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Original

## Modelling the Effect of School Engagement on Attendance to Classes and School Performance<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks modelling the structure that relates school engagement with a direct effect on the dependent variables: attendance to classes and school performance. The indirect effect of contextual variables (Family, Teachers and Classmates) on the dependent variables through school engagement. A sample of 1170 students of 12–17 years old was used. Two questionnaires are answered by every student to assess school engagement and contextual variables. Information about school performance and percentage of attendance to classes is provided by holders of municipal schools. School engagement is considered as conformed by three subtypes of engagements (affective, cognitive and behavioural). Structural equation modelling is performed to determine the fit of model to data. The mediation model proposed presented a good fit (RMSEA = .045; CFI = .944, TLI = .940). Cognitive engagement has a direct positive and moderated effect on school performance. Affective engagement has a direct positive and moderated effect on attendance to classes. School engagement is a variable to consider affecting the dependent variables school performance and attendance to classes. An important issue is that school engagement and contextual variables are modifiable aspects of a student life. Because of that, intervention programmes who seek to improve the school performance could consider it.

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## Modelización del efecto del compromiso escolar sobre la asistencia a clases y el rendimiento escolar

### RESUMEN

El presente estudio busca modelizar la estructura que relaciona el compromiso escolar con un efecto directo sobre las variables dependientes: asistencia a clases y rendimiento escolar. Además, se considera el efecto indirecto de variables contextuales (Familia, Profesores y Pares) sobre las variables dependientes, a través del compromiso escolar. Se utiliza una muestra de 1170 estudiantes con edades entre 12 y 17 años. Dos cuestionarios son respondidos por cada estudiante para evaluar el compromiso escolar y las variables contextuales. La información sobre el rendimiento escolar y el porcentaje de asistencia a las clases es proporcionada por los sostenedores municipales de los establecimientos escolares. Se considera el compromiso escolar como formado por tres subtipos de compromiso (afectivo, cognitivo y conductual). Se realiza un análisis de modelo de ecuaciones estructurales para determinar el grado de ajuste del

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modelo a los datos. El modelo de mediación presenta un buen ajuste (RMSEA = .045; CFI = .944; TLI = .940). El compromiso cognitivo tiene un efecto directo, positivo y moderado sobre el rendimiento escolar. El compromiso afectivo tiene un efecto directo, positivo y moderado en la asistencia a las clases. El compromiso escolar es una variable que presenta un efecto sobre el rendimiento escolar y la asistencia a clases. Una característica importante de este modelo es que las variables Compromiso escolar y los factores contextuales son aspectos modificables de la vida de un estudiante, por lo que pueden ser consideradas por programas de intervención escolar en busca de afectar positivamente la asistencia y rendimiento escolar.

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## Introduction

School engagement (SE) is considered internationally a fundamental theoretical model to both understand the phenomenon of dropping out and to promote successful educational trajectories (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). It is related to a student's active participation in academic and extracurricular activities (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008), and it is a variable heavily influenced by contextual and relational factors, such as peer relationships, relationships with the teachers and the influence of the family at school (Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2006; Shernoff, 2013).

Educational (or school) trajectories can be analyzed from two perspectives: the study of the theoretical trajectories and/or the study of the real trajectories. According to Terigi (2014), the theoretical trajectories are "routes that follow the linear progression anticipated by the system in the times marked by a standard periodization" (p. 73), whereas the real or unchannelled trajectories are "pathways that do not follow the course designed by the system" (p. 74).

In the case of Chile, the expected educational trajectories are established through 12 years of mandatory education. In practice, however, every student's route can be different, with great diversity in the real trajectories. Thus, although under the Chilean Constitution elementary and secondary education is obligatory, 90,884 students left their schools in 2013 and did not return in 2014, constituting a dropout rate of 3.1%, particularly in the first year of high school (MINEDUC Study Centre, 2013), equivalent to the third year of Obligatory Secondary Education (OSE) in Spain. Academic delay is a risk factor for dropping out of the Chilean education system; nearly half a million students under 17 years of age are lagging behind by at least one year (Asociación Chilena de Municipalidades et al., 2013).

Research reveals that some of the main reasons for dropping out relate to the school experience. Rumberger (2001) argues that there are two necessary and complementary lines of enquiry on the issue of dropping out of school. First, a perspective that focuses on structural risk factors: high-risk environments, family structures and education policies that promote the exclusion of students. Second, a perspective that seeks to delve more deeply into the factors linked to the student's experience that influence their dropping out from the school system, in the main the attitudes and behaviours that reveal the student's engagement with their studies.

There are two basic approaches to the study of engagement. On the one hand, some authors have chosen to use the term *student engagement*, focusing on the learner and his internal experience (Appleton et al., 2008; Christenson et al., 2012), while on the other hand, other authors refer to *school engagement* where the emphasis is not only on the student per se, but also that the contextual variables must be considered as key elements for their conceptualization (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). This study is built on the latter approach, where SE is conceived as an internal component that places the focus on the student, but which at the

same time and with the same relevance envisions the student undertaking his educational experience within a certain context (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). This context presents specific characteristics that involve interaction and information exchange, and it changes to the extent that it interacts with the student (Shernoff, 2013).

*Engaged* students consider that their learning is significant and they are motivated and involved in their learning and their future. SE drives students towards learning, which can be achieved by all. Several researchers (Appleton et al., 2008; Bowles et al., 2013; Fredricks et al., 2004; Jimerson et al., 2003) agree that SE is a key variable in dropping out of school, as leaving school tends not to be a sudden action, but rather supposedly the final step in a dynamic and cumulative process of loss of engagement with one's studies. By contrast, when students engage positively with their studies, they are more likely to graduate with low levels of risk behaviours and a high academic performance.

With respect to the components of SE, there is consensus in conceiving it as a multidimensional construct comprised of emotional, behavioural and cognitive components (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016; Fredricks et al., 2004). First, *emotional engagement* is defined as the student's level of emotional response to the school and his/her learning process, characterized by a feeling of involvement with the school and a consideration of it as a place that is valuable to him/her. Emotional engagement offers the necessary incentive to participate and persevere with school activities. Thus, emotionally engaged students feel part of a school community and consider school to be significant in their lives, and recognize that it provides the tools to achieve outside it. It includes reactions to the teachers, classmates and the school. The presumption is that it creates a bond with the school and disposes the students to school work. On the other hand, *behavioural engagement* is based on the idea of participation in the academic area and social or extracurricular activities. It includes the student's interactions and responses in the classroom, in and outside school. This aspect of SE is a continuum that goes from universally expected involvement (daily attendance) that consists of low behavioural engagement to more intense involvement (e.g., participation in student government). Finally, *cognitive engagement* is based on the idea of psychological involvement in studying; it incorporates the awareness and willingness to make the effort needed to understand complex ideas and develop difficult skills. It is the conscious investment of energy aimed at comprehension and analysis in order to go beyond the minimum requirements, making the student willing to face highly complex challenges. It also reflects the student's willingness to invest cognitive skills in the learning and mastery of new skills. It also involves putting into practice self-regulation strategies, as well as a preference for the challenge and the will to stick to goals and make the effort to achieve learning goals and self-regulation.

SE is affected by contextual factors, in particular family and school. Recent studies suggest that families, peers and teachers are the three main relational contexts associated with school

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