


## Artículo

# An ethnographic approach to school engagement in immigration contexts: the role of sociability dynamics

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## Abstract

This article reviews some key contributions based on ethnographic and qualitative research on the school engagement experiences and dynamics of children living in contexts of ethno-cultural diversity and social inequality shaped by migration flows. More concretely, it is analysed the impact of school climate and sociability dynamics (both between pupils and adults, and among peers) on school attachment and eventually on academic success and continuity to post-compulsory studies. We argue that the attentive incorporation of the ethnographic perspective in this field is essential and enriches both theoretically and methodologically the traditional psychological approaches from which the concept of school attachment has been framed and measured.

**Keywords:** School engagement; Dynamics of sociability; Immigration; Cultural Diversity; School ethnography.

**Resumen:** *Una aproximación etnográfica a la vinculación escolar en contextos de inmigración: el rol de las dinámicas de sociabilidad*

Este artículo revisa algunas contribuciones de investigación etnográfica y cualitativa clave sobre las experiencias y dinámicas de vinculación escolar de los niños/as que viven en contextos de diversidad étnico-cultural y desigualdad social moldeados por

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los flujos migratorios. Más concretamente, analiza el impacto del clima escolar y las dinámicas de sociabilidad (tanto entre alumnos y adultos, como entre iguales) sobre las experiencias de vinculación y eventualmente sobre el éxito académico y la continuidad a estudios postobligatorios. Sostenemos que incorporar con rigor la perspectiva etnográfica en este ámbito es indispensable y enriquece tanto teórica como metodológicamente los enfoques psicológicos tradicionales desde los que se ha encuadrado y medido el concepto de vinculación escolar.

**Palabras clave:** Vinculación escolar; Dinámicas de sociabilidad; Inmigración; Diversidad cultural; Etnografía escolar.

## Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to the Anthropology of Education by analysing the relational aspects of academic engagement from an ethnographic perspective, including other qualitative methodologies in a broader sense. It will draw on some key contributions to the subject, plus the author's own research input, that have not previously been discussed together. Its final purpose is none other than to delimit and support the anthropological focus on academic engagement to understand trajectories of school success and failure, as it offers a good analytical tool acting as a bridge between the objective processes and the subjective ones that make up the school experiences of children. Examining school engagement and disengagement through sociability scenarios in situ (and how they are shaped by axes of inequalities and power) helps us to capture the processes through which students interact within the academic world, and therefore becomes a crucial indicator for analysing school failure and dropout.

However, the concept of *school attachment* has been handled predominantly from a psycho-pedagogical lens until relatively recently. These researchers recognise that it is a multifaceted construct but have mainly focused on differentiating and analysing its more individualised components, speaking for example of *behavioural*, *emotional*, and *cognitive* engagement. Therefore, efforts have been directed towards calibrating the indicators that allow these dimensions to be measured (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Paris, 2004), with some forays into antecedents such as the organizational and structural characteristics of schools.

From the field of Anthropology and Sociology of Education, my theoretical research on the subject has focused on the one hand, on the analysis of the construction of academic and social identities by the children of foreign immigrant families in primary school, and, on the other, on the dynamics of intra-school segregation in immigration contexts. In both cases, the concept of academic engagement became crucial to understanding the experiences of these children from an ethnographic perspective. To obtain a more general theoretical framework, I drew on the literature on the reception of cultural minorities at school, as well as on the links between school experiences and identities.

A socio-anthropological look at the concept of school engagement will enable us to analyse in more detail and in depth some "antecedents", those situated in the sphere of sociability which are at the very genesis of the dynamics and experiences of engagement and disengagement, especially visible in school contexts more markedly shaped by cultural diversity and/or polarisation according to the social class of the student body. Given the impossibility of covering all the contributions at a global level that would support this view, I delimited my scope, in first place, to the most relevant theoretical traditions and authors (both international, but also local in a more ethnographic degree), in which I was trained, based on research carried out in Western context, and collected in scientific journals and impact publications over the last 30 years. From this framework I added some recent contributions from colleagues working on the same research lines in the Catalan context.

The first section of the article is devoted to briefly contrast the very notion of *school engagement*: how it is conceptualised from educational psychology and how it is analysed from social disciplines such as Sociology and Social Anthropology. The following sections go deep in the subject and deal with qualitative research on the impact of the school climate and relational dynamics between pupils and teachers, and among student peers, in immigration contexts. The inner leitmotiv has been to stress the importance of applying a holistic anthropological viewpoint based on qualitative fieldwork when analysing these dynamics and their impact on academic attachment.

