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Can educational engagement prevent Early School Leaving? Unpacking the school's effect on educational success

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Abstract

There is growing evidence that school engagement, or more specifically disengagement, is a key indicator for predicting Early School Leaving. The aim of this article is to explore the impact of secondary schools in student (dis)engagement and subsequent opportunities to succeed in school. Drawing on data from a qualitative study in five secondary schools in Barcelona, the article discusses the role of school context in inhibiting or facilitating school engagement by exploring compositional effects, organisational and pedagogical practices, and teachers' expectations. To do so a twofold perspective is adopted: firstly we look at the main school features and their impact on students' educational opportunities; and secondly a systematic analysis of the dimensions of school engagement (behavioural, emotional, and cognitive) is carried out. As a result, the article contributes to the identification of the most significant variables at school level that influence student engagement and their opportunities for school success.

Key words: Early School Leaving, school effect, school engagement, educational inequalities

Introduction

Early School Leaving (ESL) is one of the core issues in the European educational agenda and the majority of its member states.¹ It is a fundamental concern as it not only limits the life opportunities of ESLers but also calls into question the very foundations of European educational systems as guarantors of equal opportunities, as well as the right to education for all. In fact, far from being a phenomenon that affects all social groups equally, ESL is particularly significant among the most economically, socially,

¹ The European Commission (EC) defines Early School Leaving as the 'percentage of the population aged 18-24 with *at most* lower secondary education and not in further education or training' (European Commission. 2013: 8). In this regard, the EC aims to reduce ESL to 10% (15% in the case of Spain) by 2020. Currently the percentage of early school leavers in Spain (21.9%) and Catalonia (22.2%) is much higher than the overall average for the EU-28 (11.1%).

and culturally disadvantaged groups, and therefore must be viewed as a central question in terms of educational equality and social justice.

There have been numerous reports and publications since the mid-1990s that have analysed the causes and identified the main factors that lead to ESL. Taken cumulatively, this means that a significant body of knowledge on this matter has already been constructed: It is a social, multidimensional, and procedural phenomenon that requires parallel prevention, intervention, and compensation measures (NESSE, 2009); the profiles of ESLers are heterogeneous and diverse; and only those practices and policies focused on students' needs, interests, and voices can be effective in the struggle against ESL (Smyth and Hattam, 2001). However, despite these advances in research, many authors have pointed out (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, and Rummens, 2005; Rumberger and Lim, 2008) that there are still few studies that examine the processes of ESL, especially from the subjective perspective of the students. What is more, there is still relatively little empirical evidence focusing on the effect that schools, and teachers in particular, have on students' decisions – toward the end of their period of compulsory education – to continue studying or to drop out.

The purpose of this article is to analyse this school effect from a twofold perspective: first, by identifying the most salient features of schools that influence students' educational experiences and opportunities; and second, by examining the school effects on the possibilities to engage with the school and the different types of school engagement. As Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) state, school engagement, or more specifically disengagement, is one of the most useful concepts in capturing the gradual process through which students disconnect from school, and is therefore a sound indicator for predicting the risk of ESL. What is more, as Van Houtte and Van Maele (2012) note, there is still little research examining the specific elements of schools that affect these processes, and it is therefore essential to continue studying the role of different school contexts in facilitating or inhibiting students' school engagement.

With this goal in mind, the first section offers a theoretical perspective for addressing the concepts of school engagement, school climate and its link with ESL. The second presents the methodology of the study. The third section covers the main features of the schools where the research was conducted and highlights the most relevant elements for the analysis. The fourth provides an in-depth analysis of the school effect on students' school engagement. The fifth and final section is a discussion

of the relevance of this approach and the role of schools in promoting school engagement in students and preventing ESL.

