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Learning selves

Learner identity development in school and beyond

Verhoeven, M.

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CHAPTER 4

CREATING SPACE FOR AGENCY. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND AND STUDY ADOLES- CENTS' SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT*

In the present paper, a conceptual framework is described to understand and study the role of students' agency related to their school engagement and disengagement. The conceptual framework builds on sociocultural and CHAT research and includes the notion of agency combined with learning preferences. The framework holds that students would exercise agency to negotiate engaging learning experiences when the school's affordances and constraints are considerably relatable to their learning preferences and allow them to define themselves in desired ways. However, when adolescents would feel that opportunities to pursue their learning preferences are rather limited in school, they are expected to turn to other contexts such as home, peer groups, and workplaces. An exemplary case study is presented to illustrate the framework and implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper regards the role of adolescents' agency in their school (dis-)engagement. It has been well-documented by sociocultural and CHAT research that adolescents' school engagement is fostered when what is taught in school is evidently relevant to their current or future lives (Polman, 2010; Rubin, 2007; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Studies have also found that adolescents engage with learning in school when they can understand themselves as appreciated

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classroom participants and their abilities are valued in the classroom (Legette, 2017; Solomon, 2007). Extensive research has been conducted on what teachers can do *for* (Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, 2020) or *with* their students to help them connect to school in personally meaningful ways and to understand themselves as competent learners (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Gutiérrez, Rimes, & Larson, 1995; Hogg & Volman, 2020; Vetter, Fairbanks, & Ariail, 2011), for example by allowing students to organize parts of the program. Even though some of these studies empirically examined students' agency, it remains undertheorized in sociocultural research exactly why and when students exercise their agency to engage with or disengage from school (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). We contend that it is important to further conceptualize student agency and how it may inform adolescents' school engagement: creating theoretical space for agency could provide us with further insights into what motivates adolescents' school (dis-)engagement, and practical insights into how disengaged adolescents' school re-engagement can be fostered. In this paper, we aim to provide a set of concepts that we believe can help to understand and study the role of students' agency in their school engagement. In doing so, we answer the research question 'How does our conceptualization of learning preferences and agency help us to understand and study processes of student (dis-)engagement?', and illustrate our conceptual framework by means of an exemplary case study. We would like to stress that we do not claim that we offer final answers to questions such as 'what is agency?' or present a framework that is not susceptible to improvement. Rather, we want to provide a set of conceptualizations and operationalizations that we have found to be productive in our own work, and that we want to present here hoping that they may be of use to other researchers too.

SITUATING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our conceptual framework is grounded in a sociocultural and CHAT perspective (Holland, Lachichotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011). It draws on neo-Vygotskian sources including Funds of Identity studies (e.g., Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), learner identity research (e.g., Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Rubin, 2007) and Azevedo's (e.g., 2011; 2013) work on students' interest development. From a sociocultural and CHAT perspective, learning and identity development are considered to be intrinsically intertwined: by engaging in learning experiences, individuals develop new

knowledge and skills *and* come to understand themselves in relation to the knowledge and skills that they try to master (Azevedo, 2011; Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Holland et al., 1998; Polman, 2010; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). To illustrate, by engaging in an online French course, one becomes more familiar with different facets of the French language and perhaps too with skills needed for online learning. Simultaneously, through this experience one learns whether one is gifted as a French language learner, what one's strengths and weaknesses as a French learner are, and whether one enjoys engaging in learning French and online learning. Based on this, a person may come to identify with online French learning: it may become of significance to who that person is. This identification, or the lack thereof, is then understood to be integrated into the person's more abstract sense of self as a learner that transfers across contexts and that thickens over time (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998). The rather stable and coherent self-understandings as learners that people thus create, and that inform their current learning engagements and future learning goals, are people's learner identities (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Rubin, 2007).

What processes of learning and learner identity development one engages in is dependent on the affordances and constraints of the contexts one participates in (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998). From a sociocultural and CHAT perspective, these context-specific affordances and constraints are understood to be socially and culturally constructed, and historically accumulated (Azevedo, 2011; Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Holland et al., 1998; Wertsch, 1998). Each context is characterized by its own historically developed set of affordances and constraints that are (re-)produced through interactions of people with other people, and through interactions of people with the tools available to them (Azevedo, 2011; Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Polman, 2010). To illustrate, while it was already possible to learn French a century ago, it was impossible to do this online. Also in current society, contexts (e.g., school, home, peer groups) may differ in the value they attach to certain practices such as doing homework or critical thinking as conveyed by these different contexts' prevalent patterns of learning-related actions and interactions (Holland et al., 1998). Simultaneously, it is acknowledged that a particular context such as a school is situated and itself afforded and constrained by larger contexts (Azevedo, 2011; Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Poole & Huang, 2018; Vetter et al., 2011), such as the education system or, in the instance of our exemplary case study, Dutch society.

