

Hidden School Disengagement and Its Relationship to Youth Risk Behaviors in Hong Kong

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School dropout has become a serious problem in many places around the world. However, before students actually dropout from school, they normally exhibit some symptoms of disengagement from the social life and emotional involvement of school. Thus, hidden school disengagement or avoiding school psychologically may be the first stage of school dropout. This article examines the phenomenon of hidden school disengagement among students aged 13–16 in Hong Kong. A total of 5,246 students in Hong Kong participated in a Youth Health Behaviors Survey conducted in 2010. Based on the Index of Hidden Disengagement, 1,101 students were identified as having multiple symptoms of disengagement. Further analysis suggested that students who were identified as hidden disengaged students had a significantly

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higher ratio of being involved in health-related risk behaviors as well as suffered from psychosomatic symptoms. This paper provides some explanations for these results, and research and practice implications are discussed.

Key words: school disengagement, dropout, risk behaviors

Introduction

School dropout has become a widespread problem in many education systems around the world. However, well before students actually dropout from school, they normally exhibit some symptoms of disengagement from the social life and emotional involvement of school. Some of them, such as frequent tardiness to school (Taras, 2005) and truancy (Henry, 2007), are overt symptoms, but some of them, such as authority avoidance (Loeber et al., 1993), alienation from school (Osco, 2004) and school avoidance (Regner & Loose, 2006), are covert symptoms. Overt signs of disengagement are relatively easy to spot and dealt with from a policy perspective, but hidden or covert symptoms of school disengagement, which are likely to be more prevalent, are perhaps much more difficult to identify and to handle.

In the education literature, many scholars have used different names to describe the phenomenon of hidden school disengagement (HSD). Some of them are school disengagement (Vaughn et al., 2011), psychological disengagement (Strambler & Weinstein, 2010), emotional disengagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) and hidden dropout (Rosenblum, Goldblatt, & Moin, 2008). It is an issue that deserves much attention by researchers and educational professionals. It has been suggested that the consequences of hidden school disengagement are far reaching, resulting in many negative consequences for society (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Haxan, 2005). For example, Sum et al. (2003) found that the high school dropout rate in the

U.S. may be almost three times higher than government estimates, and that those who are not reported may be in the hidden school disengagement category. Also, hidden school disengagement is predictive of maladjustment (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Reid, 1984), poor academic performance and school dropout (George & Alexander, 2003; Kandel, Ravels, & Kandel, 1984; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989), substance abuse (Hallfors et al., 2002; Miller & Plant, 1999), antisocial behaviors (Juvonen, 2006; Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1994) and teenage pregnancy (Hibbett & Fogelman, 1990; Manlove, 1998). There is also evidence to suggest that the effect of hidden school disengagement persists past adolescence, predicting violence, job instability and adult criminality (Catalano, Arthur, Hawkins, Berglund, & Olson, 1998; Dryfoos, 1990).

Despite the growing number of research endeavors pertaining to the issue of hidden school disengagement, we do not have much knowledge about its nature, prevalence, correlates and predictors in the Asian population. The present study is an initial attempt to investigate the phenomenon of hidden school disengagement within a Chinese population, namely Hong Kong. One objective is to evaluate the prevalence of hidden school disengagement in Hong Kong secondary schools. The second objective is to examine the construct in relation to the health-related risk behaviors among the secondary school population.

Literature Review

Within the academic engagement literature, the term *disengaged from school* is used to characterize students who do not feel they belong at school and have withdrawn from school activities in a significant way (Willms, 2003). Hidden school disengagement is closely related to lack of motivation in learning and poor attitude towards school since they often co-occur and possibly share similar risk factors (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, & Tremblay, 2001). It has been conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of behavioral, emotional and cognitive domains (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral disengagement refers to students' frequent absences,

resistance to rule-following and lack of participation in extracurricular activities, cognitive disengagement refers to students' reluctance to learn beyond the classroom and to take up challenging learning tasks, and emotional disengagement refers to students' affective responses to school, including feeling alienated towards school, disliking school, and having a poor perception about personal academic ability. In the present paper, our main focus is on students' emotional response to school.