Theoretical insights: school engagement, school climate and Early School Leaving

Since the 1980s numerous theoretical and empirical studies on the concept of school engagement have been carried out. However, as Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), Appleton et al. (2008), and Demanet and Van Houtte (2014) point out, this concept is not always understood and interpreted in the same way, nor are the same variables and indicators used in the various analyses and measurements. For this reason, in terms of their purposes and results, widely diverse studies have been conducted under the banner of school engagement. According to Libbey (2004), the concept has been confused with others such as school commitment, teacher support, and even school climate. This conceptual confusion means that it is difficult to draw general conclusions from the results. Furthermore, the majority of studies done in this field tend to conceive of school engagement as almost synonymous with good school behaviour, while ignoring other dimensions such as the less observable cognitive, affective, and emotional aspects (Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2012).

In the present article, the concept of school engagement draws from the multidimensional perspective described by Fredricks et al. (2004) and is based on three key dimensions: behavioural engagement, as seen through student participation in school activities, including different types and degrees of participation; emotional engagement, in the sense of belonging and the affective bonds that students forge with their school, teachers, and peers; and cognitive engagement, in terms of students' self-perception and self-identities as learners, to their motivation and also to their approaches and strategies to the entire learning process. Exploring the three dimensions of school engagement simultaneously is essential in order to obtain a comprehensive, holistic view of the subject that can take in its different expressions and manifestations.

On the other hand it is important to note that although previous research has aimed to identify the determinants of school engagement both on an individual and an institutional level, several authors stress the need to continue studying the specific role of schools in promoting or hindering school engagement (Demanet and Van Hotte, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2012). More specifically, questions still awaiting answers are: What are the specific elements of the school effect on students' possibilities to engage with the school? Are there specific organisational or

pedagogical elements that foster different types of school engagement? How do teacher's expectations affect behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement? Only further empirical research can provide conclusive results (Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2012). Moreover, as Friedrichs et al. (2004, p. 4) state, it is particularly important to conduct further studies that consider the effects of schools on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of school engagement, as these have been the least explored expressions of the concept in previous research.

In this regard, Scheerens (2016) develop an *integrated multilevel model of education* that tries to unpack the main mechanisms that mediate the policy enactment, providing scholars with an innovative conceptual framework for conducting further research on school effects. This model distinguishes between macro and micro levels (system, school, classroom and student level), which are compound by elements of different natures, allowing researchers to combine more controllable variables (such as the student composition), with more malleable or soft variables, (e.g., school climate).

In this sense, according to Anderson (1985), the study of the school climate has been a very common component, essential in understanding phenomena such as the students' achievement or the educational engagement. However, the same author reveals the difficulty of defining the institutional climate precisely and univocally, reflecting the multifaceted nature of this concept.

Some scholars have tried to define the school climate by putting the focus on the relational dimensions and highlighting those aspects related *"to the shared beliefs, values and attitudes that shape interactions among students, teachers and administrators and set the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school"* (Bradshaw et al., 2014, p. 594). According to Tagiuri (1968), school climate is a compound of ecological (physical and material characteristics of the school), environmental (social dimensions related to the presence and characteristics of individuals and groups within the school environment), social (models of interactions and relations of people and groups in the center), and cultural variables (including value systems, beliefs, cognitive structures of groups, etc.). These dimensions together form an interactional system that can facilitate or hinder the emergence of specific relational, emotional and learning processes that occur within the school, in which different actors are involved (teachers, principals, classmates, parents, etc.).

The institutional climate should certainly be used to gain a better understanding of how schools actually work, including – besides the shared beliefs – the hierarchies

and relationships between individual and collective actors, the leadership style and decision-making processes, the physical surroundings and the characteristics of individuals and groups participating in the organization (Van Houtte, 2005). At the same time, Van Houtte (2005) states that climate implies the total environmental quality of the organization. In this regard, school climate has great importance for analyzing and interpreting how and why school improvement dynamics occur (and consequently, to understand the processes of early school leaving.).