## **The concept of *school engagement*, from a psycho-pedagogical approach to an ethnographic perspective**

Generally, the term *academic engagement* refers to a systematic and conscious attitude on the part of a student towards achieving success at school. From the field of cognitive and developmental psychology, where the vast majority of research contributions are located (see for example, regarding to children from immigrant families, Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013; or, more recently, Martin et al., 2022), it would strictly include those dimensions that have to do with behaviours and attitudes favourable to the learning of content (Greenwood, Horton, Utley, 2002), often contemplated only within the walls of the classroom. Let us look at the definition offered in an article from the School Psychology Review: "Academic engagement refers to a composite of specific classroom behaviours: writing, participating in tasks, reading aloud, reading silently, talking about academics, and asking and answering questions" (Greenwood, Horton, Utley, 1984; cited in idem, 2002, p.329).

The multifaceted nature of school engagement is reflected in the distinction of three levels: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. According to Fredricks et al. (2004, p.60), behavioural attachment deepens the idea of participation; it includes for example involvement in academic as well as social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving good academic results and preventing dropout. Emotional engagement encompasses positive and negative responses to teachers, peers, the school as an institution, etc., and is presumed to create affective ties to the institution, thus influencing academic motivation. Finally, cognitive attachment focuses on the idea of investment, incorporating the awareness and desire to make the necessary efforts to understand complex content and master difficult skills...

However, measuring these dimensions can be an arduous task because of their great malleability and range of indicators: for example, behavioural attachment can range from simply performing academic tasks and following rules to participating in student representative bodies; emotional attachment can manifest itself in many different forms and degrees, from simply incorporating the school into routines in an uncritical way to a much deeper identification with the institution. And cognitive attachment can range from simple memorisation to the use of self-regulated learning strategies

that promote expertise and the acquisition of more advanced knowledge (Fredricks et al., 2004, p.61).

This perspective tends to look at the dynamics of school attachment and disengagement in a highly individualised way, when, as we will defend below by reviewing some key contributions, it is essential to incorporate the more social factors, of symbolic interaction within the school framework, that give rise to or favour certain expectations, beliefs, etc., of the pupil towards the school. It should be borne in mind that even the analysis of variables that are more strictly internal to the school environment (organisational, structural) also generate specific sociability environments, promoting segregative or inclusive dynamics that influence students' experiences of school attachment and disengagement, as we shall see in the next sections.

The concept of school engagement is a first-order operational indicator for approaching children's school trajectories, as it effectively acts as a bridge between objective processes and subjective experiences. Nonetheless, from an anthropological perspective, the point of reference are not individual school experiences, but the individual as an *embodiment* of the wider social environment crossed by boundaries and bridges in terms of segregation, inclusion, hierarchies, status, more pro- or anti-academic peer climates, etc. The embodiment process integrates structural inputs from outside the school environment (inequalities of social class, gender, ethnicity) and reshapes them by sifting them through internal elements. Thus, when we speak of school experiences, we include both the emotional dimension, that is, the subjective experiences of children in all their diversity and heterogeneity, expressed verbally and gesturally; and the relational dimension, which includes all the social and structural aspects that condition interaction with adults (teachers, families, etc.) and among peers (classmates, friendship network, outside the classroom, etc.) (Ballestín, 2008).

Ethnographic research insists on the multidimensional and socially modulated nature of school engagement dynamics. Thus, for example, D. Gillborn (1990) states that we are not dealing with a dichotomous category (engagement / disengagement, pro-school / anti-school orientation in the terminology coined by Lacey), as could be deduced from the theories of *differentiation* and *polarisation* (Brown, Hammersley,

Hargreaves, Lacey)<sup>2</sup>, but that we are talking about a polyhedral and changing, malleable continuum. This researcher gives an account of the school experiences of dis/attachment of pupils of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian origin in the British context of the late 1980s through this idea of a continuum in the manifestations of school attachment/detachment:

A pupil might move between different degrees of involvement on different occasions and on different issues, yet overall, his/her views and actions (attitudes and behaviours) may tend to reflect broadly similar levels of involvement. (...). Rather than trying to characterize pupils' adaptations within a dichotomous bipolar model of pro/anti-school positions, therefore, it is more realistic to view pupils' involvement in relation to a continuum ranging from relative commitment through to alienation from the school value system. The model of a continuum allows for the variety and complexity of pupil adaptations while retaining important elements of previous work which have shown the potential of differentiation-polarization analyses (Gillborn, 1990, p.99).

