

Longitudinal qualitative research with children and adolescents: exploring school engagement trajectories and contextual factors in Post-pandemic period

Investigación cualitativa longitudinal con niños, niñas y adolescentes: análisis de trayectorias de compromiso escolar y factores contextuales en Post-pandemia

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ABSTRACT

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic radically transformed the educational landscape, affecting millions of students worldwide. This unprecedented situation posed significant challenges to school engagement, a critical variable associated with the successful completion of educational stages and the development of positive academic trajectories. This article presents findings from a longitudinal qualitative study conducted in Chile, analyzing the meanings of school engagement and contextual factors from a participatory research approach that emphasizes children's right to be involved in knowledge production.

The study highlights notable improvements in cognitive engagement, reflected in increased academic interest and the development of study habits among post-pandemic students. Affective engagement, however, remains a challenge, with the need for more stimulating school environments to counteract low motivation. Additionally, a decline in behavioral engagement—evidenced by increased absenteeism—demonstrates the lasting motivational impacts of the pandemic on secondary school students.

Keywords: school engagement, contextual factors, participatory research, children as co-researchers, longitudinal qualitative study, student motivation, post-pandemic education.

RESUMEN

El brote mundial de la pandemia de COVID-19 transformó radicalmente el panorama educativo, afectando a millones de estudiantes a nivel global. Esta situación excepcional planteó desafíos sustantivos en torno al compromiso escolar, una variable clave vinculada con la finalización de etapas educativas y trayectorias académicas positivas. Este artículo presenta los hallazgos de un estudio cualitativo longitudinal realizado en Chile, centrado en los significados del compromiso escolar y los factores contextuales desde un enfoque de investigación participativa que valora el derecho de niños, niñas y adolescentes a participar en la producción de conocimiento.

Los resultados evidencian avances en el compromiso cognitivo, expresados en un mayor interés académico y desarrollo de hábitos de estudio entre los estudiantes postpandemia. En contraste, el compromiso afectivo requiere de entornos escolares más estimulantes que contrarresten la baja motivación. Asimismo, el compromiso conductual mostró un deterioro, reflejado en el aumento del ausentismo, lo cual indica que la pandemia ha tenido impactos significativos en la motivación del estudiantado de nivel secundario.

Palabras clave: compromiso escolar, factores contextuales, investigación participativa, niños como co-investigadores, estudio cualitativo longitudinal, motivación estudiantil, educación postpandemia.

INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic radically transformed the educational landscape, impacting millions of students around the world. The return to in-person schooling afterward was equally complex and characterized by high rates of violence in Chile, the country where this study was conducted.

The foregoing has posed substantial challenges in terms of school engagement, a key variable not only because of its link to academic performance, the completion of successive educational stages and university persistence, but also for its crucial role in guaranteeing the right to an education, positive educational pathways and the enjoyment of learning, all of which helps to prevent school dropout (Appleton *et al.*, 2023; Saracostti *et al.*, 2023; Salmela-Aro *et al.*, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to explore and analyze the significance of school engagement (SE) and contextual factors (CF) in the eyes of children and adolescents (C&A) in Chilean schools, with the understanding that they have the capacity to share their opinions and participate in knowledge generation processes regarding issues impacting their lives. Hence, this study entails the active participation of children as co-researchers, considering the

“voices of young people” as a key element of knowledge production (Cuevas-Parra, 2016; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). This approach, supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognizes children’s capabilities and agency to construct meanings from their experiences, positioning them as valuable experts in understanding their own SE (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019).

School engagement and associated contextual factors

School engagement, understood as a positive motivational force that connects students to school and encompasses their attention, interest, investment, and the effort put into academic work, has grown even more relevant in today’s post-health crisis context (Canet-Juric *et al.*, 2021; Thorsteinsen *et al.*, 2021). In keeping with Saracostti *et al.* (2023), engagement has three key components. These are behavioral engagement, which involves following rules and participating in academic activities; cognitive engagement, related to psychological investment in learning and preference for taking on challenges; and emotional engagement, having to do with affective reactions toward school.

In addition, Saracostti *et al.* (2023) underline the substantial influence of CF on the multidimensional nature of SE, such as family support, peer support, and teacher support. The interaction between family, teachers and peers is configured as a bidirectional process, wherein SE also influences the practices and behaviors of the various actors (Acosta-Gonzaga & Ruiz-Ledesma, 2022). Not only do these relationships meet basic psychological needs, contributing to intrinsic enjoyment and engagement with learning, they also provide the “felt security” needed to address new challenges and function as a resource in stressful times (Pham *et al.*, 2021).