The affordances and constraints of a particular educational context (such as a school, school track, or classroom) inform what learner identity positions—social roles as learners such as the science learner and the inquiry-based learner—are made available to students: they communicate certain messages to students regarding the knowledge and skills that they are and are not supposed to identify with. An educational context's affordances and constraints also convey to students what it means, in that particular context, to be a competent learner (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998). For example, whereas some contexts may value obedient learners who work fast, others may be more concerned with educating critical thinkers who work meticulously (Cone, Buxton, Lee, & Mahotiere, 2014).

As contexts are characterized by possibly overlapping yet unique sets of affordances, constraints and learner identity positions, the ones adolescents encounter in school may be rather different from those they encounter in other contexts (Azevedo, 2013; Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Polman, 2010; Poole & Huang, 2018; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011; Vetter et al., 2011). Whereas some students experience high degrees of continuity in the affordances and constraints of school and out-of-school contexts, others do not (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). Discontinuities are more commonly found among disadvantaged students from minoritized or low-income backgrounds (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). However, students can only engage in school when they find constructive ways to negotiate possible contextual discontinuities, so as to connect to their education in personally meaningful ways (Azevedo, 2013; Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Polman, 2010; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Additionally, researchers have found that when adolescents encounter discrepancies between their own ideas of how they can and want to learn on the one hand, and their school's ideas about being a competent and legitimate classroom participant on the other, this may cause them to disengage from school (Rubin, 2007; Mortimer, Wortham, & Allard, 2010). This is where students' agency comes in, as adolescents experiencing such discontinuities and discrepancies may or may not try to constructively relate to the affordances or constraints that could cause them to disengage from school.

CREATING SPACE FOR AGENCY: OUR CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Learning Engagement

In adopting an adjusted conceptualization of Lawson and Lawson (2013), we understand learning engagement as adolescents' affective and behavioral attachments to learning. Adolescents' affective engagement concerns their emotional, social and psychological attachments to learning, as indicated by their levels of enjoyment and boredom (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, pp. 435–436). Their behavioral engagement regards adolescents' conduct in learning activities, as indicated by the amount of effort they (are willing to) put into learning and their willingness to conform to a particular context's norms and rules (pp. 436–437).

Learning Preferences

From a sociocultural and CHAT perspective, no person is thought to move across exactly the same contexts with exactly the same affordances and constraints engaging in the same learning experiences as someone else (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Eteläpelto et al, 2013; Holland et al., 1998). As processes of learning and identity development are considered to be interwoven, learner identities are understood to be idiosyncratic phenomena (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998). Moreover, prior to attending high school, adolescents have already engaged in learning experiences in various contexts. Although the development of learner identities is generally a process that takes place throughout the life course (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998), adolescents are likely to have already identified with certain learning goals and practices, that we will refer to as learning preferences. Inspired by Azevedo's (2011; 2013) work, we define learning preferences as deep, long-term learning-related goals, values and beliefs that people develop in relation to the sociocultural affordances and constraints that they encounter. These preferences indicate how they prefer to position, define and understand themselves as learners, and through what practices (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998). As we will elaborate upon below, people's learning preferences also explain why and to what extent they engage in learning experiences in the way they do.

What one's learning preferences are is indicated by the reasons one has for engaging in or disengaging from specific learning experiences. To illustrate, in his study on model rocketry clubs, Azevedo (2011) found that one person's

engagement in such a club was strongly motivated by his preference for design. This individual preferred to build reduced-scale original rockets and mainly engaged in that. Another person's engagements in the same club were mainly driven by his preference for construction work. The latter individual was less concerned with the looks of the rockets he built, and mainly engaged in activities such as machining parts and adapting motors. Hence, people's preferences provide insights into how participating in a particular context is personally relevant to them, and into why they engage in learning experiences in the way they do.

The deep, long-term learning-related goals, values and beliefs that people have can be considered their primary preferences. We understand these to possibly transfer across contexts. In addition, again inspired by Azevedo's work (2011; 2013), we distinguish lower level learning preferences that entail specifications of how persons believe they are able and willing to satisfy their primary preferences in a particular context. By "lower level," neither we nor Azevedo mean to imply lesser importance; rather, this refers to a structural hierarchy. For example, in the context of the home, limited resources to design model rockets may be available compared to the model rocketry club. Consequently, at home one may use recyclable objects that one finds in the house to design model rockets, whereas one would use the more professional materials when designing model rockets at the club. Furthermore, even though one may engage in designing model rockets in both contexts, the lower level learning preferences (e.g., using professional rather than home-recycled materials) that can be satisfied in a particular context may impact one's level of learning engagement in that context: while still engaging in designing model rockets at home, a person may be even more engaged in this practice at the model rocketry club.