Finally, several studies have already attempted to establish the relationship between school engagement and ESL (Audas and Willms, 2001; Friedrichs et al., 2004; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, and Pagani, 2008). On the one hand, school engagement is a crucial predictor of school performance (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly, 2006; Fredericks et al., 2004) and as such, can affect young people's possibilities and decisions to continue studying. If a student is not engaged with their educational process and has poor academic results, it is plausible that their school record may lead them to leave. On the other hand, as we have shown in previous work (Authors, 2015a), ESL cannot be solely or primarily causally linked to school performance. Instead, it is often associated with more expressive rather than merely instrumental issues. From this standpoint, the study of school engagement is relevant not only because of its mediating effect on school performance but also, and even more importantly, because of its direct effect on early school leaving processes, especially in its affective-emotional dimension. In other words, if a student is not engaged with her or his schooling process in behavioural, emotional, and cognitive terms; if remaining in school makes no sense for him or her; if they feel that it is not worth staying in school because it is not possible for them to imagine a better future by means of schooling; then there is no sense in continuing to study. The feeling of an unsatisfying and unrewarding school experience, not directly or merely due to school performance, is then the main motivation explanation for ESL. As Smyth (2005) indicates, in order to properly understand ESL, the focus should be directed toward relationships, school culture, and pedagogical arrangements, and not toward blaming students, their families, and their backgrounds.

In short, according to Appleton et al. (2008), Finn (2006), and Friedrichs et al. (2004), we can assert that the theoretical perspective on school engagement is the most appropriate one for understanding ESL as it allows us to focus on the gradual process through which students disengage from the school. As Audas and Willms (2001) point out, there is increasing evidence that engagement is the key factor in determining school

success. Furthermore, pioneers in the study of ESL such as Finn (1989) and Rumberger (1983) already demonstrated that school engagement was a crucial mediating factor in early school leaving processes. These studies, however, focused on the behavioural dimension of engagement and therefore, as Friedrichs et al. (2004) contend, more empirical research that analyses the combined effect of the different dimensions of school engagement in promoting students' educational opportunities to succeed at school is needed.

The research study

A qualitative approach has been adopted for this analysis. Specifically, we conducted in-depth case studies (Yin, 2003) in five public secondary schools in the city of Barcelona that offer compulsory lower-secondary education (from 12 to 16 years of age, Grades 7 to 10). The schools were selected to achieve a balance in terms of the social intake and social prestige of the neighbourhood, on the one hand, and the mechanisms, devices, and programmes for managing student heterogeneity, on the other. The fieldwork was carried out from January 2014 to July 2015 and multiple techniques for gathering information were applied: interviews with teaching staff (N 47) and students (N 54), focus groups of teachers (N 5) and students (N 6), statistical data analysis (on official data from the Catalan Department of Education), documentary analysis (school projects, web pages, etc), and classroom and meeting observations.

Opting for a qualitative methodology is a key advance in the field of school engagement research as the bulk of empirical studies in this area are quantitative in nature. Authors such as Friedrichs et al. (2004) and Audas and Willms (2001) have already emphasised the importance of reinforcing qualitative studies in a way so as to capture students' motivations, experiences, and subjectivities in the educational field. In this respect, rigorous qualitative studies aimed at understanding how students engage with their schooling process are of paramount importance (Smyth and Hewitson, 2014).

All the students selected for our analysis were chosen because of their risk of dropping out of school either before completing or just at the end of compulsory secondary schooling. The risk of dropping out has been defined in educational terms, meaning students with grade retention, absenteeism, and/or widespread and systematic failing grades². Simultaneously we also sought the greatest heterogeneity, in terms of

² The specificity of the sample in terms of 'educational risk' is of crucial importance in order to interpret the results of the analysis and to reflect on their implications. In this regard, the results are not applicable

family socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnic background, possible. Despite these selection criteria, due to the impact of social class on the risks of dropping out, students of low socioeconomic and cultural status (41 out of 54) are overrepresented in the final sample. All the interviews conducted with teachers and students have been digitally recorded, fully transcribed and analysed with ATLAS.ti software for thematic analysis.