Participatory action research

Youth engagement, also known as the “voice of young people,” spans diverse practices such as peer education, youth boards, participatory action research, and more (Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2018; Ozer *et al.*, 2020). Participatory action research (PAR) is a powerful tool that challenges traditional conventions about knowledge generation and ownership and has stood out in recent decades as an innovative approach that seeks to democratize knowledge production, especially in contexts where participants have historically been excluded from meaningful research processes (Ritterbusch *et al.*, 2020; Sierra *et al.*, 2019).

Under a PAR framework, children and adolescents become empowered as researchers, emphasizing the importance of giving children greater control over the research process, enabling them to address equity issues that directly affect their communities and environments, recognizing them as experts capable of generating valid knowledge about the conditions they seek to transform, while working to change underlying power structures,

challenging generational hierarchies and enabling active participation at crucial moments that influence both project outcomes and impacts (Ozer *et al.*, 2020; Ritterbusch *et al.*, 2020; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020; Vallejo-Slocker & Barrero, 2021).

Child participation seeks to bridge the gap between lived reality and scientific research, generating benefits and challenges for children and researchers alike (Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2018; Haijes & van Thiel, 2016; Mayne & Howitt, 2015). Some of the benefits they receive are empowerment, self-confidence, and the opportunity to positively influence other children, in addition to fostering an effective dialogue between children and adults, enriching the understanding of researchers, and bringing richness, validity and relevance to research, along with newly developed adaptive skills, increased self-esteem and a sense of empowerment in children. In terms of the challenges of conducting research with C&A, an ethical approach brings complexities such as the need for ongoing consent and an intrinsic understanding of the connection between children's rights, research methods, and research ethics (Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2018; Haijes & van Thiel, 2016; Saracostti *et al.*, 2015; Sierra *et al.* (2019) give backing to the participatory, inclusive, and democratic perspective, arguing that participatory research approaches seek socially just and democratic ways of knowing, which would require a paradigm shift, challenging the isolation of expert knowledge and recognizing the diversity of perspectives and ways of knowing (Sierra *et al.*, 2019).

Right to participate in educational research

The rights of the child in the United Nations Convention delineates the rights, agency, and capacity of children to construct meanings based on their experiences. This implies respecting their right to express personal opinions and influence their own lives, which goes hand in hand with the dominant image of contemporary childhood (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; López-Ordosgoitia *et al.*, 2023; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

Participatory action research in education, according to Smit *et al.* (2020), is presented as a method for improving educational practice, where students are not only research subjects, but co-researchers and change agents as well. In such a context, PAR becomes a valuable tool for challenging and modifying unequal power structures, enabling children and adolescents not only to evaluate educational programs and services, but also to advocate for meaningful changes (Guerrero & Milstein, 2021; Ozer *et al.*, 2010).

Therefore, this research methodology suggests the need to revise the way research with and for children is undertaken (López-Ordosgoitia *et al.*, 2023), perceiving C&A as legal entities capable of generating significant changes in their environments and providing a unique perspective of their experiences, involving them both in the formulation of the problem, as well as in the construction of instruments, data analysis and dissemination of results (Sotomayor *et al.*, 2021).

Collaborating with students as co-researchers improves both the research process and outcomes by providing more accurate and relevant data about their own experiences compared to conventional methods (Liebel, 2007; Reimer & McLean, 2015). Active participation also operates as a form of education itself, helping students observe and analyze their environment in different ways, thus broadening their horizons in benefit of their schools and communities (Liebel, 2007; Reimer & McLean, 2015). Considering the above, Reimer & McLean (2015) describe how children as co-researchers are able to observe, ask questions, describe situations and perform concept analysis while engaging as active contributors making changes in their local environment, schools included (Reimer & McLean, 2015).

Longitudinal studies with children as co-researchers

Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) is part of a meaningful practice in the social sciences that looks at temporal processes and durational phenomena (Thomson & McLeod, 2015). This approach has received renewed interest internationally, spanning diverse disciplines such as community studies, child development, life history, education, and organization. This resurgence is part of a “temporal” shift in the social sciences, seeking to understand social phenomena from a broader perspective, with an increasing emphasis on secondary analysis, the revision of classical studies, and intergenerational approaches (Thomson & McLeod, 2015).

This is rather limited with respect to qualitative longitudinal research with children and adolescents as researchers or co-researchers (Wöhrer *et al.*, 2020). The advantages of heightened sensitivity to contextual changes have been emphasized, allowing the exploration of everyday attitudes and actions and their integration into patterns of sociocultural change (Wöhrer *et al.*, 2020). The aim is to understand the meaning of patterns of change and their interpretations based on historical contexts, incorporating an iterative and flexible process of data collection that shows us how people change their minds over time, and how they interpret their past to understand, anticipate, and reinterpret different events in the future (Hollstein, 2021).