Agency

We understand agency as involving the pursuit of one's preferences. We deem agency to not simply *belong* to particular persons, but to be distributed among human and nonhuman actors (e.g., Silseth & Arnseth, 2011). Mortimer et al. (2010) for example demonstrated how immigrant students who wanted to go to university were simply unable to conform to the model of university-bound students due to their lack of a legal immigration status which was necessary to access universities. Hence, the possible forms the pursuit of people's learning preferences can take are dependent on the affordances and

constraints that they encounter (Holland et al., 1998; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Exercising agency, then, is considered to be indicated by one's use of tools, norms, values and skills that one thinks are or can be made available to pursue one's preferences. Like Ecclestone, we understand people's agency as rooted in their past experiences and informed by their perceptions of the current affordances and constraints they encounter; "it is not something that people possess as an attribute, but something they [may] "do" in different contexts" (Ecclestone, 2007, p. 125).

In line with Azevedo (2011), we assume people to have multiple learning preferences on both primary and lower levels. Dependent on the affordances and constraints of the particular contexts people participate in, they might deem it relatively hard or easy to exercise their agency, i.e. to satisfy multiple of their learning preferences in one context. Consider for instance the view of an adolescent. When a context provides affordances and constraints that make it easier to satisfy more of their learning preferences, and in perhaps more preferred ways as well (i.e., using lower level learning preferences), we contend that this context may be experienced as more relevant to their life, causing their level of learning engagement in this context to be higher. Hence, we understand contexts to compete with each other in the extent to which they provide people space for agency; to connect to the affordances and constraints in ways that are personally relevant to them. Furthermore, as preferences interact with contextual affordances and constraints, shifts in learning engagement may occur when affordances and constraints in a particular context change, when a new and more apt context is accessed, or when a previously present and rather apt context becomes inaccessible.

From the above, the following premises of our conceptual framework can be distilled: First, adolescents exercise agency in the context of school when its affordances and constraints are perceived as considerably helpful (compared to other contexts) to pursue their learning preferences. This would reinforce relatively high levels of learning engagement in school. In such instances, adolescents may only encounter small discontinuities or experienced discrepancies that need little to no negotiation for adolescents to relate to them in constructive ways. Another option is that adolescents do encounter rather large discontinuities or discrepancies, but that they also see how the school's affordances and constraints could best help them pursue all or most of their learning preferences. This would stimulate them to exercise agency, thereby negotiating the discontinuities and discrepancies they face to use the school's affordances and constraints in personally desired ways.

Our second premise is that adolescents may not exercise agency in school to pursue their learning preferences when they deem the school's affordances and constraints to make it relatively difficult for them to pursue those preferences. In such cases, adolescents will look at other contexts to satisfy their preferences, leading to school disengagement. We conjecture that the latter phenomenon may have three different causes. First, adolescents may experience too little space in school to exercise agency. Second, the introduction of new contexts, or of altered affordances and constraints in already accessed out-of-school contexts may more readily afford the satisfaction of their learning preferences and the possibility to position themselves in desired ways. Third, in interaction with new contexts or with changed affordances and constraints in already available out-of-school contexts, adolescents may come to adopt new learning preferences that cannot be easily pursued in school. Next, we will illustrate the framework by means of an exemplary case.

METHOD

Research Context

In Dutch education, students are allocated to separate tracks in either the first or second year of high school (grade seven or eight, respectively), by the age of twelve to thirteen. This allocation is based on teacher recommendations, students' standardized test scores at the end of primary school, and/or on the students' test results and work attitude during the first year of high school. Three sub-tracks of a four year long prevocational track (ranging from more hands-on to more theoretically oriented education) prepare students for subsequent vocational programs. The five year long intermediate track provides students with access to higher professional education. Additionally, there are two six year long pre-university tracks, of which one (the Gymnasium) includes Latin and ancient Greek. Completing one of the six-year tracks is the most common way to enroll in university. Exit qualifications for each of these tracks are formally established on a national level. In Dutch society, the prevocational tracks are—in contrast to the intermediate track and especially in contrast to the pre-university tracks—generally associated with limited career prospects in terms of finding a well-paying job. As Van den Bulk (2011) demonstrated, collective ideas about the prospects of people in the different tracks are often integrated in adolescents' status positioning of both themselves and others. Consequently, the track students are in may impact their

preferences regarding their futures and may shape and interfere with how they (want to) understand and position themselves.