In this sense, much of the literature on cultural diversity, social inequality and education has approached the concept of school engagement through the lens of group membership, with researchers asking how cultural differences, or the minority status of the group (*immigrant/voluntary* or *involuntary* in the terminology of Ogbu & Simons, 1998), shaped boys' and girls' behaviour and perceptions of school. Other approaches (e.g., Davidson, 1996) argue that the very social dynamics of school involvement are informed not only by socio-historical contextual factors, but by practices (such as disciplinary technologies) and relationships at the level of the school framework itself.

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<sup>2</sup> These sociological theories of the adaptations of different social groups to the demands of school assert that "if pupils are differentiated based on an academic-behavioural standard, for example, by group or band grading, their attitudes towards that standard will be polarised. Those receiving the lowest grades will reject it and the values it embodies". (Hammersley, 1985, p. 247; quoted by Gillborn, 1990, p. 81).

In the author's doctoral research<sup>3</sup> (2008), located in the context of the province of Barcelona in Catalonia, a distinction was made between these relational experiences and those more related to activities and teaching/learning styles. Thus, the responses in the more strictly academic sphere and those relating to the sphere of sociability constituted the two indicators which made it possible to classify and typify the experiences of students from immigrant families in terms of school attachment or disengagement. In some cases, the experiences of school attachment were revealed to be dissociated in these two dimensions: for example, among students of Moroccan and sub-Saharan origin in particular, cases of disengagement from more formal learning activities and attachment in more informal relationship settings were ethnographed. Generally, these students were mostly accepted and enjoyed a certain degree of popularity, in the peer group and/or among the teaching staff, for being "affectionate", "joking", "awake". They were predominantly "crazy"<sup>4</sup> personalities, concerned with gaining a place in the social environment as well as shying away from and "ducking out" of academic tasks, albeit without overt opposition. The strategic use of humour served as an escape valve, as a means of resistance (Davidson, 1996; Franzé, 2002; Ballestín, 2008; 2011).

However, these adaptive responses were displayed in close relation to the reproduction of socio-cultural hierarchies at school and the ethno- and socio-centric interpretation of the differences perceived and attributed to students of different origins in terms of their abilities and interests (Carrasco et al., 2011). In the case of one of the schools where I carried out my research, which enrolled students from the European Union as well as pupils of Moroccan and Latin American origin, the discourses and practices of teachers were permeated by an essentialising imaginary, on a scale of xenophilia and xenophobia that found its correlate in a clear inequality of expectations based on social belonging and national, linguistic-cultural, and ethnic origin. This scheme was incorporated and reproduced by the pupils, who sought their

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<sup>3</sup> The ethnographic methodology used was based on participant observation in two schools sited on different municipalities in Barcelona province: I visited both remedial and ordinary classrooms. In all of them, I took part in small group monitoring and academic activities. I also attended events such as school parties, excursions, etc. In addition, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with both teachers and professionals from specialised services.

<sup>4</sup> Davidson (1996) analyses the development of such academic identities and roles in the US (California) context under this epithet of *crazy*.

position in it based on adaptive responses that gave rise to changing and fragmented attachments and disengagements depending on the spatial context (classroom, playground and other places of confluence, outdoor space...) and temporal context (ordinary classes, special occasions, parties, excursions, etc.).

We will now present some relevant theoretical and research contributions that allow us to understand and gauge the impact of relational dynamics on the experiences of school attachment and disengagement from an ethnographic or qualitative approach.

### **Sociability and dis/engagement: the role of the school climate and relational dynamics**

The relational sphere becomes central when it comes to highlighting the enormous incidence of non-pedagogical spaces and moments in the experiences of school attachment and disengagement. Through these dynamics, the representations, and expectations, without forgetting the aspects of affective proximity/distance linked to the previous variables, of all the actors in interaction, as well as the teaching practices with the pupils' responses, are confronted in such a way that the tensions and majority/minority power relations become evident, shaping the diverse adaptations of the students to the school environment. Social support at school promotes the acquisition of competent skills and is central to the school engagement and academic success of students in general, but especially in relation to students from immigrant backgrounds (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, Martín, 2009, p.717).