Given the foregoing, this article reports the results of a longitudinal qualitative study on the meanings of the dimensions of SE and CF from a standpoint that is centered on putting into practice children’s right to participate in research processes related to their own lives.

METHODOLOGY

This article is part of a longitudinal study with a mixed methodological design that sought to figure out the interrelationships over time among SE, CF and educational trajectories of students at municipal schools in Chile.

By having quantitative and qualitative data dialogue with one another, the idea was to reach a better understanding of complex social phenomena (Sampieri, 2018). The project is currently in its third year. The quantitative phase consists of measuring students' SE & CF in the second cycle of primary school [middle school, or fifth through eighth grades in Chile] and the first year of secondary school through a web platform (<https://siese.uaautonoma.cl/e>). Socio-educational achievement (performance and support) variables were also collected to design a longitudinal explanatory predictive model. The aim of the second phase of the set of studies this article is part of was to deepen our comprehension of the meanings of SE and CF, as well as their configurations over time in order to enrich the theoretical discussion and empirical results. It occasions the use of a participatory and collaborative methodology wherein C&A were brought in as co-researchers (COR) (Gunter & Thomson, 2007; Reimer & McLean, 2015). The 2022 and 2023 results were compared by interpreting the results obtained in the quantitative phase.

Participants

A total of 64 girls and boys (everyone was coded using ST) from six schools in central Chile were invited to participate in a four-year longitudinal study. The co-researchers were sorted into mixed groups of males and females, with four groups from the first year of the middle school period and four more from the first year of secondary school. They were all studied in subsequent years.

Procedure

The necessary ethical safeguards to protect children remained in place for the duration of the investigative process. The study received its certificate of approval from the scientific ethics committee of Chile's Universidad de Valparaíso.

After having signed the assent and informed consent forms, participants were invited to voluntarily join in a research workshop to explore the C&A's own perspectives as CORs regarding SE and CF and to teach them about initial research skills.

In later stages, the co-researchers participated in a series of focus groups to analyze the results of the quantitative measurements of SE and CF in 2022 and 2023 and provided interpretations of the model of SE and CF trajectories.

Thus, in this study we have sought to differentiate more clearly between their involvement as subjects in studies that use participatory methods (e.g., focus groups to collect data) and children's contributions to decision-making within participatory research processes (e.g., focus groups used to engage children in decision-making in a way directly connected to the interpretation of results), fundamentally taking on the role of co-researcher. In this case,

the purpose was to identify and analyze which aspects remained constant and those that changed along the school engagement pathways between 2022 and 2023.

Analysis

The analytical process for the qualitative side of the study consisted of a content analysis of the data produced in conjunction with the C&A. Using Saldaña's questions (2003) as the foundation, a longitudinal analysis will be done using two questions: What is different from one pool of data to the next? What remains the same?

RESULTS

The information below has been organized in view of the subdimensions of school engagement (affective, cognitive, and behavioral) and contextual factors (peer support, parent support, teacher support), identifying which aspects remained the same and those that changed over time. The results interpretations from the perspective of child co-researchers were also distinguished, separating them by educational segment (primary or secondary education).

School engagement in primary education

Regarding the cognitive subdimension, 2022 saw decreased interest in studying overall and the various learning strategies that took place post-pandemic:

"We were supposed to read a comic book and maybe like five people read it because... Nobody liked the subject, so people usually don't even take the tests." (ST1, 2022)

"The library and the stories they have are too childish... We don't like childish things that much." (ST3, 2022)

Regarding the use of technological resources, although this is singled out as one of the teaching strategies, participants also pointed out that they can create distractions and lead to the misuse of technological tools, affecting cognitive engagement:

"Speaking of having internet access, I'd guess that's just fine for some people, but at the same time it's also bad, because if you have access to the internet with technology that lets you install all kinds of games and you get constant notifications, you end up with a lot of distractions while trying to research." (ST2, 2022)

"I just copied stuff I found online, so I didn't learn much." (ST2, 2022)

For the other students with no electronic devices or limited internet connection, this situation raises challenges in terms of access to learning tools, in addition to the fact that school resources are often limited:

“There are computers, but they don’t work and no one can use them for anything.” (ST3, 2022)

“Technological tools are an option, but some people don’t have a good internet connection, so it’s hard to get anywhere.” (ST2, 2022)