As mentioned above, the analytical model incorporates a dual approach. First, in order to explore the school effect, three main variables are considered: the social composition of the schools (Thrupp, 2001); their organisational practices as regards the mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity (Durpiez, Dumay, and Vause, 2008); and their expressive order (Reay, David, and Ball, 2001) in terms of teachers' expectations (Van Houtte, 2004). As a complement, three primary dimensions – behavioural, emotional, and cognitive – of school engagement have been studied. Table 1 illustrates how the two central concepts of the article (school effect and school engagement) have been codified for the analysis.

Table 2 here

The educational field: different schools, different opportunities

In this section, we address the main differences between the five schools studied through the three variables analysed: their social composition, their models for managing student heterogeneity, and their expressive order. Table 2 summarises these features.

First of all, in terms of their social composition, Schools I and II are mostly made up of middle-class students – especially those with parents in liberal or upper white-collar professions – and have a relatively small number of foreign students. Schools III, IV, and V, however, primarily enrol students from working class backgrounds, disadvantaged contexts, and/or those at a higher risk of social exclusion. Likewise they have much higher percentages of students from migrant backgrounds and newcomers to the educational system. Particularly worth highlighting is School IV, which, unlike the others, exhibits a high degree of school segregation that is characterised by low levels of demand for school places among the families in the

to all the students with low socioeconomic and cultural status, given their internal heterogeneity both in social and educational terms. However, the specificity of the sample does not bring into question the impacts that different schools generate on the students' potential for engagement with their schooling.

neighbourhood in comparison that in other schools in the area, which translates into extremely high mobility among students throughout the academic year.

Secondly, in terms of the logics and mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity, Schools I and III present a model we have called comprehensive or inclusive, while Schools II, IV, and V follow one we have defined as residual and/or based on practices of exclusion (Authors, 2015b, 2016). Thus, despite their quite different social intakes, Schools I and III share a broad and extensive conception of student diversity that encompasses social, academic, and personal aspects. Both schools understand that diversity is inherent to students and that, therefore, attention to this diversity (or diversities, as the case may be) must be part of the schools' everyday work with all of their students. Managing student heterogeneity from this vantage point means considering students' multiple educational, social, and emotional needs in global terms. From this perspective, numerous mechanisms are activated toward this aim: heterogeneous grouping, low teacher-student ratios, and personalised and cooperative teaching-learning methodologies. Similarly, the model for managing student heterogeneity implemented in both schools is characterised by constant reflection and revision and is always subject to improvements in order to expand students' educational opportunities.

The residual model for the management of heterogeneity evident in Schools II, IV, and V is expressed in both their conception of student heterogeneity and the mechanisms they employ to manage it. Thus, all three schools have a limited conception of diversity, which is viewed as more an exception than as a rule. In fact, student diversity equates exclusively to those students with special educational needs and is often viewed as a problem in the performance of everyday academic functions at the school. From this conception, in these three schools we can identify a much more residual and occasional kind of intervention than that found in Schools I and III: School II uses a model for managing student heterogeneity that deals with the students with the most difficulties individually, but does not develop overall mechanisms for the school and/or student body as a whole. This model manifests itself in curricular and methodological adaptations for students with academic difficulties in reducing the theoretical and abstract content and reinforcing the applied aspects of the curriculum. School VI implements a program that is based essentially on ability grouping. Although this ability grouping may be envisioned as flexible grouping, in practice they are hardly so. Finally, School V basically has no mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity

and, as a consequence, the outstanding characteristic of the institutional logics of its orientation toward the issue of heterogeneity among students is precisely its omission (Authors, 2015a).