Conceptualization of Hidden School Disengagement

Theories behind hidden school disengagement can be traced to structural-strain theory which focuses on the social and cultural environment in which adolescents grow up. Structural-strain theory posited that a mismatch between personal standards and wider societal standards could produce alienation and lack of legitimate aspirations (Durkheim, 1951; Osco, 2004). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Ogbu (1991) asserted that students' alienation from and lack of interest in school is, in part, a result of responses to historical events and to the current social experiences of ethnic minority students. According to Ogbu (1991), one of the ways ethnic minorities protect themselves from self-devaluation inflicted by the dominant group is through rejecting the values of the dominant group. Among ethnic minorities, African Americans in particular, who have historically been unfairly denied opportunities in education, this defensive action has resulted in some of them dismissing education as a "White" thing, and has often translated itself into attitudes and behaviors which Ogbu referred to as a low-effort syndrome, of low academic engagement, negative attitudes towards school, and lack of perseverance in school work.

Steele (1992) theorized that the stereotype associated with the dominant values of the society could lead to psychological disidentification with school as a means to protect self-esteem against confirming the negative stereotype. Osborne (1997, 2004) further asserted that students who are not identified with academics have little motivation to succeed because of the weak connection between academic outcomes and their self-esteem. According to Osborne, those

students who are disidentified with academia are frustrated at being forced to remain in the school setting. Also, the unattainable goals and peer derogation push students along the path of identification with deviant peers.

Since the early work of Ogbu (1991), Steele (1992) and Osborne (1997), other researchers have advanced the theory of school engagement and have conceptualized hidden disengagement into two main types, namely, a chronic type and a situational type (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Nussbaum & Steele, 2007). The chronic type of hidden disengagement has its theoretical root in school bonding theory (Maddox & Prinz, 2003), school engagement theory (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Willms, 2003) and self-concept theory (March, 1993). This type of disengagement, in which disidentification plays a major role, involves the devaluation of academic performance. The concept of identification with academics is rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective, which holds that people receive feedback from their environment, and this feedback, if attended to, is perceived and interpreted. If the feedback is deemed accurate or valid, it is incorporated into the self-concept. Thus, if academic is viewed as central to the self-concept (i.e., a student is identified with academics), then the resulting changes in the self-concept will affect the student's self-esteem (Marsh, 1993). Hence, among students who are not identified with academics, they should have little motivation to succeed in academics because there is no contingency between academic outcomes and self-esteem (Osborne, 2004).

The situational type of hidden disengagement has its theoretical root in social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) and social identification theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000). This type of disengagement, in which interpersonal relationship plays a major role, involves discounting feedback from peers as a means of protecting self-esteem. It assumes that group identity and interpersonal relationship is another source where students can base their self-esteem on. Even if students have disidentified from academics, given the developmental stage of adolescents, they may still need to be attached to some groups, such as peers or romantic relationships, in order to satisfy the need for identification. Hence even when students may dislike school, the fact

that their friends are still at school gives a compelling reason for them to remain there (Finn, 1989). Therefore, students who have poor social skills and who are frequently ridiculed and bullied by their peers are likely to be disidentified with peer groups and interpersonal relationship.

Risk Factors for Hidden School Disengagement

Prior research on school disengagement shows that it is typically a gradual process of disengaging and disconnecting from school physically, mentally and emotionally. Available evidence suggests that the process of disengagement may start as early as the kindergarten years and throughout the primary and secondary years, with the fourth, seventh and tenth grades being most prevalent sufferers (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007).