In 2023, the situation appeared to change. Students seemed to be more interested in learning, as they became more responsible with homework and assignments and improved their study habits, thus enhancing their academic activities overall:

“I read my notebook several times, I highlight and make summaries... I emphasize the important things... I also underline things.” (ST2, 2023)

“Interest in studying has gone up. We’re more motivated.” (ST2, 2023)

In terms of affective engagement, general fondness for the educational establishment was low in 2022, reflecting a lack of motivation to attend classes and participate in activities related to the academic arena:

“Nobody likes school because they have to write a lot.” (ST1, 2022)

“Some students are not very motivated to even come to school because they don’t enjoy studying.” (ST3, 2022)

In 2023, students showed a greater recognition of the affective values that the establishment teaches, such as being empathetic, helping classmates, being kind to others, learning to connect with people, and recognizing the value of friendship. This is shown in the comments of the following ST3 students when asked about what affective engagement means to them:

“Putting yourself in another person’s shoes and helping someone in need”; “Companionship”; “Being kind and affectionate with classmates”; “Helping classmates”; “Helping friends”; “Being empathetic and things like that”; “Not bothering people”; “Not bullying”; “Not taking photos without first getting consent”; “Caring about people, classmates, friends and teachers.” (all from ST3, 2023)

Lastly regarding behavioral engagement, the children pointed out that some students have a bad attitude when attending classes, exhibiting bad behavior, violence against other classmates and a poor willingness to follow the rules, which makes it difficult to get along inside the educational establishment. This situation seemed to worsen in 2023:

“In our class they admonish us a lot because we’re very messy and don’t pay attention to the teachers, so we’ve had a lot of challenges this year.” (ST1, 2022)

While many recognize the importance of following the rules for healthy coexistence, behavioral problems were reported to have worsened in 2023.

“Because classroom rules are important for having a positive climate and good behavior in the classroom.” (ST3, 2023)

"I live right by my school, and although I'm nearby, I always get there really late." (ST1, 2023)

"With the noise they make, the whole room gets thrown into disorder, which makes it hard to concentrate." (ST1, 2023)

"It's worse in the classroom than in online classes." (ST2, 2023)

"We all behave very badly here." (ST3, 2023)

Some of the strategies the children say increase participation include fun approaches to learning, sports, art, and recreational workshops:

"I like to participate in the workshops at school. It's about committing ourselves to doing things right." (ST2, 2023)

In short, when comparing the two years, one can appreciate specific changes that took place in 2023 with respect to the previous year for the three dimensions of school engagement. These include increased focus on academic activities which, together with a greater appreciation of friendship and peer bonds and a stronger identification with the establishment, enabled an increase in school engagement in its cognitive, affective, and behavioral variants.

Contextual factors in the middle school years of primary education

Regarding the mediating factors of school engagement, peer support stands out for both years as a factor that influences affective engagement insofar as it impacts the motivation to attend school. Some report being interested in going to school just to spend time with classmates or even just with other children of the same age, regardless of whether they are close friends or not, as noted by some students:

"I get along well with the whole class because we've known each other since pre-kindergarten." (ST2, 2022)

"I come to school just for my friends... They are my motivation." (ST3, 2022)

"The children get along well, I mean, they can relax with their classmates and are now getting along better and spending more quality time together." (ST2, 2022)

More contradictory feelings were brought up in 2023 regarding peer relationships in the academic field, with participants stating that children prefer working only with certain classmates who are more to their liking than others:

"Some kids say like, uh... 'you must work with so and so' and they respond with 'no, I don't want to work with that person because I don't like him or she's not from my circle of friends and I don't plan to work in that area (...)' Sometimes we have to deal with

someone who is not to our liking and some say 'I'm not going to work with that person anymore' so some kids shun them or isolate themselves." (ST1, 2023)

Beyond academics, when it comes to supporting a classmate who is being treated badly, children report that the whole class can help:

"Yes, because, for example, ... They'd bully him and a bigger class would start a problem, so we'd all defend them." (ST3, 2023)

"For example, one of our classmates has autism, and he was crying, and we went to ask him what was wrong." (ST3, 2023)

To the contrary, some reports show poor relationships with certain teachers at the educational establishment that have persisted over the two years of the study, alluding to the fact that there is mistreatment inside the classroom that interferes with good communication between the parties:

"Most students don't get along very well with their teachers." (ST2, 2022)

"We're all having a hard time." (ST4, 2023)

"She [the teacher] is very irritating, and she treats us badly." (ST5, 2023)

"The language teacher has it out for me." (ST2, 2023)

