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Academic performance and school engagement among secondary school students in accordance with place of birth, gender and age

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One of the most pressing concerns today in our society is how to ensure that students are able to adapt to the ever-changing context in which they live, and one of the ways of achieving this is to ensure good school adjustment. This study analyzes whether this adjustment is influenced by students (and their parents) place of birth, gender and age. The sample group comprised 828 secondary school students (Mean age=14.83; *SD*=1.81) from the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (BC) in Spain. The results indicate that students born in the BC to native parents have higher levels of affective engagement and achieve better academic results; however, contrary to expectation, not all natives born to immigrant parents were found to score higher for the different dimensions of school adjustment than those born outside the BC. Also, in general, girls were found to have a higher level of adjustment than boys, and students in the last two years of secondary school had lower levels of performance and engagement than both those in the first two years of secondary school and those in higher education. These results are then discussed in the final part of the paper.

Keywords: Academic performance, school engagement, place of birth, secondary.

Rendimiento académico e implicación escolar en relación al origen, al sexo y la edad del alumnado de Secundaria. Actualmente una de las mayores preocupaciones de la sociedad es conseguir que el alumnado alcance ciertas cotas de adaptación al contexto cambiante en el que se mueve y una de las estrategias principales es a través de un buen ajuste escolar. En este trabajo se analiza si dicho ajuste está condicionado por el lugar de nacimiento del alumnado (y sus progenitores), su sexo y su edad; los análisis se realizan con un total de 828 estudiantes (*M*=14.83 años; *DT*=1.81) de Secundaria de la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco (CAPV). Los resultados indican que los nacidos en la CAPV son quienes ofrecen una mayor implicación afectiva y mejores calificaciones pero, al contrario de lo esperado, no en todos los casos los inmigrantes de 2ª generación obtienen mejores resultados que los nacidos fuera de la CAPV en las dimensiones del ajuste escolar. Por otro lado, en general, son las chicas las que ofrecen un mejor ajuste y el alumnado de 3º y 4º de la ESO el que peor rendimiento e implicación. Los resultados se discuten.

Palabras clave: Rendimiento académico, implicación escolar, origen, secundaria.

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One of the greatest educational challenges today is to ensure that all students develop their capacities to the best of their ability, regardless of their or their family's place of birth, education or socioeconomic level. This human right to equality in learning is manifested through academic performance and school engagement, or in other words, school adjustment (Madariaga, Arribillaga, & Zulaika, 2014). School adjustment is defined as social adaptation to the demands and characteristics of the education system, and as such represents the degree to which students perceive themselves as satisfied with, integrated in and committed to their school (Rodríguez-Fernández, Ramos-Díaz, Madariaga, Arrivillaga, & Galende, 2016). Moreover, students manifest their adaptation to the school system through their academic performance, measured in terms of both self-perception and the grades they achieve in different subjects.

While there are many definitions of school engagement, this concept is often considered to reflect students' active commitment to their school and their motivation to learn (Rodríguez-Fernández, Ramos-Díaz, Ros, Fernández-Zabala, & Revuelta, 2016).

Although there is no single, universally-accepted conceptualization of the construct, a consensus does exist regarding its multidimensional structure, which includes cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors (Ros & Zuazagoitia, 2015; Veiga, Burden, Appleton, Taveira, & Galvao, 2014). Cognitive concepts allude to students' thoughts and beliefs about themselves, their school and the people who work and study there; the emotional dimension encompasses school-related feelings and students' sense of identification with their school; and finally, behavioral factors cover actions and participation in school life (Fernández-Zabala, Goñi, Camino, & Zulaika, 2016).

Adolescence is a period of growth and development that occurs between childhood and adulthood and which poses new challenges that affect school adjustment (Eryilmaz, 2012). During this period, young people must respond to the demands of the education system, which requires them to engage in performance and engagement tasks aimed at ensuring good academic achievement. They must also learn to cope with the transition to new educational stages and, often, a new school environment. Although it is also during this period that adolescents must rise to the challenge of acquiring a greater degree of independence, it is evident that the family continues to serve as a key source of social support and influence (Ramos-Díaz, Rodríguez-Fernández, Revuelta, & Axpe, 2016) and its participation in school life is beneficial, although often hampered nowadays by the difficulties encountered by parents when attempting to achieve a good work-life balance (Rodríguez, González, & López, 2016).