Understanding the nature and significance of hidden school disengagement is an important first step in supporting students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. A number of risk factors for school disengagement have been identified and these risk factors are also expected to be relevant for hidden school disengagement. Some of these risk factors are poor academic performance, i.e., poor grades stemming from low literacy or verbal ability (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001); risk factors related to family support, i.e., inadequate family functioning and weak social bonding (Harachi, Ayers, Hawkins, Catalano, & Cushing, 1996; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Maguin & Loeber, 1996); risk factors related to the community i.e., negative peer influence, such as affiliation with deviant friends (Gillmore, Hawkins, Day, & Catalano, 1992; Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996) and dispositional factors e.g., limited personal goals and sense of future, lack of positive experience in school (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Janosz et al., 1997).

Hidden School Disengagement Indicator

In the present paper, hidden school disengagement is seen as an educational problem. It is a condition caused by stress or social factors

which may lead to a student dropping out of school. It is conceptualized as students' affective responses to school which includes four dimensions grouped into two domains, namely, the academic identification domain and interpersonal relationship domain. Within the academic identification domain are poor academic achievement and school disaffection. Within the relationship domain are social isolation and victimization. Hence, students who suffer from hidden school disengagement are those who feel that they are alienated from the schooling process, and that they are isolated from the social network of the school. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that students who feel disengaged from school have a higher chance of engaging in health-related risk behaviors or suffering from mental health issues (Paulhus, Fridhandler, & Hayes, 1997).

The above conceptualization of hidden school disengagement has a clear advantage because as an educational problem, a set of simple but accurate indicators for identification is important. The existing methods of assessment are seen as either clumsy to administer or overly subjective. For example, the method used by Strambler and Weinstein (2010) to identify students who are emotionally disengaged from school has seven dimensions and its assessment is based on a 15-item self-administered questionnaire. Also, the method used by Rosenblum, Goldblatt, and Moin (2008) to identify hidden school dropout is based on the teacher's subjective judgment.

Investigating the phenomena of hidden school disengagement among Chinese is an important step towards improving education quality in Chinese societies. It has been reported that Chinese students are experiencing high levels of stress in the school environment and are exposed to a high frequency of victimization because of competition within the education system (Hesketh et al., 2010; Tam & Taki, 2007). Also, it has been suggested that study stress and high-stake examinations are the main reasons behind the low self concept and high psychological distress among Asian students (Lee, 2009; Liu & Lu, 2011).

Methods

Sampling

The target population in this study is students in Hong Kong studying in Secondary 2, 4 and 6. Thirty-three secondary schools in Hong Kong participated in a Youth Health Behavior Survey in June, 2010. Among the 33 schools, 27 schools were funded under the Aided School Scheme and 6 schools were funded under the Direct Subsidy Scheme. Approximately half of the schools being sampled enroll a high percentage of students coming from families of low socioeconomic background. A total of 5,246 students provided useful information to the survey, which represents 1.23% of the total secondary student population in Hong Kong. The author cautions that since the schools were not selected randomly, this cannot be considered a representative sample of schools in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, given the large sample size, the data set does reveal some important health-related characteristics of the adolescent population in Hong Kong. Table 1 gives the demographic descriptions of the student samples.

Table 1: Demographic Descriptions of the Samples

	Boys	Girls	Total	Average age
Secondary two	1,180	1,248	2,428	13.9
Secondary four	777	950	1,727	15.9
Secondary six	435	656	1,091	18.0

Measures

Most of the instruments used in the present study were adapted from the 2005/06 version of the Health Behaviours of School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey which is an international survey sponsored by the World Health Organization and conducted in North American and European countries every four years. The instruments were originally written in English and they were translated into Chinese, following the

established protocol for the translation of international surveys (Harkness, Villar, & Edwards, 2010).