Thirdly, regarding the expressive order of the five schools studied, and particularly teacher expectations, we found clear differences in the factors contributing to school success and failure as well as the responsibility assigned to teachers in this process. Once again, Schools I and III have very different social compositions, but they demonstrated a broad, multidimensional conception of the factors involved in school success and failure and clearly acknowledge the role of schools in general and teachers in particular in these processes. In fact, both schools stress social inequalities as key factors in explaining school failure and success and, consequently, these processes cannot be understood without considering the broader structure of opportunities available to different students. By the same logic, teachers avoid explaining academic failure and success by leaning on individual or family interest, merit, and effort. Likewise, at both schools we have identified critical discourses regarding the very structure of the educational system and its excessive rigidity and academicism as key factors framing the possibilities to succeed. The current system, they claim, only caters to one kind of student and is therefore responsible for the others' failure. In this sense, it is believed that teachers must accept and fulfil their responsibility to all students, a responsibility that extends beyond the strictly academic realm and is associated with the personal, social, and emotional development of the young people they work for.

Our education system is very much like a shoemaker who makes only size 8 shoes because this is the standard size. As a result, this is great for those who wear size 8, because their shoes fit them right, but for those who wear size 10 or 6, they will never have the right size. And our system is really, really academically oriented. Absolutely academically oriented. And this academic orientation does not work for everyone (Principal, Centre I).

In contrast, in Schools II, IV, and V, the main responsibility for school failure and success is attributed to the students themselves, and in particular to their motivation, effort, and interest. They claim that the most 'interested', 'committed' and 'hardworking' students are the ones who are successful and, if students do not manage to make

satisfactory progress in their academic career, it is usually because they are not interested in it. Likewise, families are highlighted as bearing fundamental responsibility in this process, which often mobilises deficit-thinking discourses (Valencia, 2012) in blaming those families most distant to the educational practices, values, and attitudes expected by schools. In line with this logic, all three schools produce discourses that are largely sceptical of the role of teachers in reducing or reversing the risks of educational failure and dropping out. Teachers often feel disconcerted, overwhelmed, and puzzled; they feel they have to accept responsibilities they should not and dream of students who are intrinsically interested in the school contents regardless of their social background or specific needs.

We are secondary school teachers, we have university degrees, we know our subjects, but we are not psychologists; we are specialists. I can explain whatever you want in my field, but I haven't studied psychology or pedagogy, so I do what I can with the students. I try to understand what I can, but you can't ask for the impossible" (Teaching Coordinator, Centre IV).

We can, then, argue that even though the social composition of the schools clearly influences their organisational models and expressive orders (Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2012), it does not determine them in a direct, linear manner. In some cases, as in those of Schools I and IV, there is a linear relationship between the different variables analysed. Specifically, School I comprises the middle classes and has numerous mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity and implementing an expressive order based on high expectations of all students. Along the same lines, there is also a linear relationship between all three variables for Schools IV and V, although they tend toward the opposite direction: school segregation, few mechanisms for managing heterogeneity, and low educational expectations of students. In the other two cases, however, the relationship between these variables is not linear. School III, for example, is mainly composed of working-class students, but it is similar to School I in its model for managing student heterogeneity and its expressive order. The same is true of School II, but again on the opposite end of the spectrum. The social composition effect, then, is expressed in several ways and is also mediated by other variables beyond the scope of this article, such as teacher training, working conditions, and so on. Nevertheless,

although the relationships are not always linear, it is crucial to acknowledge the influence of social composition in generating different opportunities for school success.

Table 2 here

Results: the impact of schools on school engagement

The results of our analysis clearly demonstrate the existence of a 'school effect' in explaining different types and degrees of school engagement among students. Moreover, as we will see below, this school effect is determined primarily by the expressive order of the schools and is particularly significant in behavioural and emotional engagement.

In fact, analysis reveals key differences between Schools I and III on the one hand and Schools II, IV, and V on the other. The first two schools have higher overall levels of school engagement among their students, while the latter three present lower levels of engagement in behavioural, emotional, and cognitive terms. Obviously, regardless of the specific features of the schools, in all of them there are students who are and are not engaged; who are and are not motivated; and who are connected and disconnected from the educational process. As Appleton et al. (2008) point out, this is inevitable. Our analysis, then, refers to students in collective and global terms, going beyond the perceptions, opinions and/or attitudes of individual students who in isolation may not be representative of the student culture as a whole at the schools studied.