Case Selection and Description

This case is drawn from a larger research project where fifteen students were interviewed in two sessions: one in fall and one in spring of the schoolyear 2016-2017 (also see Chapter 3). The semi-structured interviews regarded the students' experiences of going to school, their self-understandings as learners in school, their educational trajectory thus far, the contextual affordances and constraints they encountered in the various contexts they moved across, and their reflections thereupon. The first two topics were addressed in both interviews. Although we analyzed four cases of differing backgrounds and abilities using the framework, we zoom in on only one of these cases due to space restrictions. Amanda's case was selected because her school engagement shifted twice over the course of a schoolyear. Also, she was one of the few interviewed adolescents who had already started a job contemporaneous to school. These two factors make her case particularly illuminating.

During the time of the interviews, Amanda was fifteen years old and lived with her parents and younger brother. Both Amanda's parents finished the intermediate track. Afterwards, her mother worked as a secretary and was trained as such. Amanda's father finished a technical program and became a self-employed plumber. During the schoolyear of 2016-2017 (after the first but before the second round of interviews), Amanda started working as a runner in a restaurant and joined a soccer team. We would like to stress that Amanda's case is not supposed to operationalize our conceptual framework as a whole. To make sure that other researchers can apply our framework to other students' cases with different learning and identity trajectories too, the operationalizations of our framework's concepts are discussed below.

Analysis

To examine the role of Amanda's agency in her school re-engagement and later disengagement, the first author started to code the data for Amanda's learning engagement in the various contexts she participated in. Fragments were coded that were characterized by Amanda's use of words such as 'like', 'fun', 'enjoy', 'appealing', 'a pity', 'hate' or 'boring'. For example, the following statement was identified as an indication of Amanda's enjoyment of a

learning experience, because she mentioned liking this experience, “Soccer practice is a lot of fun” (interview #2). Additionally, fragments were coded for Amanda’s behavioral learning engagement when she made remarks about her invested effort and behavior that conformed with norms or disrupted norms. For instance, regarding certain class sessions in school, Amanda said, “When I am not interested, I would describe myself as someone who just sits there, but does not bother others” (interview #1). This quote indicates that when she is bored, she does still comply with the school’s rules, yet without paying attention and intending to learn something. In this part of the coding process, we found that fragments in which Amanda reported relatively high levels of learning engagement in school appeared almost exclusively in the interview that took place in fall, rather than in the interview that took place in spring.

Amanda’s learning preferences were identified based on statements she made regarding why she engaged with or disengaged from various learning experiences. In coding the data for Amanda’s learning preferences, the first author initially stayed very close to the data. To provide an illustration, we present an interview transcript below.

Interviewer: What are your favorite classes?

Amanda: I think my favorite classes are mathematics and religion. And perhaps religion seems a bit odd as I am not religious, but [...] for example, we now work on a chapter called Relations. It is about friendships, romantic relations, how to best maintain relations. [...] That really gets to me [...] It teaches you that there is a lot you should be appreciative of [...] It is also about racism, discrimination, about how to treat each other [...] and that you cannot just say things and tell yourself it was a joke, because it might really hurt someone else’s feelings. (Interview #1)

This part of the transcript was coded for the preferences, ‘learning about how social relations can be built and sustained’, ‘learning about racism and discrimination’ and ‘treating each other respectfully’. Other examples of coded preferences identified in other parts of the interview transcripts are ‘not struggling with the subject matter’, ‘seeing friends again’, and ‘not using unnecessarily difficult words’. Additionally, the coded fragments were coded too for the contexts that Amanda referred to, as especially lower level

preferences may be context-specific. Hence, context codes such as 'high school', 'prevocational track' and 'home' were allocated to the fragments.

After having coded the first interview for Amanda's preferences, we used the network function in our data analysis software program Atlas.ti to group these preferences when they appeared to be related. For instance, the preferences 'not having fights with friends', 'not being yelled at', 'not being bullied', 'being able to wear whatever you want', 'seeing friends', 'learning about how social relations can be built and sustained', 'learning about racism and discrimination' and 'treating each other respectfully' were assigned to the same cluster of preferences. The result of this grouping process can be found in Figure 4.1. As can be derived from this figure, four preference clusters were distinguished.

We used these clusters to interpret what really was at stake for Amanda in these interviews. In doing so, we labeled Amanda's four primary learning preferences that were related to her reported levels of learning engagement in school: 'participating competently' (cluster 1), 'having spare time left' (cluster 2), 'a warm and socially inclusive environment' (cluster 3), and 'building a stable life' (cluster 4). These primary preferences are represented in capital letters in Figure 4.1. Subsequently, we repeated the process of coding for Amanda's learning preferences for the transcript of the second interview. In doing so, we did not find new primary preferences. Additional lower level preferences, such as 'getting work experience' were also added to the already distinguished preference clusters, as is presented in Figure 4.2.