Hidden School Disengagement is a 5-item scale which describes the students' degree of emotional withdrawal from school based on the following five indicators. (1) Poor academic achievement — students were asked to rate what their class teacher think about their school performance as compared to their classmates on a four-point scale with descriptors “Very good,” “Good,” “Average,” and “Below average,” if students indicated that they were below average, they would be considered to have fulfilled the first criteria of hidden school disengagement. (2) Dissatisfaction with school — students were asked how they feel about their school at the time of the survey on a four-point scale with descriptors “I like it a lot,” “I like it a bit,” “I don't like it very much,” and “I don't like it at all,” if students indicated that they didn't like it very much or didn't like it at all, they would be considered to have fulfilled the second criteria. (3) No close friends — students were asked how many close male or female friends they currently had. If male students indicated that they had no close male friend or female students had no close female friend, they would be considered to have fulfilled the fourth criteria. (4) Victimized in school — students were given a one paragraph explanation of the meaning of bullying and then asked whether they had been bullied at school in the past two months. On a five-point scale with descriptors “I have not been bullied at school in the past couple of months,” “It has only happened once or twice,” “2 or 3 times a month,” “About once a week” and “Several times a week,” If students indicated that they had been bullied 2 or 3 times a month or more, they would be considered to have fulfilled the fifth criteria.

Health Risk Behavior Scales are a collection of nine instruments used to assess the extent of involvement of respondents in a variety of risk behaviors which may have serious consequences to their health. These behaviors include drinking, smoking, drug abuse, internet addiction, bullying others, fighting, sexual activity, psychosomatic symptoms and suicide ideation. With the exception of internet addiction, which was a 10-items scale created for this study, all the other scales had been validated in previous HBSC studies.

- A. Drinking is a 6-item scale intended to measure the frequency that students engaged themselves in drinking any of the following alcoholic beverages: beer, wine, spirits, alcopops/Shandy, Chinese wine, or other alcoholic drinks. Respondents are asked whether they had tried the drinks on a five-point scale ranging from “never” (1), “rarely” (2), “every month” (3), “every week” (4), and “every day” (5).
- B. Smoking is a 2-item scale intended to assess the frequency that students smoke cigarettes. Respondents are asked the following questions: (i) How often do you smoke? The responses are: “never” (1), “less than once a week” (2), “more than once a week” (3) and “everyday” (4); (ii) How many cigarettes did you smoke in the past 30 days? The responses are: “none” (1), “less than once per week” (2), “at least once per day” (3), “one to five per day” (4), “six to ten per day” (5), “eleven to twenty per day” (6) “more than twenty per day” (7).
- C. Drug abuse is a 9-item scale intended to assess the frequency that students abuse the following drugs: (i) ecstasy, (ii) amphetamine (ice), (iii) heroine, (iv) ketamine, (v) cocaine, (vi) thinner (glue or other solvents), (vii) codeine (cough syrup), (viii) hallucinogen, and (ix) cannabis. Respondents are asked whether they had tried the drug on a seven-point scale ranging from “never” (1), “once or twice” (2), “3 to 5 times” (3), “6 to 9 times” (4), “10 to 19 times” (5), “20 to 39 times” (6) and “40 times or more” (7).
- D. Problematic internet use is a 10-item scale. Respondents are asked whether they are suffering from the following symptoms: (i) I have strong desire or impulse in surfing the net; (ii) I will feel uneasy, irritated, easily angry, or lack of concentration when I reduce or stop surfing the net; (iii) I continuously increase the time on surfing the net to satisfy myself; (iv) I tried to control the time and hours spent on surfing the net, but didn’t succeed after various trial; (v) I know that long hours of net surfing may affect learning and living, but I still find it hard to stop; (vi) I once forgo other interest, entertainment or social

activity due to net surfing; (vii) When I am not happy or encounter troubles, I wish to get rid of the feeling through net surfing; (viii) I had the experience of forgetting to do my homework or skipping classes due to net surfing; (ix) I had concealed my true situation of net surfing to my parents or friends; and (x) I had had confrontations with parents and teachers due to net surfing. The responses are “no” (1) and “yes” (2).