Recent PISA reports have revealed an alarming drop in performance during adolescence, coupled with a major reduction in engagement (Ros, Goikoetxea, Gairín, & Lekue, 2012). Recent research carried out in several different countries on the basis of the PISA reports has highlighted the importance of contextual factors such as family

origin (Azpiazu, Esnaola, & Ros, 2014). Although the influx has decreased over recent years due to the recession, over the past few decades Spain has been a major recipient of migrants from Latin America, Africa, Europe and Asia. One result of this is the growing number of immigrant students and students born to immigrant parents in Spanish schools, a circumstance which poses new challenges linked to the multicultural nature of today's classrooms.

Language problems, difficulties integrating diversity and conflicts between classmates are all events with which schools must currently cope on a daily basis (Cabrera & Montero-Sieburth, 2015). The schools of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (BC) in Spain currently have a high percentage of students who are either immigrants themselves or children of immigrant parents, and who often have poor academic performance and come from disadvantaged families (Ibabe, 2016). Academic performance and school engagement are vital to ensuring social inclusion; however, it should not be forgotten that most immigrants are forced to choose between either assimilation or marginalization, a situation that is a far cry from the ideal solution, which would be for them to be as involved in and committed to their heritage culture as to their national society (Berry & Sabatier, 2010).

A recent study has reported a growing feeling of rejection towards this type of student in Basque classrooms (Etxeberria, Murua, Arrieta, Garmendia, & Etxeberria, 2015). Many studies conducted today aim to explore the factors underlying the poorer performance levels of immigrant students and those from immigrant families.

The results indicate that first-generation immigrant students (i.e. those born abroad) achieve the lowest results, followed by native students with immigrant parents. This latter group performs better because its members no longer have to cope with the difficulties involved in adapting to a new context and language, and the improvement in the field of mathematics is particularly notable (Calero & Escardíbul, 2013).

This type of student can achieve similar results to natives who have at least one parent born in the autonomous community, providing they are from the same socioeconomic stratum. However, the majority of parents of the students in this group have unqualified jobs and their economic wellbeing tends to be lower than that of native families. Integration, therefore, relies not just on cultural adaptation, but on the improvement of their economic situation also.

Another factor to bear in mind is the environment in which immigrant students and students from immigrant families study, with those living and attending school in rural areas being much more engaged than those living in the suburbs of large cities. In European countries, specifically Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy, major performance differences have been found between students from immigrant and native families in the PISA mathematics tests, with said differences being attributed to the fact that immigrant families usually have fewer economic resources (Schnell &

Azzolini, 2015). Moreover, it has also been found that a high concentration (over 30%) of immigrant students in any one classroom has a negative effect on competence acquisition among native students (Calero & Escardíbul, 2013).

Finally, according to reading results based on PISA tests, natives with immigrant parents perform better tan first-generation immigrant students, although not as well as native students with at least one native parent (Azzolini, Schnell, & Palmer, 2012).

According to a report issued by the Department of Education (ISEI-IVEI, 2016) in relation to the 2015-2016 academic year, the mean percentage of foreign students is 8.5% in Spain in general, and 6.9% in the Basque Country. Nevertheless, the figures clearly show that most foreign students are concentrated in the public system, with immigrants accounting for 9.66% of students in the public system, as opposed to just 3.78% in private or semi-private (government-subsidized) schools. The lowest scores in all evaluation tests were obtained by first-generation immigrants, followed by native students with immigrant parents, and negative effects were observed among native students with at least one native parent when the percentage of immigrant students in the classroom was over 30% (Salinas & Santín, 2012).

In the Basque Country, first-generation immigrant adolescents score lower in the Spanish and mathematics PISA tests than both natives with immigrant parents and those with at least one native parent (Mera, Martínez-Taboada, & Elgorriaga, 2014).

