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Students' Involvement in School and Parental Support: Contributions to the Socio-Educational Intervention

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Abstract

Student involvement in the school and the perception of parental support are core variables in the context of studies on personal and school adjustment of children and adolescents and should be considered in the context of socio-educational intervention. In this study, we formulated the following objectives: *i*) to understand the differences in students' involvement in school and the perception of parental support, according to several socio-demographic and school variables, *ii*) to analyse the relationship between involvement and the perception of parental support *iii*) to outline socio-educational intervention strategies in the contexts of children's lives. This is a non-experimental, correlational and cross-sectional study by means of a non-probabilistic convenience sample consisting of 150 children, aged between 10 and 16 years, attending the 2nd and 3rd cycles basic education [5th – 9th years of schooling] attending a school in the central region of Portugal. The data collection instruments were "Students' Engagement in School: a Four-Dimensional Scale – SES-4DS" (Veiga 2013, 2016), the "Perceived Parental Support Scale" (Veiga, 2011) and a part with socio-demographic and school questions was added. We found significant differences in overall (and partial) amounts of student involvement and the perception of parental support, depending on the age, gender (in agency and behaviour subscales), school difficulties/retentions and methods of study (time, a place to study and a study schedule). We also found positive and significant relationships between student involvement and perception of parental support. The results are in line with the scientific literature in the field, which highlights the key role of the variables, student involvement and perception of parental support in the academic and psychosocial adjustment of young people. These should be considered in the context of socio-educational intervention. Given the above, we present areas and action strategies promoting parent and student involvement in the educational process.

Keywords: Involvement; parental support; adjustment; socio-educational intervention.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades the concept of students' involvement in school has raised the interest of researchers and is considered an important factor in academic success and reducing school dropout rates as well as in developmental and behavioural adjustment, particularly in improving students' social-affective and cognitive skills (Fernández-Zabala, Goñi, Camino, & Zulaika, 2015; Li, & Lerner, 2011). Despite some difficulty finding consensus on the definition of the concept, we have found a multitude of studies on the subject, in the national and international literature (Kindermann, 2007; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr & Anderson, 2003; Veiga, 2010; Zepke Leach & Butler, 2010).

In this context, lines of research on indicators and facilitators of students' involvement have emerged, from the relationship with motivation to the influence of family, peers and teachers (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). Thus, there seems to be consensus on the multidimensional nature of the construct, involving cognitive, emotional and behavioural components, as well as their relation to motivation for learning (Radovan, 2011; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). In addition to these dimensions, self-concept is also a core element in involvement. Studies argue that one reason for school failure is students' self-concept, especially students' negative feelings about themselves and about their study tasks (Radovan, 2011).

School involvement is associated with a greater propensity for the student to participate in school, to be motivated for school learning and interested in working with peers and teachers (Wolters, & Taylor, 2012), which enhances feelings of belonging and participation, in both school activities and extracurricular activities (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). The literature argues that more engaged students have better academic results and a lower dropout rate. In contrast, students with less involvement show reduced interest in school and make less of an effort to be involved in activities with regards to problems and challenges in school learning, besides having greater absenteeism and dropping out more (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Veiga 2011). Moreover, they present socio-affective difficulties and are less well-adjusted to the school context (Chapman, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004), are associated with peer groups with deviant behaviour and have an increased propensity to consume alcohol and drugs (Henry et al., 2011; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011). Lower involvement also seems to be associated with families with low socio-economic status and poor social support (Li & Lerner, 2011).

With regard to the variables which impact school involvement and are related to school and the relationship with teachers, studies emphasise quality of educational practices, the teacher-student relationship, which has effects on students' self-concept. Also important are the dimensions related to the atmosphere of the classroom (Lee, 2012; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Parental influence on school involvement and school performance is an important aspect in controlling student behaviour and learning (Abreu & Veiga, 2014; Bempechat, & Shernoff, 2012; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Raftery, Grolnick, & Flamm, 2012; Schlechter & Milevsky, 2010). Thus, reduced parental monitoring encourage promotes behavioural problems and young people associating with peers with deviant behaviours (Hirschfield, & Gasper, 2011; Li, & Lerner, 2011).

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Given the great potential of the construct of student involvement, it is necessary to continue to pursue studies in an integrative approach. Then again, studying the different levels of analysis of the construct in order to promote strategies and best practices to improve student involvement in school is a challenge (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Veiga 2011).

2. Problem statement

Students' involvement in school and the perception of parental support are important variables in school, socio-emotional and behavioural adjustment of children and young people, and efforts should be made to understand the relationship between the constructs more fully with a view to implementing appropriate intervention strategies in this area. Thus, our aim is to analyse the results of student involvement in school and the perception of parental support as well as to understand their relationship these with other socio-demographic and school variables, in order to outline socio-educational intervention strategies which will promote involvement.