- E. Bullying others is a 9-item scale. Respondents are first given a short paragraph to explain the meaning of bullying, and then they are asked how often they bully others in the following ways in the past two months: (i) called others using a bad name or laughed at them in a hurtful way; (ii) isolated other students intentionally, excluded or neglected him/her in a group of friends; (iii) hit, kicked, pushed, crashed or locked others in a room; (iv) spread rumors or lies about other student to make others hate him/her; (v) gave others names or harsh comments out of their race or my skin color; (vi) gave me names or harsh comments out of their religious belief; (vii) joke on others about sex, had discussion about sex, or did sex-related movement to them; (viii) bullied others through computer, e-mail messages or photos; and (ix) bullied others through cell phone.
- F. Fighting is a 1-item scale. Respondents are asked how many fights they were involved in the past 12 months. The responses are: “I was not involved in any fight in the past 12 months” (1), “once” (2), “twice” (3), “3 times” (4) and “4 times or more” (5).
- G. Sexual activity is a 1-item scale. Respondents are asked whether they had sexual intercourse (or make love) before. The responses are “no” (1) and “yes” (2).
- H. Frustration symptoms is a 8-item scale which describes students’ bodily reaction to stress. The scale starts by asking “In the last six months, how often have you had the following complaints: headache, stomach-ache, back ache, feeling low,

irritability or bad temper, feeling nervous, difficulties in getting to sleep, and feeling dizzy.” Respondents are asked to rate each of the above complaints separately on a five-point scale with the descriptors “Rarely or never” (1), “about every month” (2), “about every week” (3), “more than once a week” (4), and “about every day” (5).

- I. Suicide inclination is a 5-item scale which describes students’ inclination to hurt themselves or to commit suicide. Respondents are asked the following questions: (i) In the past 12 months, have you ever been feeling sad, desperate, unable to carry out daily activities everyday, which lasted for at least two weeks or even longer time? Responses are: “no” (1), “yes” (2). (ii) In the past 12 months, have you ever seriously thought of committing suicide? Responses are: “no” (1), “yes” (2). (iii) In the past 12 months, have you ever planned of committing suicide in any way? Responses are: “no” (1), “yes” (2). (iv) In the past 12 months, how many times have you attempted to commit suicide? Responses are: “0 time” (1), “1 time” (2), “2–3 times” (3), “4–5 times” (4), and “6 times or above” (5). (v) In the past 12 months, have you ever been hurt, poisoned or overdosed due to attempting suicide, that requires medical treatment? Responses are: “I have never attempted suicide in the past 12 months” (1), “attempted but not hurt” (2), “yes” (3).

The properties of these instruments, their means and standard deviations, number of items, number of response categories, and reported reliability are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Descriptive Properties of Survey Instruments

Instrument	No. of items	Response categories	Mean			Reported reliability
			Sec. 2	Sec. 4	Sec. 6	
HSD *	4	varied	0.23 (0.42)	0.20 (0.40)	0.19 (0.39)	0.524
Drinking	6	1–5	1.41 (0.59)	1.41 (0.56)	1.46 (0.51)	0.874
Smoking *	2	varied	0.07 (2.07)	0.03 (1.96)	–0.30 (1.03)	0.809
Drug abuse	9	1–5	1.59 (3.05)	1.28 (3.06)	1.22 (3.02)	0.984
Problematic internet use	10	1–2	1.23 (0.26)	1.21 (0.24)	1.20 (0.20)	0.818
Bullying others	9	1–5	1.35 (0.86)	1.27 (0.81)	1.26 (0.83)	0.933
Fighting	1	1–4	1.46 (1.05)	1.26 (0.82)	1.12 (0.60)	--
Sexually active	1	1–2	1.06 (0.25)	1.08 (0.27)	1.08 (0.28)	--
Frustration symptoms	8	1–5	2.08 (1.00)	2.14 (0.97)	2.21 (0.91)	0.890
Suicide inclination *	5	varied	0.04 (0.80)	–0.01 (0.72)	–0.08 (0.61)	0.667

* Reported values are z scores.