Nevertheless, school environments vary greatly. Whereas some schools feel friendly, inviting, and supportive, others feel exclusionary, unwelcoming, and even unsafe. The feelings and attitudes that are elicited by a school's environment are referred to as school climate (Loukas, 2007, p.1). More precisely, we could define *school climate* as "the set of psychosocial characteristics of an educational centre, determined by those structural, personal and functional factors or elements of the institution, which, integrated in a specific dynamic process, confer a peculiar style to the centre, conditioning, at the same time, the different educational processes<sup>5</sup>" (CERE, 1993,

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<sup>5</sup> All the quotations originally in Spanish have been translated into English.



p.30; quoted in Jiménez, V., Fajardo, M.I., 2010, p.729). Similarly, Conejo and Redondo point out that the school social climate refers to "the perception that subjects have about the interpersonal relationships they establish in the school context (at classroom or school level) and the context or framework in which these interactions take place" (2001, p.6). According to Sandoval (2014, p.169), the development of the concept of school climate (Mena & Valdés, 2008) has as a precedent the notion of "organisational climate", resulting from the study of organisations in the workplace, from the late 1960s (Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968; Schneider, 1975; cited by Sandoval, 2014, p.169).

In sum, school climate helps us to characterise globally the environment of social relations favoured by a given school configuration based on structural and organisational elements, as well as social and personal composition.

In this article I focus on the two aspects of school climate that most directly affect children from immigrant families: relational dynamics between students and teachers, and peer sociability. The relationship between families and the school<sup>6</sup> also plays a relevant role, but that will demand another paper by their own.

### **Student-teacher relational dynamics, cultural diversity, and school engagement**

Social psychology has long been aware of the extent to which learning in primary classrooms, and the associated engagement and disengagement processes, depend crucially on the type and quality of the relationships established between pupils and teachers, with the desiderata that members of the latter should place special emphasis on caring for the interactive aspects of their role that are key to transmitting to pupils the confidence and ability to cope with day-to-day school activities. This care is even more necessary in school contexts of great social and cultural diversity. In the words of J. Le Roux:

Intercultural relations in the classroom may be a source of knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse learners if managed proactively by teachers. Frustration, misapprehensions, and intercultural conflict are a

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<sup>6</sup> Two key research works can be mentioned in this line of research: Lareau & McNamara Horvat (1999), and Crozier (2001).

more likely outcome if teachers do not deal with diversity in a sensitive manner (Le Roux, 2001, p.273).

However, the already extensive research production dealing with this dimension of the schooling of children and adolescents of immigrant and/or minority origin is not at all flattering in its conclusions, there is still a long way to go in this "mutual enrichment" claimed by LeRoux, especially when applying equality policies and recipes that remain blind to a direct treatment, without complexes or taboos, of the various forms of racism (Downey and Pribesh, 2004), especially to what we understand as "cultural racism" (Gilroy, 1992) or "cultural fundamentalism" (Stolcke, 1995), which classify and treat minority groups under supposedly fixed, immutable cultural characteristics.

In the school arena, it is particularly difficult to distinguish stereotyping processes from their effects on student-teacher dynamics, and this is evident, for example, in the *theories of differentiation and polarisation* (Hargreaves, 1986; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981) cited before. The dynamics of teacher-student relations in relation to minority groups (on the basis of ethnicity and/or class) have also been explored in *theories of resistance* developed by students (Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Gillborn, 1990; McLaren, 1994), that have been concerned with making visible the strategies used by students to assert themselves against teachers as agents of power within schools, often leading to the creation of an *oppositional culture* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This concept has been much questioned and debated in the literature of the late 1990s and first decade of the 2000s (Downey & Ainsworth, 2002; Farkas, Lleras, Maczuga, 2002; Fryer & Torelli, 2006; among others. ...) <sup>7</sup>, placing a special emphasis on separating the positive elements of *resilience* <sup>8</sup> from the "self-destructive" connotations of it.

Furthermore, the experiences, and school trajectories, of children of foreign immigrant origin and disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be conditioned by the

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<sup>7</sup> For a critical review of the literature on oppositional culture theories, see Berlowitz M. et al. (2006) "Oppositional Culture Theory and the Delusion of Colour-blindness", published in the journal *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*.