Impacts on behavioural engagement

First of all, regarding the behavioural dimension of engagement, the main difference identified between the schools is the level of active involvement of the students in classroom activities and their participation in extracurricular, non-academic or volunteer activities at their schools. The students in Schools I and III have much higher levels of active involvement in school activities than those in Schools II, IV, and V. This is so because of the differences between the schools in terms of their mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity or the greater variety of extracurricular activities available in these schools. In fact, the students at Schools I and III unanimously recognise their respective schools' efforts in managing their diverse and specific needs and share a highly positive opinion of the existing mechanisms for managing heterogeneity. As such, students acknowledge the impact of schools and teachers in their behaviour as they feel they are being helped and there are spaces and opportunities

provided for them to improve.

The teachers in this school have always helped me. If I don't understand something they explain it twice, they want me to understand. So this has helped me a lot, it raised my self-esteem a bit and my desire to study. Nowadays I never skip a lesson. I'm more attentive (Ahmed, Grade 9, School I).³

Yeah, sometimes we work in small groups, with fewer students in the classrooms and more teachers for us. I think we've changed a lot. All of us in these groups used to go to detention almost every day. We were expelled one day or another. And now it is not like that. We receive much more attention and so we are much more motivated to study (Ángela, Grade 9, School III).

In Schools II, IV, and V, however, the students lament the lack of specific mechanisms to manage their needs, and where these mechanisms do exist (such as flexible groups or adapted individual curricula) they consider them as stigmatising and/or limiting their opportunities. In fact, the students in these three schools claim overall that if they do not make more of an effort in class and are not more actively involved in the educational process, it is due to the corresponding lack of effort their schools make for them. Why make an effort, they claim, why do homework, why study if your effort is not rewarded?

Q: What are the differences between this adapted small group and the others?

A: Well, it's slower, much slower, with less content.... I mean the others say that it's for us dummies. And there's no doubt that those of us who go there are not going to do the baccalaureate (Martí, Grade 10, School II).

In this school, the teachers are much more attentive to those who study

³ The real names of all the actors interviewed have been changed to protect their anonymity.

than those who don't. They ignore those who don't study. And remember that what a kid wants is to receive attention (Ángel, Grade 9, School V).

On the other hand, it is essential to point out the importance that students at Schools I and III attach to the extracurricular activities offered by their respective schools, which are a far cry from the academicist bent common to secondary schools. Thus, whether in the form of elective classes associated with theatre or other artistic-expressive activities, extracurricular spaces set up for student group work, mentoring classes, or other activities, these kinds of activities are perceived by students as a factor that improves their school behaviour. The schools thus become not only places for learning but also spaces for interaction, socialisation, and creation that have unquestionably positive effects on the kinds of behaviour students display and on their overall engagement with the educational process.

Impacts on emotional engagement

Secondly, regarding the emotional dimension of engagement, the analysis reveals significant differences in all the variables studied. Thus, the students at Schools I and III share highly positive opinions of their teachers and their schools, while in Schools II, IV, and V, highly critical discourses on their teachers and the schools as a whole predominate among students. In fact, the perception of the figure of the teacher varies widely in the five schools analysed. Thus, in Schools I and III the teachers are perceived as accessible and attentive to students' needs; they are viewed as emotionally supportive beyond their strictly academic function. At Schools II, IV, and V, however, the teachers are generally perceived as excessively strict and distant – specifically, largely distant from their needs as students and young people – and they particularly stress the hostile treatment that students with more difficulties receive.

In my opinion, the teachers here are good. They help you if you have a problem, they're attentive, they listen to you and that helps a lot. I know of other schools where this isn't true, but here it's different (Jonás, Grade 9, School III).

I don't really like the teachers, to be honest. They teach without really thinking about us, they don't explain things in a way in which we can

understand them and this means that I don't pay much attention in class. 'I hear you but I'm not listening to you', that's what happens to me. I don't really do anything wrong, but I'm really bored (Raquel, Grade 9, School II).