3. Research questions

Taking the problem stated above into account, study questions emerge: what is the relationship between student involvement in school, their perception of parental support and socio-demographic and school variables so as to implement socio-educational intervention strategies school context?

4. Purpose of the study

From analysing the answers to the study questions, we intend to understand the relationship between student involvement and the perception of parental support and to examine whether there are significant differences in values for involvement and perception of parental support as a function of several socio-demographic and school variables (gender, age school difficulties/retention and study methods). In addition, we intend to reflect and outline socio-educational intervention strategies in order to enhance the dimensions studied.

5. Research methods

To achieve the aims of this study, a non-experimental, correlational and cross-sectional study was conducted.

5.1. Participants

The sample, whose characterisation is presented in Table 1, was selected by convenience, with 150 students, mostly females, 52.7% (n=79) and 47.3% (n=71) males aged between 10 and 16 years, with a mean age 13.05 (±1.60) participating in the study. They attend the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education [5th – 9th years of schooling] in a school in the centre of Portugal. The sample consisted of 16.7% (n=25) students of the 5th year, 14% (n=21) of the 6th year, 25.3% (n=38) of the 7th, 20.7% (n=31) of the 8th and 23.3% (n=35) of the 9th year of schooling.

With respect to academic achievement, 36.7% (n=55) have been retained in at least one school year and 63.3% (n=95) have had no retention. Most have had educational support (54%, n=81), through private tutorship (34.9%, n = 30), teaching support (24.4%, n=21), special education measures (17.4%, n=15) or other informal support (23.3%, n=20). As for study methods, 71% (n=107) having a specific place to study, 52.7% (n=79) having a specific study schedule and 66.7% (n=100) reported that they dedicate enough time to study.

Table 1. Characterisation of the sample

	n	%
Gender		
Female	79	52.7
Male	71	47.3
Age category		
10-11	27	18
12-13	59	39.3
14-16	64	42.7
Year of schooling		
5th	25	16.7
6th	21	14
7th	38	25.3
8th	31	20.7
9th	35	23.3

As for the students' caregivers, the fathers' ages are between 29 and 60 years, with mean age of 42.8 (±6.15), and mothers are aged between 29 and 55 years (±5.5). With regard to their academic qualifications, 80.6% (n=108) of fathers and 71.1% (n=101) of mothers have primary education, 14.2% (n=19) of fathers and 21.1% (n=30) mothers have secondary education and 5.2% (n=7) of fathers and 7.7% (n=11) of mothers have a university degree. With regard to marital status most (n=125, 85.6%) are married or living in civil unions, 11.6% (n=17) are divorced (or separated) and 2.7% (n=4) are single or widowed.

5.2. Instrument

The students completed a questionnaire that included measures on their involvement in school, their perception of parental support and a part on demographic and socio-relational issues. Thus, we applied the following data collection tools: the "Students' Engagement in School: a Four-Dimensional Scale – SES-4DS" (Veiga 2013, 2016) and the "Perceived Parental Support Scale" (Veiga, 2011).

The "Students' Engagement in School: a Four-Dimensional Scale" (Veiga, 2013) assesses four dimensions of involvement: Cognitive, Affective, Behavioural and Agency. The scale consists of 20 items and shows response options 1 to 6, on a Likert scale ("total agreement" – 6 "total disagreement" – 1). The total result is the sum of all items. For internal consistency, the Cronbach's α values are satisfactory for total involvement α=.83. For the dimensions the values are α=.71 (Behavioural), α=.76 (Cognitive), α=.82 (Affective) and α=.85 (Agency).

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The "Perceived Parental Support Scale" is composed of 8 items, with a Likert response format similar to the previous scale (1 to 6 points). Internal consistency is high α=.80 (Abreu & Veiga, 2014; Veiga, 2011).

5.3. Procedure

The instruments were applied in the context of the classroom in March 2016, with the support of class directors of the classes involved. The rules of ethics involved in any research project were strictly adhered to. In this sense, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary and that their responses were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. They were also given any necessary clarifications during application.

5.4. Data analysis techniques

After applying data collecting instruments by the researchers, we selected the data which were considered most relevant, taking into account the purposes of the study. These data and later analysed using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) software version 23.

6. Findings

In terms of internal consistency, the Cronbach's α values were close to those obtained by the author of the studies (Veiga, 2013). Thus, for the SES-4DS scale α=.82 and the subscale values were α=.83 (Agency and Behavioural), α=.78 (Cognitive) and α=.74 (Affective). For the parents' support scale, PPSS, α=.80. Generally speaking, the values are consistent with other studies (Veiga, 2016); however, the α was higher for the Behavioural subscale and lower for the Affective subscale.