<sup>8</sup> According to Freiberg (1994, p. 151) "(...), resilience in children is the ability to learn from the positive elements of their environment and to seek them out (and not replicate the disabling ones)".

practice of segregation through level groups, tracking (Davidson, 1996; Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, Lintz, 1996; Dauber, Alexander, Entwisle, 1996; Carbonaro, 2005) and other devices such as "reception classrooms". This school segregation ends up harming these students' access to "standard" learning, since once they are assigned to the lowest level groups (contradicting the very meaning of "flexible groupings" that is often used), it is difficult for them to progress, and instead they develop adaptive strategies in response to their devalued position in academic and social terms. The literature has extensively reported on the detrimental effects of tracking and ability grouping<sup>9</sup>.

Qualitative research on the impact of segregative school practices in contexts of immigration and high cultural diversity (e.g., Gillborn, 1990; Gibson and Ogbu, 1991; Gibson, Gándara and Koyama, 2004; Author, 2008; Carrasco et al., 2011) has allowed us to capture micro dynamics in vivo, concluding that these pedagogical practices tend to reproduce the existing social stratification outside the school through the creation of unequal and polarised environments inside the school. On one side, high-prestige groups where students access to self-assurance and self-support, having greater possibilities of receiving academic recognition (Valenzuela, 1999). On the other side, low-level groups with adapted school curricula and lower teacher expectations, fostering the emergence of oppositional subcultures and reactive identities.

Through qualitative research we have learned that perceived teacher support (not only academic but also social and emotional) throughout schooling reduces the risk of dropout, and its incidence is higher among pupils from working class and immigrant backgrounds (Carrasco, Pàmies & Narciso, 2018, p.232; Carrasco, 2020). Moreover, it has unravelled the key importance of teachers' and public schools' support in providing responsive and sufficient, non-selective educational resources as well as sustained care and advice to prevent from uncertainties, barriers (including

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<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, Carbonaro (2005) analyses the links between students' academic effort, segregation devices by level, and academic results; and he does so by exploiting the British National Education Longitudinal Survey, following cohorts from 8th to 9th grade (secondary school stage). His conclusions are clear: "the higher a student's track, the more effort she or he exerts" (2005, p. 43): effort tends to be demanded and valued more intensely in the more advanced groups, which is why it is a mistake to consider this effort as the sole responsibility of the student.

linguistic ones<sup>10</sup>) and gaps that lead to discouragement and disengagement (Carrasco, Narciso, & Bertran, 2018; Carrasco, Ruiz-Haro & Bereményi, 2018). Students in more precarious positions value very highly the commitment and dedication perceived on the part of the centre, for example through a collective Tutorial Project (Carrasco, Narciso & Bertran, 2015, p.89).

It should be noted that while most of contributions to the analysis of teacher-minority students dynamics of sociability have been focused on the adolescent population, however, school ethnographies carried out in the primary school stage show how the processes and dynamics of pupils' resistance to teachers are conveyed through attitudes and responses that are to some extent differentiated. In fact, primary pupils' dynamics are still more influenced by the organisational configuration and *ethos*<sup>11</sup> of schools, as the adults exercise a control and power over the children that is much more evident and visible (Ballestín, 2008).

Going deeper into the primary school stage, the contribution of L. Brooker *Starting school. Young children learning cultures* (2002) offers us a micro lens on the relationships between children starting school (in a metropolitan area in UK) and the teachers who mediate their experiences of "transition from child to pupil" (Jackson, 1979; Pollard and Filer, 1996; Woods, Boyle, Hubbard, 1999; cited by Brooker, 2002, p.89). For young children, the immediate experience includes their first major separation from parents and initiation into the rituals of the classroom (Woods et al., 1999) as well as the formal requirements of academic discourse (Willes, 1983). Children who had been familiarised at home with what is expected of them in school enjoyed more opportunities to transform and maximise this preparation into social capital that could be converted into greater cultural proximity with educators, a proximity that in turn benefited them in the acquisition of new learning content.

The same correlation between the relational distance with teachers and the lack of connection to learning, which gave rise to evaluations of the same tone as those

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<sup>10</sup> For a very illustrative case study in the Catalan context, see Reyes & Carrasco (2018).