What is more, the students at Schools I and III have a clear sense of belonging to the school that stems from the perception of being tended to and cared for. In both schools, the students stress the feeling of a family atmosphere that comes not so much from the size of the school but from the affective, approachable relationships generated between both the teachers and the other students. Additionally, this feeling of belonging becomes clear not only in the students' discourses but also in the relationships observed between teachers and students in the hallways, outdoor areas, and other places or in different aspects of the schools' hidden agendas. For example, what drew our attention at School I was a painting hanging on the wall by the entrance which is entitled: 'I Love You, School I'. In this artwork, there is also a poem by a former student who is bidding the school farewell and recounting the fond memories she is taking with her as she leaves the school after graduating. The piece is representative of not only the sense of belonging felt by the majority of students at the school but also the way the administrative team and teachers manage this issue. That is, at School I, just like at School III, they are proud that everyone feels included and as part of the process, and they impart this to the students.

I like this school because they make us work hard, but at the same time the teachers know you, they know your background, they know how far you can and can't go. They talk to you, they are interested in you and I really like it here (Julia, Grade 9, School I).

I thought about changing to another school because it's closer to my home and the football pitch is right next to it, but I'm not going to. No, the [school] where I see myself doing my best, because of the way it is, is this one (Jorge, Grade 9, School III).

In contrast, at Schools II, IV and V, there is a pervasively weak sense of belonging. As the students do not feel cared for, tended to, and listened to by the teachers, this clearly

distances them from the school, which in turn escalates their lack of motivation and sense of detachment from their own educational process. As mentioned above, students' motivation gradually wanes because they perceive that the school in general and the teachers in particular make little effort for them. In fact, what prevails among the students with the most academic difficulties is a lack of motivation or a sense of futility (Agirdag, Van Houtte, and Van Avermae, 2012), which stems from the sense that their efforts are ultimately in vain.

If you're a person who finds it hard to study and the day you ask a question they [the teachers] don't even answer you, then what can you do? And if you're repeating the course it's even worse; it's like they shove you aside (Axel, Grade 9, School II).

I think they should help us more. I mean, it's not like I have a bad relationship with the teachers, but at this school they don't encourage you to keep going, they don't help you much. We kind of feel alone. If you don't understand something you're a lost cause here, it's like you're not worth spending any more time on (Fátima, Grade 9, School V).

I can't do anything. I come here every day and have no idea what they're saying and I take an exam and fail it and I try to pass another one but I can't so.... It's really bad. That's what demotivates me. Last year I failed five courses and now this first quarter I'm failing seven (Elayne, Grade 9, School V).

Impacts on cognitive engagement

Finally, on the cognitive dimension of school engagement, our results trace a more ambiguous trend than in the other dimensions. On the one hand, in terms of the indicators of student motivation as well as interest in learning and in the activities held at the school, the results were the same as for the two other dimensions. Thus, for Schools I and III the results of these indicators are generally much more positive than those for Schools II, IV, and V. Indeed, as noted above, the fact that Schools I and III have numerous mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity and that students perceive them in eminently positive terms has a clear effect on their motivation to learn

and their interest in the activities held at the school. The same holds true, but on the opposite end of the spectrum, with the other three schools studied.

I think if I hadn't gotten that attention I would have performed much worse. More than anything because of seeing how you fail exams and courses, seeing that you're not making any progress. I mean it destroys you mentally. I think that I would have ended up dropping out because I wouldn't have thought I was capable of carrying on (Ahmed, Grade 9, School I).