Results

Table 3 presents the distribution of students who are exposed to different levels of risk of hidden school disengagement. The result shows that more than half of secondary students were identified with one or more risk factors of hidden school disengagement, and the higher the grades, the higher the prevalence. Thus, it appears that the longer the students remain in the education system, the more likely they will feel disengaged from it. In the present study, it is assumed that students who are exposed to two or more of these factors will be considered as being suffered from multiple symptoms of hidden school disengagement. Based on this criterion, 1,101 secondary students (21.0%) in Hong Kong were identified as having multiple symptoms of hidden school disengagement. This percentage is in the same magnitude as the reported 25% of students who claimed to be unhappy with their school experience in the PISA study (Willms, 2003), and is slightly higher than the reported 16% of truancy among 10th graders in Henry's (2007) study of truancy.

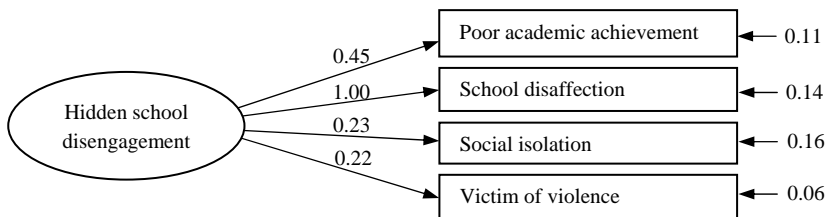
Table 3: Percentages of Students Exposed to Different Levels of Risk of Hidden School Disengagement

Risk factors	Secondary 2	Secondary 4	Secondary 6
0	50.3%	47.2%	39.1%
1	30.0%	32.0%	36.7%
2	12.6%	14.8%	18.4%
3	6.1%	4.8%	4.8%
4	1.0%	1.2%	1.0%

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in order to demonstrate the construct validity of the hidden school disengagement scale. Result of the confirmatory factor analysis (shown in Figure 1) suggests that the construct validity of the hidden school disengagement scale is acceptable ($\chi^2 = 11.65$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.020$, CFI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.019). In addition, in terms of the ranking of factor loadings, school disaffection has the highest factor loading, followed by academic achievement, then high pressure in school, social isolation and victim of violence, in decreasing order of factor loading.

Figure 1: Result of Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Hidden School

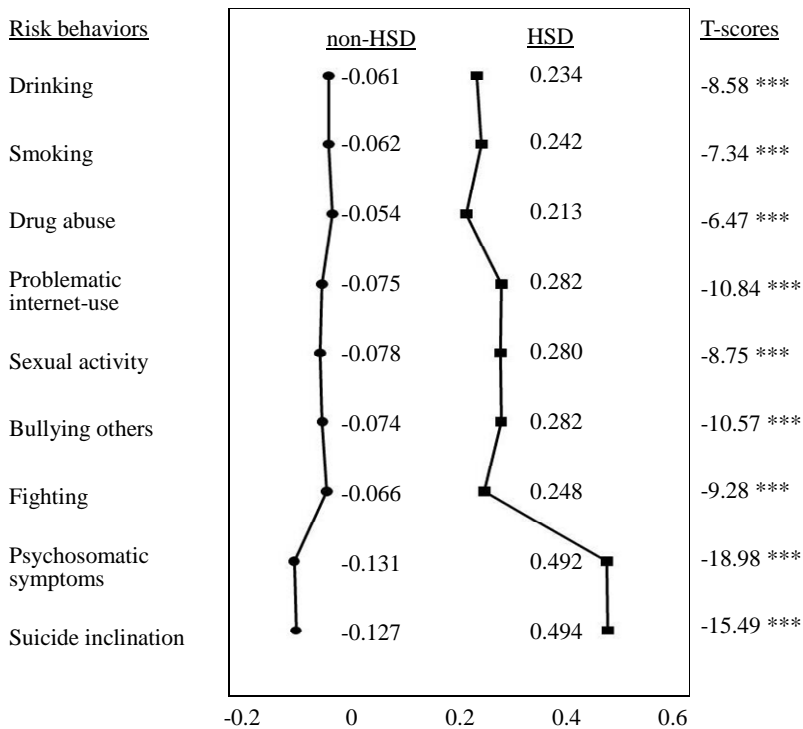
Disengagement Scale (Model statistics: Chi square = 11.65, degree of freedom = 5, $p = 0.020$, GFI = 0.999, AGFI = 0.997, CFI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.019)