<sup>11</sup> The concept of *school ethos* is linked to that of *school climate* as the distinctive characteristics of each school derive to a large extent from the general climate of relations (more or less distant, more or less bureaucratic, more or less trusting and supportive of teachers towards pupils, etc.) that prevails in each school; as well as the predominant ideology or ideologies in each school, the history or time span of the school and its organisational and internal functioning characteristics.

pointed out by Brooker (2002) in the "Personal and developmental aspects" of the school report cards in the case of the most stigmatised students of immigrant origin, the Moroccan, was found in the Catalan context investigated by the author (Ballestín, 2008, 2014, 2015). In fact, in the region there is an interesting line of research (see, for example, Gratacós & Ugidos, 2012; Oller, Vila & Zufiaurre, 2012) on teachers' expectations and relationship dynamics towards pupils from non-EU immigrant backgrounds.

Thus, for example, Ollé, Vila, and Zufiaurre (2012) show how teachers' expectations regarding the engagement of their pupils from non-EU immigrant backgrounds are relatively low, and how subjective manifestations of racism towards certain groups, especially Africans, are evident in the relational climate, favouring a negative impact on the school careers of these children who are more likely to fail. As Narciso and Carrasco point out (2021:663), being Black is a fundamental factor that activates representations of foreignness existing in the European context, without any chances of concealment, as well as those related to the African diaspora and specifically the zone where the research was conducted.

This is the ideological framework that produces the naturalization of educational expulsion, which hinders school disengagement and the encouragement of continuing in school from being combated. Especially when it converges with the presence and impact of what is called colour-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) at school, which is paradoxically expressed through the discourse and rhetoric of equality (Ballestín, 2008, 2011, 2014; Narciso & Carrasco, 2021).

### **Peer sociability dynamics in multicultural settings and school engagement**

We now enter fully into the sphere of sociability that is most likely to develop outside the adult's presence in educational centres. Sociability built around structures and positions of a more purely infantile nature, which favour certain identity processes and positions, as has been contrasted by different researchers from a myriad of interests and specific objects of study which we do not have the space to go into in detail. Both the psycho-pedagogical and sociological literature converge in the conclusion that the dynamics of school engagement and disengagement, and through these the academic results, are directly linked to the networks and friendship

relationships established in the classroom. If we focus on the cognitive impacts, the results of most research in this area conclude that when students do collaborative work with friends, their performance becomes much more efficient regardless of the tasks, ranging from more creative and orally based tasks to more academic tasks such as reasoning problems or writing exercises (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003, p.258). Behind these cognitive impacts there is no other driver than emotions (Hartup, 1996).

However, it should not be overlooked that the assumptions of most researchers in this more psycho-pedagogical line seem to start from a supposed "pro-academic nature" of children's friendships: but what happens when the networks of sociability between children are shown to be counter-academic? And what factors influence a certain collective position in this respect? It is necessary to introduce the approach of the school as an arena where power relations are played out between the different actors who act there, unequally positioned not only according to the classic external structural conditioning factors (gender, social class, ethnicity/culture), but also according to age (adults versus children) and the very internal characteristics of schools and classrooms, which shape school culture.

In fact, as far as structural conditioning factors are concerned, we must move from Social Psychology or Psycho-pedagogy to Sociology and Anthropology of Education to focus on the contributions that have specifically dealt with the influence and interaction of ethno-cultural variables, as well as those linked to social extraction (the gender perspective is included in these more psychological works<sup>12</sup>), on the relational dynamics of children staged in schools. In psycho-pedagogical studies, the variables of ethnicity and social class are usually taken as an "external", independent data or variable ("age", "gender", "ethnicity", "socio-economic status", etc.) to explain children's affinities and disaffections, when an ethnographic or at least a qualitative approach reveals that the relational statuses associated with these variables, far from being "independent" variables, are constructed in the school itself, being the very

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Gifford-Smith & Brownell (2003, p.266) point out that voluntary segregation based on gender begins in early childhood and reaches its peak in middle childhood (Maccoby, 2000). Social norms banning heterosexual friendships in elementary school, routinely and vociferously enforced through behaviours such as teasing and taunting (Gifford-Smith, 1998; Thorne, 1986), are so strong that pre-existing friendships between boys and girls will even go "underground" to avoid detection.

result of the power relations established there, in this case by children immersed in unequal and hierarchical structures.