As for the results regarding student involvement, SES-4DS and the subscales by gender, as shown in Table 2, we observed significant differences in the Agency subscale (p=.020), with the boys presenting the highest mean (16.63±4.52) and the Behavioural subscale (p=.022), with the girls presenting a higher mean (21.14±4.10).

Table 2. Differences in SES-4DS scale and subscales by gender

Scale and subscales	Gender				t	p
	Female (N=79)		Male (N=71)			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Agency	14.97	4.14	16.63	4.52	-2.347	.020
Affective	19.52	4.14	19.58	3.77	-.090	.928
Cognitive	15.77	3.71	16.46	4.51	-1.030	.305
Behavioural	21.14	4.10	19.56	4.23	2.315	.022
SES-Total	71.41	10.58	72.24	10.85	-.476	.635

For perception of parental support/PPSS, we found that there are no significant differences between boys and girls (U=2595.000, p=.428), with the respective means of 20.44±4.01 and 20.13±3.63.

Regarding the effect of age on involvement, we found significant differences between age groups for the behavioural subscale (F=4.685, p=.011). Analysis with the Bonferroni test showed that the differences show up between 10/11 years (M=27.59±2.0) and the other categories (11/12, M=19.02±4.96, 14/16 years, M=19.91±3.92). For the total involvement scale, the differences (F=3.197, p=.044) were between 10/11 years (M=75.59±11.52) and 14/16 years (M=70.14±9.16).

For the perception of parental support, significant differences were also found according to age categories (K-W=6.248, p=0.44), with higher means for 10/11 years (M=21.33±3.39), 12/13 years followed (M=20.63±3.98) and 14/16 years (M=19.50±3.69).

As for the results in the SES-4DS scale and subscales, due to school difficulties/retention (Table 3), we found significant differences for total involvement (p=.010) and the behavioural subscale (p=.000), showing that the students without school difficulties/without retentions are more involved in school activities.

Table 3. *Differences in SES-4DS scale and subscales, by school difficulties/retentions*

Scale and subscales	School difficulties (retentions)				t	p
	Without retentions (N=55)		With retentions (N=95)			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Agency	15.85	4.41	15.60	4.38	.339	.735
Affective	19.88	3.84	18.96	4.12	1.377	.171
Cognitive	16.42	4.20	15.55	3.92	1.259	.210
Behavioural	21.35	3.81	18.75	4.42	3.796	.000
SES-Total	73.51	11.07	68.85	9.35	2.619	.010

Significant differences were also found for perception of parental support (U=2021.000, p=.020), indicating that students without school retentions a have greater perception of parental support (M=20.78±3.72) than students with more difficulties school/retentions (M=19.40±3.82).

With regard to the influence of the variables, study methods (place, length of study and study schedule), as shown in Table 4, significant differences were found for the SES-4DS scale (p=.000) and in all subscales (Agency – p=0.40, Affective – p=.002, Cognitive – p=.004, Behavioural – p=.000). This shows that when students spend the time needed to study, they are more highly involved with school (mean values: 74.95±10.14, 16.28±3.82, 20.24±3.867, 16.77±4.12, 21.66±3.42, respectively) than students who do not have daily study periods (mean values: 65.50±8.87, 14.72±4.66, 18.16±4.17, 14.75±3.80, 17.86±4.56, respectively). The effect is similar for the variable, study time. A significant difference was observed for the total scale (p=.000) and the subscales (Affective – p=.030, Cognitive – p=.005, Behavioural – p=.001), which highlights the importance of organising studying with a stipulated time for student involvement (mean values: 74.90±10.11, 20.20±3.77, 16.98±4.10, 21.46±3.28, respectively). In comparison students who do not have a study time show less involvement (mean values: 68.26±10.27, 18.80±4.06, 10.15±3.92, 19.72± 4.83, respectively). The variable, having specific place to study, also presented significant differences in the total scale (p=.004) and the

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subscales (Agency – p=.034 and Cognitive – p=.001). Students who have a specific and suitable place to study indicate greater involvement (mean values: 73.33±11.15, 16.23±4.47, 16.77±4.16, respectively) than those who do not have such a place to study (mean values: 67.86±8.27, 14.55±3.96, 14.38 ±3.84, respectively).