In order to understand the characteristics of students who are identified as hidden school disengagement, independent samples *t* test was conducted on the health risk behaviors of students who are identified as HSD against the normal population, and the result is shown in Figure 2. Among the nine health risk behaviors, drinking, smoking and drug abuse are substance abuse behaviors that are considered deviant or illegal and are hazardous to health (Goldstein, 2001). Problematic internet use is a widespread problem in school that affects a person's social and academic outcomes (Capland, 2007). Sexual activity affects a person's future opportunity in education and is considered a deviant behavior in the Chinese society (Song & Ji, 2010). Bullying others and fighting in the school setting are considered deviant behaviors and have serious consequences (Tam & Taki, 2007). Psychosomatic symptoms are signs of frustration of a person in life and suicide inclination has serious consequence in a person's life, and both are related to the state of mental health of the person (Hesketh et al., 2010).

The comparison of HSD students and the normal population shown in Figure 2 shows that HSD students have significantly higher scores in all nine health risk behaviors than students in the normal population. What this implies is that students who are identified as having two or more symptoms of HSD are more likely to drink, smoke or abuse drugs more frequently than students in the normal population. In addition, they have a higher chance to be engaged in problematic internet use, more likely to be involved in sexual activities, or more likely to be a bully or involved in fighting. Worse still, these students could have a larger likelihood of suffering from psychosomatic symptoms or even being inflicted with suicidal thoughts or actually committing suicide.

Figure 2: Health Risk Behaviors of Secondary Students Identified as HSD (rectangles) and the Normal Population (circles)



*** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2003) posited that the internal organization of a person — the cohesiveness of his thoughts, emotion and will — is closely associated with his ability to reach the experience of full engagement. In the same vein, the phenomenon of hidden school disengagement may be seen as an indication of a state of disorganization within the person. From a developmental perspective, a person who is in a state of internal disorganization is probably at an early stage of ego development, and his/her behaviors tend to be impulsive, aggressive and undisciplined (Erikson, 1968; Loevinger, 1976). Structural-strain theory suggests that uncertainties and confusions resulting from social disorganization often produce a state of alienation and leaving individuals vulnerable to deviant behaviors (Merton, 1957). Similarly, hidden school disengagement may be describing a condition of alienation caused by disorganization, but the condition occurs within an individual instead of a social environment.

The present paper suggests an empirical model to explore the phenomena of hidden school disengagement in Hong Kong. The model consists of four simple measures: poor academic performance, school disaffection, social isolation and victim of violence. Results suggest that approximately one-fifth of students are identified as having multiple symptoms of HSD, and that these students have significantly higher chances of engaging in health-related risk behaviors and suffering from higher level of psychosomatic symptoms.

The composition and factor loadings of the hidden school disengagement construct suggest that identification with academic and social relationship are proximal reasons behind hidden school disengagement, and these reasons are more related to personal issues, such as personality or developmental problems of the students. More distal reasons could include pressure from learning, pressure from parents and teachers, insufficient support from the environment, etc. In the Chinese culture, competitiveness and success are taught in the schools, glamorized in the media, and encouraged by the values that are passed along from generation to generation (Lee, 1991). However, cultural emphasis on achievement in the education system needs to be

matched by a social supportive system in the family, school and community (Wildschut, Insko, & Gaertner, 2002). The existing education system in Hong Kong, which still places heavy emphasis on large class teaching, teacher-centered instruction and competition despite its current reform efforts, is likely to put huge pressure on the students and causes hidden school disengagement (Tam, 2009). But the mechanism of how pressure in the education system actually leads to hidden school disengagement is perhaps another research agenda.

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