They also make a reference to gender:

"The guys don't care what the [female] teacher thinks." (ST1, 2022)

Regarding family support, in 2022 students stated that family support for their studies was greater when they were in online classes, whereas in post-pandemic in-person classes that support had dropped due to their parents' workload:

"It was easier with online classes because we were closer, so it was better, but now it's gone down because you come home from school and sometimes your parents aren't there or they're still at work and maybe not with their kids during the day." (ST1, 2023)

"During the pandemic we spent more time together, and then we returned to school... Because parents have to work." (ST4, 2023)

In summary, regarding contextual factors, it is important to highlight peer support as having an impact on affective engagement, although more contradictory perceptions that can be linked to behavioral problems in the classroom were evident in 2023. The appreciation of teacher support remains low, materializing as problems with communication and treatment. There is also a low perception of post-pandemic family support in situations where parents are once again dealing with long working hours that make it difficult for them to be there for their children in their learning processes.

Secondary education school engagement

Regarding the cognitive subdimension of the school engagement of secondary school students in 2022, we see that some students present a marked motivation towards learning, where effort and the use of various study techniques are notable, as reported below:

“I’ve seen a lot of notebooks with a bunch of highlighting in them, and many people try to remember things by underlining stuff. I’m one of those people, too. I’ve seen a lot of people going to the library as well.” (ST5, 2022)

“Sometimes I go into school and there are people occasionally reading books or searching them out.” (ST5, 2022)

However, a percentage of the class shows a lack of interest in school activities, where students do not even participate in the lessons. This is clear in the following story:

“I was present today, but I didn’t do anything.” (ST5, 2022)

“This year if they have to write down any schoolwork, they’d have to read the board first, and most people just don’t.” (ST7, 2022)

Some study methods that reflect students’ interest and cognitive engagement were once again apparent for 2023, and associated with good academic performance and efficiency in the implementation of the strategies employed:

“To have our own method of study and to want to have an education, if we want something, to work on it now instead of putting it off until later.” (ST5, 2023)

“If we’re interested in the subject the teacher is talking about, it’s okay to investigate further. If we get ahead of ourselves, it’s fine, even if we don’t understand it all. We have to try to find interesting things and look for topics we like that are related to the subject matter so we can learn new stuff.” (ST5, 2023)

“I think it’s about studying what’s difficult to understand and finding other ways of doing research.” (ST6, 2023)

“The truth is that we have been told that our class has gotten the best grades... good grades do in fact bring many more opportunities.” (ST6, 2023)

Mention is also made of the negative impact of virtual classes on cognitive engagement:

“I think the study method during the pandemic destroyed me.” (ST5, 2023)

“We’ve got to tell the truth; almost everyone cheated on tests during the pandemic. Let’s be honest.” (ST5, 2023)

Regarding the affective dimension, in 2022 students reported a great lack of interest in and disregard for their school, but not with their peers, as one of the objectives of attending classes is precisely to spend time with friends:

“A lot of people don’t care much for the teachers or the school itself.” (ST6, 2022)

“Because they don’t like the school. They love their friends, but they don’t like coming to school.” (ST7, 2022)

“I just sleep through it. I don’t like my high school.” (ST7, 2022)

Furthermore, the co-researchers were able to perceive a degree of tiredness and fatigue on the part of the students with respect to turning up at school and carrying out academic activities, expressing both physical and mental exhaustion with their schoolwork.

This can be seen in these accounts from ST7:

“They show up tired”; “I just sleep through it.” (2022).

In 2023, some students highlight a greater sense of belonging and connection with the educational establishment, but opinions are still contradictory:

“I spend all day here.” (ST6, 2023)

“There are moments that are gratifying and others that aren’t.” (ST5, 2023)

Lastly, for the behavioral dimension, students have distinct experiences. One group tends to adhere more to the rules, and another exhibits poor behavior while at school:

“Now they’re sticking to the rules more.” (ST5, 2022)

“Some of the girls light fires using correction fluid.” (ST5, 2022)

“It’s because they don’t want to do what they’re told; for example, they’re told to ‘do the assignment’ and they respond with ‘why?’.” (ST7, 2022)

In 2023, the co-researchers were able to recognize which elements make more easily up this dimension, such as good behavior, participating in activities, attending classes, and respecting others:

“Behaving well, e.g., attending classes”; “Following the rules of the institution such as not bringing in phones, not swearing or cheating on tests.” (ST5, 2023)

“Being orderly in class and respecting the teachers.” (ST6, 2023)

“I do participate in activities”; “Yes, because it’s good to work as a team”; “I prefer to come into the high school where I learn more.” (ST6, 2023)