Table 4. Differences in SES-4DS scale and subscales by study methods (location, schedule, duration)

Variables	Place to Study		Study Schedule		Duration of Study	
	t	p	t	p	t	p
Agency	2.135	.034	1.506	.134	2.075	.040
Affective	1.056	.293	2.189	.030	3.123	.002
Cognitive	3.296	.001	2.851	.005	2.890	.004
Behavioural	.840	.402	3.432	.001	5.721	.000
SES-Total	2.888	.004	3.985	.000	5.604	.000

Significant differences were found for perception of parental support as a function of having a specific place to study (U=1764.500, p=.034) and study time (U=1617.000, p=.000), in that students who understand the need to have a specific place and more time to study also perceive greater parental support and guidance (mean values: 20.69±3.66 and 21.05±3.50, respectively). Students who do not have a specific place to study and devote less time to study perceive less parental support (mean values: 19.21±4.02 and 18.72±3.94, respectively). As for having a study schedule, no significant differences were found.

As for the analysis of the relationship between the variables under study, the results for the correlation coefficient between total involvement SES-4DS (and subscales) and the PPSS scale of parental support, we found that the perception of parental support is significantly related (p<.01) to overall student involvement SES-4DS (r=.44) and all construct dimensions (Agency r=.27, Affective r=.26, Cognitive r=.42, Behavioural r=.30). These results are in line with similar studies (Conboy et al., 2014).

7. Conclusions

Analysis of the results leads us to confirm that involvement in school is a central variable in students' personal and relational adjustment and academic success, which is in line with the literature in the field (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fernández-Zabala et al., 2015; Li, & Lerner, 2011; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003; Veiga, 2013; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2010). The construct involves a broad set of dimensions: cognitive, affective, behaviour and agency (Abreu & Veiga, 2014) and implicates students in their social contexts of life, family, school and community.

Specifically, the results indicate the strong and significant relationships between the perception of parental support (support behaviour, assistance in studying and students' personal and school development) and student involvement in school (socio-affective, cognitive and behavioural) in accordance with national and international studies (Abreu & Veiga, 2014; Hirschfield, & Gasper, 2011; Li & Lerner, 2011; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Veiga, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). In fact, research has emphasized dimensions regarding family involvement, particularly in socio-economic and

cultural terms, involvement in learning and parenting styles and practices (Raftery, Grolnick, & Flamm, 2012; Schlechter & Milevsky, 2010).

The results of study show the importance of student involvement in academic achievement (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012; Radovan 2011, Veiga, 2016), in that students without difficulties/school retentions showed higher values in involvement. This brings us to other variables that the literature highlights and that must be considered within the scope of the intervention, especially the teacher-student relationship, academic activities, the atmosphere of the classroom (Lee, 2010; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen , 2012) and relationships with peers (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012). Moreover, the perception of parental support was also shown to be important in greater school success/without retention, which is consistent with the literature (Bempechat, & Shernoff, 2012).

Regarding the influence of the age variable, we found effects on student involvement and perception of parental support. In fact, studies reported a decrease of involvement with advancing age and education level. Younger children in primary education reveal a closer connection to the school environment than secondary school students (Wang & Eccles, 2012). The same applies to the perception of parental support which also appears to decrease with age. These data reinforce the idea of a timely and preventive intervention in the course of primary education, as well as using educational strategies to promote parental involvement in school (Felizardo, 2013; Felizardo & Ribeiro, 2013).

With regard to gender, results showed girls had greater behavioural involvement (which translates into greater compliance with of school rules and greater involvement in learning tasks). This is partly consistent with the literature, which reports more affective and behavioural involvement on the part of girls than boys (Fernández-Zabala et al., 2015; Yuen, C., Cheung, A., Kennedy, K., & Leung, Y. (2014). Boys, on the other hand, have higher values in cognitive involvement. Nevertheless, in this study the boys did better in the agency dimension, which brings us to more proactive behaviours and constructive contributions in the learning activities in the classroom.

In what concerns the variables related to study methods (time, place and study schedule), generally speaking, the results show that young people who are more involved and have a greater perception of parental support present more effective strategies and methods of study, which is in line other studies in the field (Radovan, 2011; Wolters, & Taylor, 2012).

Given the above, considering the socio-educational intervention in the school context, we identify a number of coordinates that should guide the action of specialists and teachers, namely:

i) starting early, from the beginning of primary school, implementing strategies that encourage student involvement. Thus, students should be encouraged to use effective study methods and adopt effective cognitive strategies early on.

ii) developing intervention programmes with families (including parental training programmes, supporting parental monitoring, encouraging participation in activities at school and in the classroom, promoting forms of informal and frequent communication)

iii) promoting training activities for teachers, in order to improve their relationship skills with students and families, as well as teaching/learning methods and techniques

iv) including activities to promote interaction among children (educational games, activities involving motor, dramatic and plastic expression, involvement in projects and activities which promote solidarity).

In short, taking into account studies on student involvement in school and the support of parents/families in this process, it is important that all of the school community agents are involved in constructing and implementing programmes that enhance students' skills. To this end, continuing this line of research on the specific strategies that best maximise the involvement of students and families is of the utmost importance.

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