To examine Amanda's agency, the first author started coding the fragments for the affordances and constraints that Amanda perceived to encounter in each of the contexts she participated in. The quote below was, for instance, coded as 'constraints: intermediate track: only getting just sufficient grades'.

So I was in the intermediate track in Grade 7. I really struggled there, was promoted with a GPA of a 5.9 [out of 10]. Then, in Grade 8 of the intermediate track I was really struggling again, and so I was promoted, but to Grade 9 of the prevocational track, this time with a GPA of a 5.8. (Interview #1)

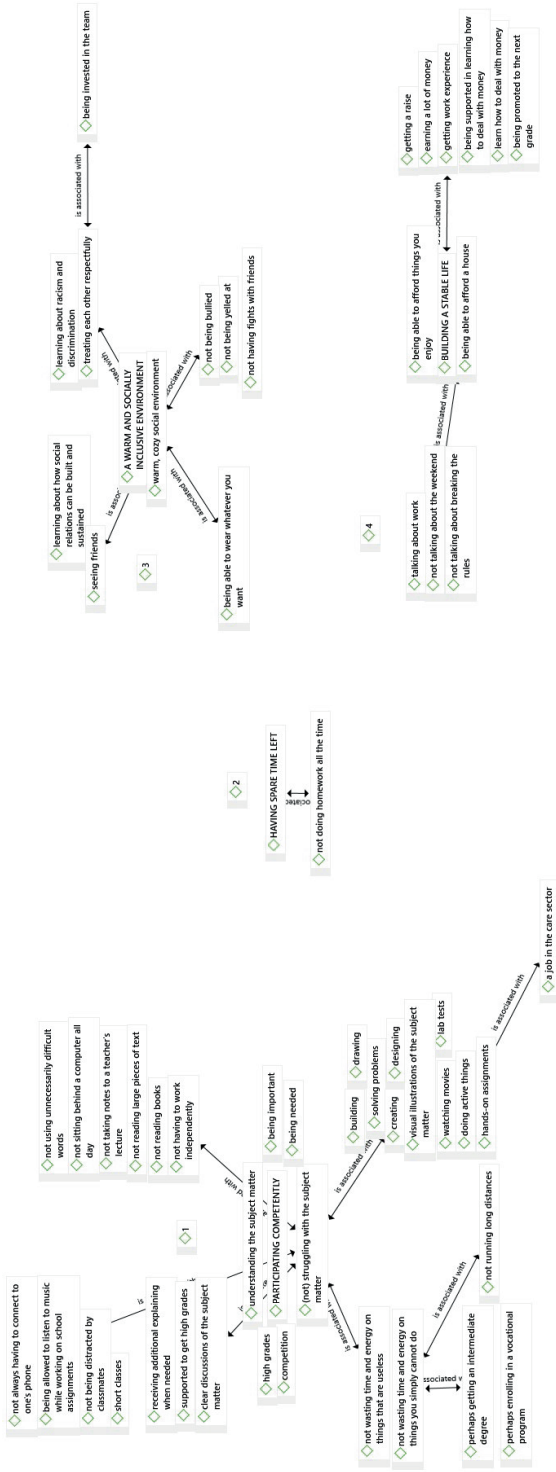


Figure 4.2. Amanda's preference clusters later on in the school/year

The identification of Amanda's perceived affordances and constraints per context enabled us to assess which contexts were considerably apt for Amanda to pursue her various learning preferences. We contend that this provided us insights into when, why and how Amanda exercised agency, thereby explaining Amanda's levels of learning engagement in each context and the shifts therein. Throughout the coding process, the other authors took the role of critical friends. In cases of doubt, we held research team meetings.

EXEMPLARY CASE STUDY

Amanda's Re-engagement in School

Amanda's first shift in school engagement had taken place at the beginning of the schoolyear. After summer break, Amanda had just moved from the intermediate track in the eighth grade to the most theoretical prevocational track in the ninth grade because of her just sufficient GPA. That her school engagement was higher than it was in the schoolyear before was, for example, indicated by the following quote, "Now I am in the prevocational track and I really feel this is the right place for me [...] I enjoy it more" (interview #1). Additionally, as an indication of her behavioral engagement, Amanda reported in the first interview that she now always finished her homework, whereas this was not the case in the previous schoolyear. The analysis based on our conceptual framework suggests that this can be explained by how the affordances and constraints in the prevocational track, in Amanda's view, catered more to some of her learning preferences than the affordances and constraints in the intermediate track, also causing a sense of relief.