However, they continue to identify some bad practices of students related to negative behavior, such as not following classroom rules and interfering with proper class flow:

“Don’t ask my class, because it’s like hell on wheels.” (ST5, 2023)

“If the head teacher isn’t in the classroom, it’s total breakdown.” (ST5, 2023)

An interesting point is that the co-researchers identified attendance as having worsened in 2023 due to a lack of behavioral engagement. The students characterize this as a direct effect of the pandemic since they found it difficult to readapt to in-person classes again, directly affecting their motivation for academic activities:

“What happened in our class was last year (2022), almost everyone showed up. There were very few absences, but this year there’s quite a lot of truancy.” (ST5, 2023)

“A lot of people got accustomed to staying home and procrastinating as they say, so they got used to that. For many of them, studying means almost nothing. They’d rather do nothing than get up early to do the things they should be doing, which is not just studying, but physical activity as well as other activities that would really be useful.” (ST5, 2023)

“It might be the pandemic, mixing a lot of people back together and returning to what used to be normal. It was an abrupt change.” (ST6, 2023)

In summary, some of the study methods that were already seen in 2022 were maintained in 2023, which helped increase the cognitive engagement to schools. However, behavioral challenges and difficulties with following classroom rules persisted, which is a sign of decreased behavioral engagement.

Some of the changes detected in 2023 with respect to 2022 included students showing greater interest in actively participating in the construction of knowledge, e.g., looking for additional information on their own, which demonstrates a much more consolidated cognitive engagement. Likewise, progress was made toward recognizing how bonds and relationships built at school function to foster affective engagement. Finally, the C&A co-researchers also perceived a change in students’ disposition toward classes with respect to the pandemic period, with lower attendance and less behavioral engagement on their part.

Contextual factors in secondary education

Regarding contextual factors, in 2022 students mostly held negative opinions about teachers, with the notable absence of an affective bond that would enable teachers to provide them more concrete support:

“Teachers are annoying.” (ST6, 2022)

“They don’t believe you because they tell you what the answer is (inaudible), and the kids are made to just shut up sometimes.” (ST6, 2022)

Some students in 2023 stated that a portion of teachers care about their students’ learning outcomes, and the support they give in the classroom is clearly evident. There are also students who believe that some teachers only show up to meet their job requirements and care not if students truly understand the subject matter:

“They support us”; “They’re understanding”; “Because there are some who are truly interested in our education and answer all of our questions, but then there are others who don’t...”; “ They basically just show up to do their job, which is to teach.” (ST5, 2023)

“They either don’t have the capability or haven’t been trained to teach. Instead they’re more about doing the job as they see fit, using the knowledge they already have, and they don’t know how to treat people, how to deal with children or those who are there simply trying to learn something.” (ST5, 2023)

They appreciate that teachers make them feel secure enough to ask questions and care about them beyond academics alone:

“It’s like they should support us so that we have the confidence to ask questions if we don’t fully understand something.” (ST6, 2023)

“Our teachers have been very willing to help us.” (ST6, 2023)

Along the same lines, there is a marked difference between the relationships that students had with teachers in online classes during the pandemic versus in-person classes due to the fact that digital education meant some group barriers could be crossed in order to focus more on individual learning, thus fostering greater closeness and trust in such relationships. However, this connection disintegrated when students returned to school building, as mentioned by ST6 students:

“It’s like now they teach the lesson and if students need support, they’ll give it, but before when we were using WhatsApp and the like, it seemed as if they were more personable.” (ST6, 2023)

“Maybe because they were worried that we wouldn’t do our homework at home, whereas at school they can watch us doing assignments in class. I mean, they see the effort we’re putting in to get it done, but when we were at home it was like, hey, did you do your homework? It’s got to be turned in tomorrow. They’d text us, you know, because they knew that at home, we’d get distracted by everything, and we wouldn’t do our assignments, so they were more insistent.” (ST6, 2023)

Second, with respect to peer support as a contextual and relational factor, good support was perceived both inside and outside the classroom despite the negative behavior shown by some. This can be linked to the affective engagement seen in students in 2022, in that friendships meant more to students than the school itself. The above is reflected in the following:

“I feel comfortable in my classroom.” (ST6, 2022)

“Classmates in general can be unruly and disrespectful, but when something happens to someone in our course, everyone is there to support them, so that’s good.” (ST6, 2022)

In terms of peer support in 2023, students regard this as essential for their own development, the school environment and coexistence within its walls, which means they feel comfortable and maintain more harmonious relationships in the classroom environment. This is expressed in the following quotes:

“I’ve seen classmates feeling down, so I try to be there for them sometimes.” (ST5, 2023)

“Here in secondary school, I had so-called “friends” because I was bullied in elementary school.” (ST5, 2023)

“Maybe it’s more common now to have more friends because people are starting to include those who used to be in minority groups. There weren’t as many of them, so they were treated as strange, but now because there are more of them, it’s less frequent.” (ST5, 2023)

In terms of family support, students had perceived a heightened concern from their parents regarding homework assignments. This habit began with the pandemic, although it continues still, but to a lesser extent. The family grew accustomed to motivating their children when they did not feel like attending online classes, which helped foster several facets of school engagement:

“Parents were more concerned than the children themselves about their studies because some kids didn’t want to do anything, so they’d be there saying ‘do this and do that’.” (ST7, 2023)

“Yes, it’s the support of the family. After school they would help you with homework and things like that.” (ST6, 2023)

Lastly, students state that emotional support from the family has been insufficient. They feel judged rather than supported, with preconceptions and a lack of understanding of students’ experiences leading to biased and impractical advice. This is notable in the following quotes:

“The thing is, I’ve never felt... We don’t choose our families. We get whatever family we’re born into. Sometimes it’s not the one we need for support and sometimes we choose our own family, our friends, the human beings that we really want to support us, so the family doesn’t always have to be and often isn’t our primary source of support, either emotionally, for homework, or any other type of situation.” (ST5, 2023)

“In fact, there are still families, one example would be my dad, who has always had a retrograde mind emotionally speaking.” (ST5, 2023)

“The good thing about friends is they know you. They know what you’re like and how you act in certain situations, so they accept you as you are and they don’t judge you, unlike the family who tells you that you shouldn’t do this and don’t be like that, just be a little lady.” (ST5, 2023)

For both 2022 and 2023, the bond between peers is an aspect to spotlight as a constant that has been maintained among students and allows them to feel more adjusted and comfortable at their schools, supporting each other in academic achievements and generating a positive experience of coexistence. However, the support of teachers and families has been

further questioned and identified as having been greater during hybrid education, while being perceived as relationships of poorer quality for the in-person context.

DISCUSSION

Including children in the research procedures of educational processes provides important clues for decision-making in schools. Specifically, what was done here was to share the school engagement survey data to analyze it together with the children, who took on the role of co-researchers, as they participated directly in analyzing and interpreting the data. It was concluded that having the children directly engage in these stages enriches the results by giving them greater depth and relevance, which translates into benefits for both adults and C&A, producing knowledge that may have been inaccessible to the former when working in isolation (Marinkovic *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the experience can empower C&A, assigning them an active role in the decision-making that affects their lives and encouraging them to develop writing and communication skills and reflectively analyze their own and others' experiences (Cuevas-Parra, 2016; López-Ordosgoitia *et al.*, 2023).

In general, the quantitative results showed moderately favorable outcomes for school engagement and contextual factors; however, the analyses carried out with children showed a more complex post-pandemic scenario, characterized above all by tense relationships with teachers. Peer support continues to stand out as a relevant contextual factor that has a major impact on children's motivation to attend classes. Another notable result is that the difficulties in reconciling family and work came back with the return to in-person schooling in the post-pandemic context, which has an impact on the families' support of children in their educational processes. Likewise, for Bakadorova and Raufelder (2017), the relationships between teachers and classmates directly influence school motivation and engagement, which is also related to autonomy and personal interests, favoring students' participation in their own learning (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Combette *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the protective role of friendship and companionship highlights the importance of cultivating positive relationships among students to strengthen affective engagement. The latter serves as a gateway to foster a sense of belonging despite negative opinions about the institution, since the educational establishment becomes an essential part of students' social construction and integration (Combette *et al.*, 2021; Forsberg, 2023).

Meanwhile, at the global level, notable consequences include increased learning gaps and problems with mental health and coexistence, with the interruption of educational pathways as a primary issue (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura [UNESCO], 2022). For the case of our study, the learning gaps produced by the pandemic can be linked to difficulties in the deployment of deep learning strategies or cognitive engagement in children and adolescents in 2022 for both groups.

It should be noted that a study done by the OECD showed Chile to be the member country that kept schools closed for the longest period (259 days in total between 2020 and 2021). The pandemic and school closures made it difficult to strengthen emotional support bonds between peers to the detriment of self-esteem, security, and confidence, while causing negative emotions to surface such as stress, frustration, and sadness. The diminished opportunities for interaction and social skills education may also be associated with acts of violence between peers after the schools reopened (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe [CEPAL], 2021; Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos [INDH], 2022), which also became evident during this study.