Despite the importance of analysing the dynamics of sociability among peers in relation to their responses in terms of school engagement, the primary school stage, and within it the more spontaneous spaces and moments of interaction, less subject to adult control in the classroom, these are still relatively little researched from an ethnographic perspective, partly because the focus on students of immigrant origin tends to concentrate on the supposedly convulsive stage of adolescence. Indeed, there is a persistence of the dominant image in the everyday world that tends to consider, from an adult-centric (Amit-Talai & Wulff, 1995; Corsaro, 1997, 2003; Hirschfeld, 2002) and idyllic view of childhood, that in primary school children of immigrant origin have minor problems of racism and integration compared to secondary school.

With specific reference to the activation and management of ethno-cultural differences and inequalities in primary school peer relations, one of the first ethnographic precedents is Wright's study *Race relations in the Primary School* (1992), which explored the interactions between pupils of African-Caribbean and Asian origin in four schools in the British urban periphery. She showed how racial conflict between children of different cultural backgrounds was part of everyday life in these schools in the early 1990s. If the maintenance of a strong *oppositional culture* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) marked the "self-defence" of Afro-Caribbean pupils, in the cases of students of Asian origin (mostly Pakistani), a special vulnerability as victims of "white" peers was detected (Wright, 1992, p.101). Teachers, although aware of these conflicts, did not act decisively, thus fuelling responses of disappointment and alienation, which were overtly visible in the pupils' responses.

Another relevant pioneering study (also in the UK) from an ethnographic perspective is that of Hatcher (1995), who analysed patterns of racism in children's cultures within the classroom, based on his fieldwork in three primary schools composed mainly of mainstream "white" pupils, but with representation of the same minorities of Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin. The main devices of racialisation identified by Hatcher consisted, on the one hand, in aggression and conflict, mostly by racist insults and name-calling (in his observations he did not witness any acts of physical violence); and, on the other hand, in various patterns of inclusion and exclusion



deployed in different ways along the axes differentiated above. Hatcher (1995, p.114) highlights the extent to which "race is embedded in children's cultures", and therefore, "it needs to be tackled as part of a much broader project by schools, to help children to understand their own lives, relationships, experiences, ideas and social behaviour" (1995, p.114).

A device of dramatization of segregating behaviour among children that is worth mentioning are the pollution games or "cooties", as they are known in Anglo-Saxon literature. Some authors (Hirschfeld, 2002; Thorne, 1995, among others) show how power structures in children's relationships are interwoven through these rituals and playful dynamics:

When rituals of pollution appear, even in play, they often express and activate broader patterns of inequality in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as in relation to physical characteristics such as weight or motor coordination. (...). To turn away from a person and their belongings because they are perceived as contaminants is a powerful assertion of social distance and superiority (Thorne, 1995, p.75).

Apart from these more ethnographic approaches, there is a whole body of qualitative sociological work on peer relations and how the boundaries of belonging/exclusion are activated in terms of ethnicity. These contributions move within the framework of intercultural contact theories, either to support them or to refute them, without integrating in a sufficiently articulated way the incidence of factors internal to the school arena. Initially put forward by Williams (1947) and Allport (1954), with a specific ramification in education by Pettigrew (1971, 1997), the starting assumption is based on the idea that it is the (physical and social) boundaries between ethnically differentiated groups that foster mutual ignorance and prejudice. Therefore, it is assumed that a change in relational patterns of avoidance and/or hostility will occur when these groups initiate processes of rapprochement and mutual (re)acquaintance (Ballestín, 2012; 2017).

Authors from the sociology of childhood, such as Peter Connolly, are critical of this approach called the "Intercultural Contact Hypothesis", and their disagreement is relevant because it is based on fieldwork in the educational context of the primary school stage. Connolly notes the popularity of this hypothesis on the basis of "both



its simplicity and the underlying political ideology" (Connolly, 2000, p.169), which would also explain its rise as a folk theory among school professionals: "if we can make spontaneous contact between diverse students - avoiding, for example, their concentration in certain schools - conflicts will disappear". But he relativises the idea that simple contact between children from different backgrounds leads to the establishment of friendly relationships. In *Racism, gender identities and young children* (1998), he focuses in a novel way on the early stages of primary education (5- and 6-year-olds), paying attention to the ways in which children's interactions are shaped by the dominant racist discourses in the social structure and filtered through the school environment and ethos (organisation and disciplinary patterns). The intention is, however, "to pay attention to the social competencies of these children, and to their active role in negotiating their identities by drawing on the discourses of 'race', class, gender and age found both inside and outside the school, in the domestic sphere and the local community" (Connolly, 1998, p.9). The main conclusion of his work is that young children appropriate, rework and reproduce dominant social discourses in their own complex ways, pointing to school experiences as mediating the development of these relations in tension between inequality and inclusion.