However, this effect does not occur with the other indicators identified with the cognitive dimension of engagement, namely beliefs about the usefulness of school and studying, self-perception as a student, behavioural self-regulation, and involvement in learning activities outside the school. At least, it does not appear in the same linear fashion as in the analysis of the aforementioned variables and indicators. In fact, at all the schools studied, regardless of their organisational practices and expressive order, the students with the lowest socioeconomic and cultural background are the ones who believe the least in the value of studying for changing their social position, who blame themselves for their academic performance, and who have the fewest resources (not only economic) for diversifying their learning strategies and pursuing academic activities outside the school. The specificity of our sample, that is, students at risk of dropping out, could be reinforcing the relationship between the students' status and their cognitive engagement. Certainly, if our students have been struggling during their entire educational trajectory, it is likely that they perceive themselves as 'bad students'. However, it is crucial to highlight that this perception is stronger in the students with the lowest socioeconomic and cultural status than in the students with higher status, even if both have experienced the same kind of educational 'risks'. Moreover, these results are consistent with other studies revealing the crucial role that a student's social background plays in explaining the configuration of his or her learner identity (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010).

I mean there are things they teach us that I don't think are good for anything, like literature (Iván, Grade 9, School IV).

The diploma is important, but the knowledge isn't, really (Claudia, Grade 10, School II).

A: I know I won't be able to do it but I've always wanted to be a vet.

Q: And why is it that you can't study to be a vet?

A: Pfff, too many years studying and I don't think I could, no, no, no way. I have to give it up because I will never be a vet. In fact, I think I'll go for cosmetology in the end (Amanda, Grade 9, School III).

A: I don't think I'm prepared to go to high school. I find myself unable to do it.

Q: But you were just saying that this semester you got an 8 and 9. Why shouldn't you be prepared with such good marks?

A: Yeah, but I don't know. I think it will be very difficult and I don't see myself doing that.... I'm not a very confident person and in this case I'm not sure if I could continue in high school because I heard it's very difficult (Rut, Grade 9, School III).

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis carried out in this article leads us to several reflections and conclusions. It reveals the crucial importance of examining the meaning of the concept of school engagement to identify its different meanings and expressions. School engagement is expressed not only in its more observable dimensions but also in the more subjective ones associated with emotional, affective, and cognitive factors. Moreover, the relationships between the different dimensions of school engagement are not simply direct and unidirectional linear but may entail different meanings for different students in different school contexts.

Likewise, this engagement does not arise exclusively through students' willpower, merit, or individual effort, but is instead closely mediated by school contexts. Schools act as key institutional fields in influencing young people's educational dispositions and decisions. These fields, however, cannot be examined as if they were a black box. On the contrary, we must identify, break down, and empirically explore their dimensions as well as the ways in which they both inhibit and facilitate school engagement. In this sense, this article also contributes to identifying the most

significant variables of the school effect and to exploring the impact each has on school engagement. As demonstrated above, the social composition, mechanisms for managing student heterogeneity, and teachers' expectations are the three touchstones of the role played by schools in students' opportunities for school success.

Our analysis also demonstrates that the three school-level variables are not always and not solely expressed in a direct fashion. On the contrary, there are multiple articulations among them, which in turn generate different educational opportunities for young people. What is more, analysis reveals the crucial effect played by the schools' expressive order on students' school engagement, which reinforces the conclusions of previous studies in this field (Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2012). Specifically, students' emotional engagement with their schools and their sense of belonging do not correlate exactly with the social composition of the schools, but rather with their perception of support, help, and encouragement from teachers. In this sense teachers play a key role in generating opportunities to prevent early school leaving and promote school success for all.

Despite all of this, the analysis has also revealed that, beyond organisational practices and teachers' expectations, schools' social composition and individual students' socioeconomic and cultural background are of paramount importance when seeking to understand their possibilities for engagement with the school and for reducing their risks of dropping out. As we have seen, the cognitive dimension of engagement is much more related to social elements than to pedagogical ones, underlining the impact of social class in particular schemes of perception and appreciation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) among students. Previous studies have already demonstrated that students with the lowest socioeconomic status are the ones with the lowest sense of futility and the lowest confidence in their possibilities to succeed in school (Agirdag et al., 2012). Our study has reached the same conclusion, confirming that students' beliefs about the usefulness of school and their self-perceptions as proper learners are not independent of their social status. In this regard, it seems clear, to paraphrase the title of one of Smyth's (2014) articles, that 'educational reform makes no sense without social class'.

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