Amanda's preferences at the beginning of the schoolyear. As noted above, we identified four primary learning preferences of Amanda (these are represented in Figure 4.1 and 4.2 by capital letters) at the beginning of the schoolyear: *building a stable life*, *participating competently*, *having spare time left* and *a warm and socially inclusive environment*. Regarding her primary preference for *building a stable life*, Amanda wanted to work towards a future in which she would have a job through which she could afford the rent and engage in things she would enjoy. That Amanda was concerned with building a stable life was also indicated by the fact that she was not as interested in talking with friends about, for example, their weekend plans, as she was in talking with her adult neighbors about their day-to-day working lives.

When it came to *participating competently*, this meant that performing well made Amanda feel important and needed, especially when her peers asked her to help them with something because of her high performance. In line with this, Amanda wanted to obtain high grades rather than just sufficient ones. To pursue this preference in school, Amanda felt she had to understand the subject matter. Amanda's lower level preference for being supported was needed to satisfy this primary preference for understanding the subject matter when she was struggling with it. For example, she received support in the form of additional explanations of the class content, and by not being distracted: short classes and listening to music helped Amanda to focus. Additionally, Amanda noticed that it was easier for her to understand the subject matter when she could engage in hands-on assignments and with visual rather than textual study materials. Yet, despite her preference for *participating competently*, Amanda preferred to not waste time and energy on things she felt she would never be successful in (such as getting an intermediate degree), or on things that seemed useless to her (e.g., learning the German language). Also, Amanda did not pursue this primary preference in the context of soccer. She only did this in contexts that afforded opportunities to pursue her preference of building a stable life, namely school and, later on, work. Playing soccer, in contrast, was something she merely did for fun.

Having spare time left was another primary preference of Amanda's. This preference was most clearly characterized by her lower level preference for not getting too much homework at school. In Amanda's case, this meant she preferred to have less than two hours of homework a day. This lower level preference was related to a lower-level preference of her primary preference for *participating competently* too, namely not being distracted: the more Amanda could focus, the sooner she could finish her school- and homework, and the more spare time she would have left.

Finally, Amanda was socially-oriented and had a preference for *a warm and socially inclusive environment* in all contexts. This primary preference is not further elaborated as it did not play into Amanda's shifts in school engagement (probably because Amanda experienced all the contexts she participated in to be warm and socially inclusive) and is therefore not germane to this paper. Also, in the remainder of the paper, the context of soccer will not be further addressed, as no indications were found that Amanda's learning engagements in that context impacted her school engagement.

Amanda's agency at the beginning of the schoolyear. Our analysis suggests Amanda deemed the prevocational track less apt to satisfy her preference for *building a stable life* than the intermediate track. Amanda reported that being in the prevocational track made her worry about the future: she felt her education level was now considered too low for most available jobs. Also, she feared that the jobs she could still get might not pay enough to live a comfortable life. Hence, the attainment of a prevocational degree would not contribute to Amanda understanding herself as someone who was building a stable life. For that she felt she needed an intermediate degree. This feeling appeared to be grounded in Dutch societal learning notions on (pre-)vocational education as discussed above. Also, this feeling was reinforced by her father, who shared Amanda's concerns about her future.

Simultaneously, the prevocational track afforded the satisfaction of Amanda's learning preference for *participating competently* more strongly than the intermediate track. Whereas Amanda deemed the schoolwork in the intermediate track unfeasible, this was not the case in the prevocational track. According to Amanda, less unnecessarily difficult words were used in the prevocational track. Moreover, Amanda reported that in the prevocational track, "if you are not able to do something, you can always ask for help" (interview #1). In the intermediate track, in contrast, "they expect you to be able to do a lot by yourself" (interview #1). As Amanda had a preference for participating competently and felt that in school this mainly meant getting high grades, there was a discrepancy between how she wanted to understand herself as a learner on the one hand, and the affordances to do so in the intermediate track on the other. Moreover, Amanda felt that there were no other affordances she could make use of to participate more competently in the intermediate track. Apart from working really hard for school (and still risking less competent participation), she did not perceive any other options to improve her grades: despite having completed the intermediate track themselves years ago, her parents could not help Amanda understand the subject matter of most of her classes. Also, they lacked financial resources to enroll Amanda in a tutoring program. Hence, discrepancies in affordances that might have been useful to succeed in the intermediate track and the ones that were available to Amanda at home further impeded constructive processes of learning and identity development for Amanda in this school context. The prevocational track, in contrast, did provide Amanda with affordances to pursue her preference for participating competently. Amanda considered the expectations her teachers in this track had of her as much more feasible than those in the

intermediate track. In other words, Amanda experienced more space to exercise her agency in the prevocational track to participate competently.