In terms of behavioral engagement, the difficulties mentioned by students seem to be widespread at the national level. One issue at hand is that absenteeism has reached severe levels. On average, Chilean schoolchildren's attendance stands at 85%, with 1,600,000 chronically truant. Added to this is an explosive increase in the number of complaints about problems with school coexistence at educational establishments. The above can be linked to the numerous factors that contributed to the mental health deterioration of this age group during the pandemic. According to the latest National Survey of Education Monitoring during the Pandemic from November 2022, 24% of schools stated that the "motivation and emotional well-being" of their students is one of the most significant challenges that must be addressed. The same survey reveals that a lack of discipline, poor coexistence and violence among students have been positioned as correlates to this deterioration in socio-emotional well-being. In fact, these problems were some of the most common challenges that went on in educational establishments in 2022 (Izquierdo, *et al.*, 2023).

Powerful camaraderie among students stands out for 2022, providing a sense of support and belonging in the academic context. However, this dynamic changed in 2023, with primary school students preferring to work only with a handful of their closest peers, indicating a decline in academic camaraderie. This situation may be due to the fact that friendships in the school context are closely related to both inclusion and exclusion, especially when seeking social participation and entry into various school activities. This in turn encourages the development of both feelings of companionship and disputes within groups (Andrews, 2023; Forsberg, 2023). In addition, children often create different classes within groups and then decide who is equivalent to the in-group and who is different, which strengthens a sense of belonging among children with similar characteristics that can be applied to both a specific schoolwork group or to the class as a whole, distinguishing between best friends, friends, and classmates (Andrews, 2023; Forsberg, 2023; Strindberg & Horton, 2022).

However, the latter occurred only with the primary school students, since the peer support relationships were maintained over both years for the secondary school students, which lends credence to the importance of this type of support for individual development and classroom

coexistence. Therefore, friendship in the school context is a key factor for social and academic development in which students negotiate their social belonging within a school environment that is highly mediated by institutional limitations, teacher performance, and competition among students (Forsberg, 2023; Strindberg & Horton, 2022).

Despite the perceived family support uncovered for secondary education students, it extended to academic matters alone and was insufficient to address the socio-emotional needs of students, which lead to feelings about judgmental attitudes and a failure to be understood. According to Gómez *et al.* (2023) and Barbosa da Fonseca *et al.* (2023), the key traits that mark good child development and school engagement include an interest in learning, perseverance, and social-emotional regulation, which is made available directly through familial support and the ways in which a family resolves internal conflicts.

Furthermore, a lack of family support and parenting practices with low levels of attachment have also been identified as a risk factor that increases student misbehavior and affects self-regulation, self-expectations, academic participation, and attachment relationships among peers, all essential elements of beneficial school engagement (Barbosa da Fonseca *et al.*, 2023; de Toro *et al.*, 2023; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Notably, as interpreted by the child researchers, a complex array of educational dynamics influenced by a variety of factors emerge through the detailed analysis of the students' school engagement results for the primary education middle schoolers and for secondary education high schoolers between 2022 and 2023. In terms of cognitive engagement, positive progress was found regarding academic interest and developing study habits in post-pandemic primary school students whereas for secondary school students, the negative impacts of Covid-19 persisted in 2023, directly affecting academic interest and study methods.

Along with the above, the difficulties of accessing a formal education stem from digital distractions, the digital divide and lack of resources, underscoring the importance of adaptive educational approaches that consider the individuality of students and their unique contexts. Regarding affective engagement, the design and implementation of a stimulating school environment is clearly needed to help deal with low motivation and the outright rejection of the educational establishment, with strengthened peer relationships and companionship promoted across the board for every age group.

In addition, the worsening of behavioral engagement marked by poor practices and increased absenteeism indicates the pandemic had significant impacts on the motivation and disposition of secondary school students. This calls for the use of recreational activities and the variation of pedagogical methods to facilitate school engagement.

Apropos of contextual factors, changes were observed in academic companionship, relationships with teachers and family support, where there is a marked preference for working with certain classmates in primary school in contrast to the importance of peer relationships in secondary school. Additionally, distant relationships between teachers and students were found for both age segments as well as the kind of family support that is mainly oriented to academic needs, leaving the socio-emotional ones unattended to.

Considering the above, one proposal is to design educational strategies that are personalized to fit each educational cycle, context and developmental stage of the students with the aim of promoting school environments that foster positive relationships, thus improving the educational experience and strengthening of school engagement with its range of variables.

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