At this point, we must include the role of organisational, ideological, pedagogical, etc. variables, internal to the school; in short, of the school culture or *ethos*, on the relational dynamics between children. These elements may have a decisive influence on the possibilities of access of certain students to sociability networks: for example, in schools with a more *traditional* organisation<sup>13</sup>, there tend to be more isolated children without friends. In contrast, in schools with more active and inclusive pedagogical practices, it is more common to find more networks of friends, and with more stability. Similarly, the fact that class groups are configured according to criteria of competitiveness and ability, or according to cooperative and related interests, is

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<sup>13</sup> By *traditional* -school- organisation I basically refer to that in which teaching styles operate with more passive response expectations on the part of students, where memorisation predominates over understanding in learning, where there is a more openly hierarchical, vertical relationship between students and teachers, and where the heterogeneity of the student body is not taken into account (or is treated in a segregated manner).

reflected in the type of friendships promoted, and in the slanting of these towards a more pro-school or oppositional position (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000).

As a corollary, we should pay attention to the factors associated with the wider school climate that surrounds the school and the visible existence of an oppositional culture (in the terms established in the *cultural-ecological* paradigm of Ogbu, 1998) in both majority peer groups and those composed of members of stigmatised minorities. The widespread emergence of a peer culture opposed to school values and practices implies for the students most closely linked to the school to face numerous dilemmas and contradictions (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) between the need of belonging to the stigmatised group, and the need and will to adhere to the established norms as a guarantee for a successful academic career in the terms established by adults.

My own research results (Ballestín, 2008; 2012) led to the hypothesis that when the oppositional culture is present among all the students in a classroom with independence of their origins, the processes and experiences of segregation of minority students are more invisible and subtle; In contrast, when the general environment is more pro-academic, the dynamics of peer segregation are more polarised along ethnic-cultural lines, so that it is more difficult for the most vulnerable and stigmatised minority students to engage with the school environment without being accused of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, op. cit.), thus triggering dramatic and sometimes irreversible processes of school disengagement.

Monitoring the emergence of oppositional cultures, not only at the secondary education stage, but also from the beginning of school trajectories, is vital to understand the meaning of the dynamics of peer relationships, which depend both on the social and community context and on the characteristics (resources, staff, etc.), the trajectory and the pedagogical and ideological *ethos* that features each school in a specific territorial enclave.

## Conclusion

In these pages we have contributed to underpinning the theoretical and methodological need to prioritize an ethnographic perspective focusing on sociability scenarios, and the variables that shape power and inequalities inside them, into the analysis of the experiences and dynamics of school engagement and disengagement of students from immigrant families. This is especially crucial in the early educational stages, that have been little researched from such perspective in comparison with secondary school. And this is even more relevant when our study population is made up of children, families and educators in school and community contexts of special visibility in terms of cultural diversity and polarisation by social class.

The article has brought together and confronted studies showing how schools as social environments participate in configuring power scenarios that shape dynamics of engagement and disengagement linked to the construction of inclusive and exclusive, consensual, and conflictive, patterns of sociability between adults and children/adolescents, and among peers. These dynamics are fostered both by internal factors (pedagogical ideologies and teaching/learning styles being the main ones) and by external structural variables of inequality (social class, spatial segregation, stigmatized stereotypes associated to geographical and social origins of pupils, etc.), especially visible in culturally diverse and racialised educational settings. It is through all these factors that students construct their academic identifications (dynamic identities) and the meanings and expectations associated to them, which finally shape their trajectories of success and failure at school beyond simply academic grades.

Without leaving aside the decisive contributions of the more individualistic disciplines that first coined and used the term (Psychology, Psycho-pedagogy...), the ethnographic and qualitative research works reviewed in this paper allow us to understand and delve deeper into the social genesis of experiences of school engagement and disengagement, from the core of the networks of inclusion and exclusion that can only be fully observed and analysed throughout an immersion in the field.

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