Another difference Amanda identified between the tracks regarded less homework in the prevocational one. Furthermore, as Amanda found her homework in that track relatively easy, she got more work done during her classes. Therefore, the prevocational track provided Amanda with more affordances to satisfy her preference for *having spare time left*. Whereas Amanda used to do homework almost all night every night and on the weekends, she needed to do less than two hours of homework per day in the prevocational track. What struck us in the analysis, is that Amanda wanted to position herself as someone who found it important to have *spare time left*, despite the facts that the prevocational track did not clearly afford the satisfaction of building a stable life and her parents were initially disappointed about her work attitude towards school; in their eyes, Amanda had not worked hard enough for school to get promoted to the next grade of the intermediate track. It seemed that Amanda could put this disappointment (of not building a stable life through school and of her parents) aside based on her lived experience of participating in the more academic track. Amanda knew how unrewarding it was to do that much homework, with what she perceived as limited payoff in the realm of participating competently. Therefore, she appeared to negotiate and claim space for her preference to have spare time left; she started using her desire to have spare time left as a signifier of her identity, as a core value.

To summarize, the more comprehensible home- and schoolwork and the smaller amount of homework in the prevocational track granted Amanda more space to exercise agency in pursuing her preferences for *participating competently* and *having spare time left*. Consequently, Amanda's school engagement was fostered, even though she feared that lesser prospects from a prevocational degree could conflict with her other primary preference for *building a stable life*.

Amanda's Disengagement from School

Later in the schoolyear, we found that Amanda was less engaged in school. She still wanted to finish her degree because of her preference for building a stable life (as not graduating from high school would further impede the satisfaction of this preference) and so she made sure she would pass her tests and get promoted. However, Amanda was no longer motivated to get high

grades and hence the pursuit of her primary preference for participating competently diminished in the context of school. Amanda reported no longer enjoying learning in school. She even mentioned hating school, despite the fact that the affordances that reignited her school engagement at the beginning of the schoolyear were still present. The analysis based on our conceptual framework suggests that this shift in school engagement was caused by Amanda's access to a new context, namely work.

Amanda's preferences later on in the schoolyear. In essence, Amanda's primary learning preferences did not change over the schoolyear (see Figure 4.2). However, her access to the context of work halfway through the schoolyear seemingly caused Amanda to foreground some additional lower level preferences she had in *building a stable life*, such as earning a lot of money and getting work experience.

Also, starting her job appeared to make Amanda aware of an additional lower level preference she had in the pursuit of her preference for *participating competently*. In the second interview, Amanda spontaneously brought up the comparison between school and work when she said:

I do not like the obligations [in school] and the having to listen for hours and hours. I know, I already work full days now [...] I work quite a lot and I just like working a lot better than school. I always say, 'I would rather be here [at work] all day, than being in school'.

When asked whether she did not have obligations at work too, she replied:

Yes, but not that many, because I serve people, so I also get to talk to people, I get to do things in the back of the restaurant, I get to clean, I get to pick up plates. There is a lot of variety [...] and I get to be "in myself" and at school that is not possible, because then you would miss out on too much.

Hence, Amanda experienced a discontinuity between school and work. Amanda had mentioned in the first interview that to *perform competently* in school, she needed to not be distracted and have short classes. Yet, starting a job appeared to have made Amanda perceive the monotonous rhythm and lack of variety in school (long hours of listening). It seemed to not so much have been the short classes that helped Amanda to not be distracted and to be

able to understand everything, but rather 'brief and alternating tasks', which she discovered as a new lower-level preference in the workplace context.

Amanda's agency later on in the schoolyear. Amanda's access to work offered her new affordances to pursue her learning preference for *building a stable life*. For example, in the second interview Amanda elaborated on how getting work experience and wage (raises) helped her to practice in personal bookkeeping, and to find a decent job that paid well in the future. Moreover, pursuing a stable life in school *and* in out-of-school contexts was supported by her parents and therefore afforded by the context of home: Amanda's parents thought it was crucial for Amanda to get a degree, but they were very concerned too with teaching Amanda things about living healthy, managing a household and how to find and keep a job. Additionally, due to some continuities, Amanda could draw on affordances from home at work that she could not draw on at school: Amanda's mother, and most of her other family members from her mother's side, used to work in the same restaurant as Amanda now did. Consequently, Amanda's family understood the lingo when she talked about work, and could vividly picture and recognize how Amanda experienced her work and why. Furthermore, if necessary, they could generate sound solutions for any problems Amanda would face at work, thus contributing to her preference for participating competently. Our analysis suggests that this fostered Amanda's high level of learning engagement at work. However, this does not yet explain why Amanda disengaged from school.

