on the individual's skills and competences[5].

The association between school performance and gender, age, school year and SDQ - total score in the present study,

demonstrated the articulation between these variables. Regarding the sample under study it was possible to observe, in the total SDQ score, that more than three quarters of the students presented adequate results. In other words, most of the participants had a low score in the total SDQ score, due to a low number of complaints referring to difficulties regarding emotional symptoms; conduct problems; hyperactivity and relationship problems with colleagues. With regards to pro-social behavior, it was found that more than 90% of adolescents had adequate results. A systematic literature review showed that the scores obtained by the SDQ presented satisfactory levels of reliability[19]. As for the analysis of the re-categorized school performance, it was observed that most of the participants had a very good or excellent result. According to data released by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (Inep), referring to the 2018 School Census,
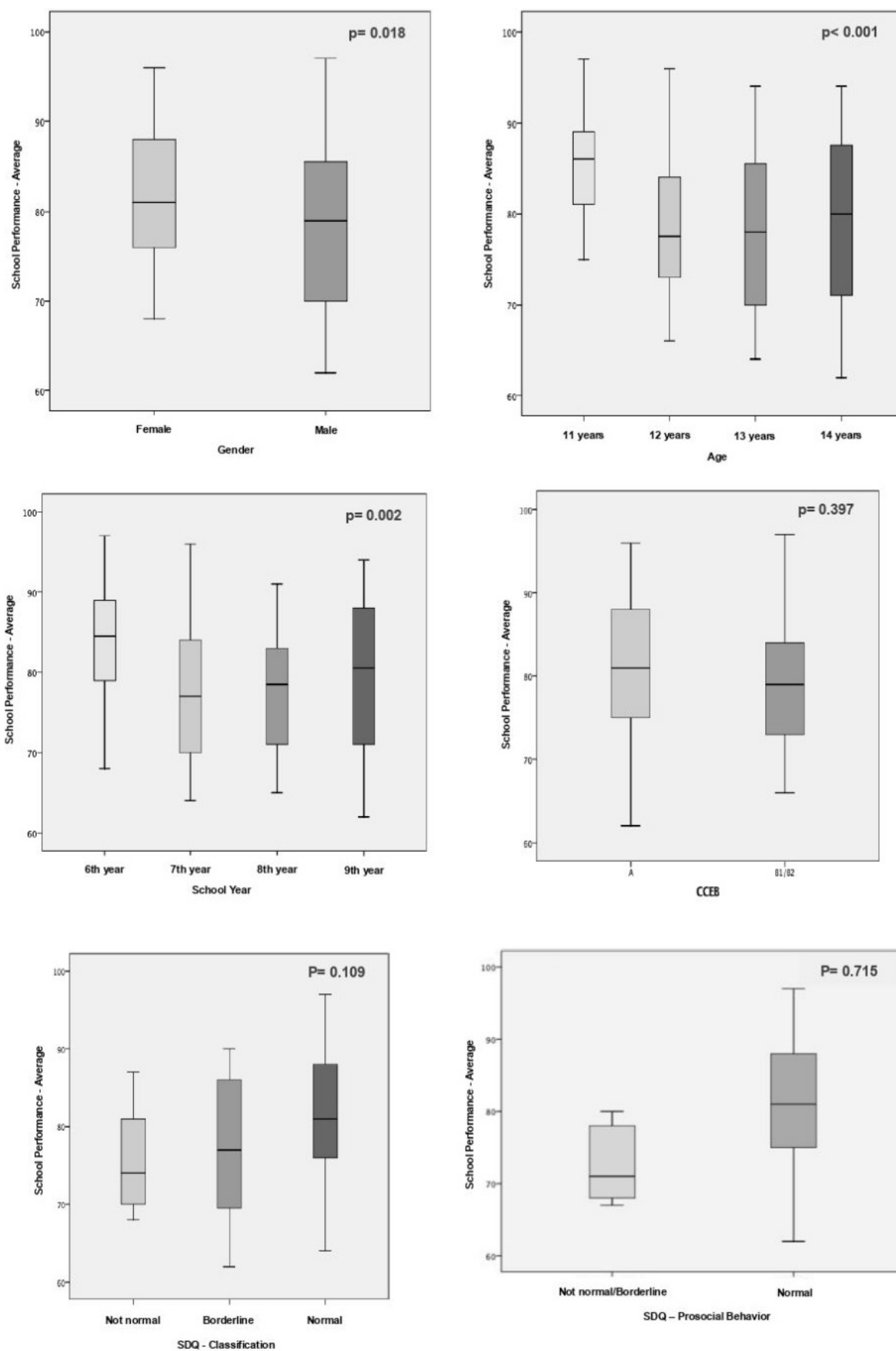
Figure 2. Distribution of school performance according to explanatory variables (n = 124)
Subtitle: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; CCEB = Brazil Economic Classification Criteria; n = number of subjects

there was a decrease in terms of school failures and approvals improved; while school dropout remained in decline or stable[20]. The results obtained in this research regarding the school performance of the participants confirm such data. However, it is worth considering that, unlike the School Census that is carried out in publicly and privately financed institutions, the present study was carried out in only one private school.