An explanation of why Amanda disengaged from school was found in the affordances Amanda's work offered her to satisfy her preference for brief and alternating tasks in the pursuit of her preference for *participating competently*. Compared to school, the tasks at work did not require extended focus on one thing, which she found difficult. Also, because the tasks at work were shorter and perhaps therefore more clear, Amanda's mind could wander off every once in a while ("being in myself", interview #2) while not being distracted to the extent that she could no longer participate competently. Amanda experienced her work to require less focus, or perhaps a different form of focus that came more easily to her. Additionally, Amanda's work, unlike school, exclusively provided opportunities for hands-on learning, which made it easier for her to participate competently too. Our framework suggests that this helps to explain why Amanda, to a certain extent, stopped exercising her agency to position herself as a competent (high achieving) learner in school, and shifted

her focus to define herself as such in the context of work instead. At work, there was no discrepancy that needed to be overcome in how she wanted and could best learn and how she was expected to learn.

Starting a job clearly did not contribute to the satisfaction of the preference for *having spare time left*, though. Amanda mentioned sometimes not appreciating it that her employer required her to work one long weekend day. However, Amanda was aware that, for example, working in a supermarket came with shorter shifts, but also with lower income. For her, this was the reason to keep working at the restaurant. This indicated that, to Amanda, having spare time left did not have priority over pursuing her preference for building a stable life. Such a prioritization of preferences may have further been afforded by her parents' ideas about the importance of working hard to build a stable life.

In sum, by starting a job, Amanda found that satisfying her preference for *participating competently* was more readily afforded by work than by the school context. Moreover, while still being aware of the importance in current society 'to obtain a degree', Amanda also considered 'gaining work experience' as crucial to *build a stable life*. Our framework suggests that these factors contributed to Amanda disengaging from school, where exercising her agency to pursue two of her primary preferences was less readily afforded.

DISCUSSION

This paper presented a conceptualization of when, why and how adolescents may or may not exercise their agency to negotiate engaging learning experiences in school. We believe that our conceptualization of learning preferences and agency contributes to understanding and studying processes of student (dis-)engagement in two ways. First, our conceptualization stresses, once again (Esteban-Guitart 2012; Vetter et al., 2011), the need to take adolescents' out-of-school contexts into account in understanding and studying students' school engagement. Second, from this holistic perspective, the idiosyncratic processes of learning and learner identity development of individual students can be studied in a way that allows for the recognition of the particular discontinuities in (expected) abilities that students may encounter (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016, p. 19). This framework not only draws attention to learning preferences that adolescents have already developed, are developing, or may develop in relation to the affordances and constraints of the different contexts where they participate. It also explicates how adolescents' school engagement

is informed by the extent to which school's affordances and constraints provide room for students' agency to satisfy their learning preferences. This differs from what some structural power analyses (such as Willis, 1977) have found, characterizing disruptive students as exercising agency, but complicit in contributing to their own victimization at the hands of structural class exclusion by rejecting school. Whereas such analyses emphasize the resistance to school culture as a whole, our conceptual framework emphasizes both what the affirmative affordances are which attract agentic engagement with learning preferences, and how they are present in the multiple contexts of learners' lives. This paper suggests that adolescents always see multiple contexts and therefore diverse ways in which they can pursue their learning preferences. Therefore, school has to compete with other contexts in order to have students engage in the learning experiences it provides. This implies that integrating a diverse set of topics, assignments and values into the formal curriculum may more readily afford adolescents opportunities to build meaningful connections between school and their out-of-school contexts. This might help students, especially those otherwise inclined to disengage, to identify as competent classroom participants. This requires that teachers, through the curriculum and pedagogy they utilize, get to know their students and their identities and preferences better, as is commonplace in approaches based on funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2012, Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, 2020).

Finally, future studies may benefit from collecting observation data to triangulate findings regarding adolescents' learning engagements and exercise of agency. Teacher and parent interviews may help to triangulate findings on adolescents' learning preferences too. Additionally, the conceptual framework that is presented in this paper leaves an important question about priorities and interactions between preferences unanswered. Why did Amanda prioritize building a stable life at times, whereas having spare time left or being a competent participant at others? How did she decide, implicitly or explicitly, how to exercise her agency when her enduring preferences seemed to be in conflict in a setting? Furthermore, our framework makes one wonder whether inviting students to reflect on their preferences and how these are shaped, afforded and constrained by the contexts they participate in, may make students aware of additional ways in which they can exercise their agency to pursue their learning preferences in school, thereby fostering their

school engagement. We invite fellow scholars to further investigate these issues. In doing so, we hope that the conceptual framework presented here can be further tested and expanded, so as to gain more insights into how adolescents' school engagement can be fostered.