As for the analysis of the association between school performance in categories and sociodemographic variables, this study showed that only the explanatory variables "age" and "school year" were associated with the students' school performance. Regarding the average school performance and sociodemographic variables, the study showed that female adolescents had higher averages, when compared to male adolescents. Regarding age, the youngest students, of 11 years old, had higher average grades in school performance. With regard to school year, it was found that the 6th year students obtained higher average scores in relation to the other adolescents. The literature states that different sociodemographic variables, including the variables age, gender and school year, showed better results on the use of strategies to obtain better responses in academic performance[21]. This means that the youngest female students enrolled in the 6th year of junior high school had higher scores on proficiency tests, compared to the other students. Some extrinsic factors, such as encouragement, participation and parental involvement in school affairs are also essential aspects for students' good performance. The correlations between the type of school, family income and students' maternal and paternal education prove that school performance is impacted with extra-school environmental influences[22].

The association between categorized school performance and the total score of the continuous SDQ showed that students presenting higher results in the scores of difficulties also had worse school performance. It is therefore possible to consider that behavior problems as presented in different ways, such as, for example, oppositions, aggressions, impulsiveness, challenging behavior, antisocial manifestations. Additionally they may involve depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, fear, sadness, shyness or insecurity, and that these feelings can influence the adolescent's school performance. Although the present study only understood the behavioral aspects contemplated by the SDQ, it is worth mentioning that other behavioral problems must be considered when discussing school performance in students. Manifestations of depressive symptoms might generate student disinterest in learning, compromise their development and negatively influence their school performance, in addition to provoking losses both in their interpersonal relationships as well as in their social life[23].

It is also worth remembering that, although the SDQ is studied only in terms of the total score, the composition of the instrument includes subscales of emotional symptoms, behavior problems, hyperactivity and relationship problems. Thus, the result of a higher score of difficulties associated with worse school performance may indicate different behavioral aspects not specified in the present study, due to the specific nature of the instrument.

An intervention study (case/control) with students from a public school in the countryside of São Paulo, showed negative correlations between social skills and behavior problems and between academic competence and behavior problems, in addition to positive correlation between social skills and academic competence[24]. In this way, students who presented behavior problems had worse results in terms of social skills

and school performance. It was also found that girls obtained a higher score on social skills than boys, as well as having less behavior problems. However, no significant differences were found between genders regarding school performance, something not confirmed by the present study, by indicating that girls have better school performance, compared to boys.

The existence of divergence between parents, the school and the adolescent, in relation to the types of behavioral difficulties contributes, as well as explains the low school performance[25]. Family members and teachers, considered fundamental for the development of adolescents, may limit themselves to the difficulties presented by students in the classroom, therefore not paying attention to other emotional and behavioral demands which also need to be observed, in order to improve results in the teaching-learning process.

The literature acknowledges the socioeconomic impact on the individuals' educational performance, as a substantial component for the results obtained by the student. The distribution of Brazilian income is related to the level of education among the different economic levels of society[26]. The lack of association between school performance and economic classification in the present study can be explained by the high homogeneity of the sample, predominantly from social stratum A. The increase of the socioeconomic level of families is linked with larger frequency of situations with potential to positively impact students' academic development and performance[27]. This is due to the fact that these adolescents have contact with several instruments, such as electronic devices, books and toys, which contribute significantly to the development of the schooling process. An integrative literature review showed that parents in the higher social strata tend to value their children's autonomy and self-control and have methods of inductive discipline that encourage children to reflect on situations[28]. In this way, these children become able to develop critical thinking skills in adequate way and, from that point on they may create their own ideas about the situations that surround them.

The results presented in this study demonstrated how the socio-demographic variables - age, gender and school year of adolescents - and aspects of behavior related to emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and relationship problems with colleagues can interfere in the academic success of high school students.

Considering the evidence of the relationships between behavioral aspects and sociodemographic variables in the process of school performance of children and adolescents, the study presented contributions to the discussion of the topic school performance and social behavior, having verified this relationship in students from junior high school. It is worth considering as limitations of this study, the fact that only students answered the SDQ questionnaire. Additionally, the instrument does not recommend the detailed analysis of its subscales, as well as the sample homogeneity in relation to the social strata, which did not allow analyzing the association socioeconomic classification in school performance and behavioral aspects across social strata.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the association between school performance, sociodemographic aspects and social behaviors of students enrolled in elementary school revealed the association between school performance categorized with the age and school year of

students and with the total SDQ score. This association refers to emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and relationship problems with colleagues. Regarding continuous school performance, there was a difference with the adolescents' gender, age and school year.

It can be affirmed that the youngest female students, who were in the 6th year of school performed better when compared to the other students, and that the adolescents with the greatest difficulties pertained to the lowest category of classification of school performance.

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