Moreover, given that there are only a few schools in the Basque Country which teach all subjects in Spanish (A Model), the percentage of immigrants in those schools is high, suggesting that performance would be poorer in general, among both immigrant and native students. Differences have also been found between immigrant and native adolescent students in Catalonian schools (Vaquera & Kao, 2012). In certain autonomous communities with two co-official languages, such as Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country, there is also an added difficulty: Latin American students must learn a new language (Basque in the case of the BC), while non Latin American students must learn two languages (Spanish and Basque). Although a significant percentage of immigrant families choose to send their children to A model schools to avoid this difficulty, the majority are obliged to study in a language that is not their own, with seven out of every ten foreign primary and secondary students attending B model (half of the subjects taught in Spanish and half in Basque) or D model schools (all subjects taught in Basque).

According to the PISA report, the results for Catalonia and the Basque Country are below the mean (Pereira-Casal, Santos-Rego, Moledo, & Lorenzo, 2013) with Latin American students obtaining the poorest educational results (Santos, Godás, Ferraces, & Lorenzo, 2016; Vaquera & Kao, 2012).

As regards gender and age differences in relation to academic performance among adolescents, research to date indicates that girls and younger students in general tend to perform better. Specifically, gender differences in favor of girls were observed for Spanish (Costa & Tabernero, 2012), and general performance (Hernando, Oliva, & Pertegal, 2012), while no significant differences were found in mathematics, despite the fact that boys scored slightly higher.

Some authors have alluded to the gender stereotype threat which may cause girls to feel wary of mathematical disciplines, thus resulting in a poorer performance (Appel, Kronberger, & Aronson, 2011; González-Pienda et al., 2012). Performance also drops as students enter adolescence, a decrease which is particularly notable among boys (Hernando et al., 2012; Ibabe, 2016).

Existing studies suggest that school engagement is greater among girls than among boys, and decreases as students move up the school, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2016; Ros et al., 2012).

Also, in secondary school, students under the age of 14 score higher for school engagement than their older counterparts (Fernández-Zabala et al., 2016). Given the findings reported by previous research, the aim of this study was to analyze the relationship between place of birth, age, gender and school adjustment (academic performance and school engagement) in a sample of adolescent secondary school students in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (BC).

The hypothesis was that significant differences would be found in school adjustment in accordance with students' gender, age (educational phase) and place of birth (natives in BC, from native in BC but immigrant families, and 1st generation immigrants).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 828 students (Mean age=14.83; *SD*=1.81) from Compulsory Secondary Education (37.8% in the first two years and 38.4% in the second two years) and Higher Education-Spanish Baccalaureate (23.8%) living in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (BC). Of the total sample group, 423 (51.1%) were boys and 397 (47.9%) girls, and 411 (55.8%) attended public schools and 326 (44.2%) attended semi-private ones (i.e. private schools which receive some state funding).

As regards place of birth, 84.6% were native students from native families, 11.5% had been born in another Autonomous Community in Spain or another country (1st generation immigrants) and 3.9% had been born in the Basque Country but to immigrant parents.

Measurement instruments

School engagement was measured using an adaptation of the School Engagement Measure (SEM) questionnaire by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel and Paris (2005), which measures all three dimensions of the construct: affective, cognitive and behavioral engagement. Academic performance was measured through the grades obtained by each student during the previous term in mathematics and Spanish (Gordon & Cui, 2012; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). It was also measured through students' subjective perceptions of their own academic performance, using the "good performance" scale of the EBAE-10 questionnaire (Moral, Sánchez, & Villarreal, 2010).

Procedure

This study forms part of a broader research project in which participants were selected from the entire compulsory secondary school population of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (BC) by means of a random cluster sampling procedure, respecting the proportion of public and semi-private schools existing in each province. The selected schools were contacted and sent information about the research project. Those that agreed to take part in the study then requested and obtained the necessary informed consents from the parents and legal guardians of participating students. The dates and times on which the researchers would administer the questionnaires were then agreed upon with the management teams at the different schools. The data were gathered either in an ordinary classroom (paper questionnaires) or the IT room (on-line version of the questionnaire), with sessions lasting approximately 50 minutes.

Data analysis

The statistical analyses carried out were comparative in nature, and were based on the mean scores for each category. Two types of means comparisons were carried out for the dependent variables: in accordance with each student characteristic (independent variables) and in accordance with each pair of independent variables, in order to analyze the interaction effect. In all cases, the software used was version 24 of the SPSS statistical package for Windows.

The first analysis group included the Student's t statistic for variables with two response options and the Anova F statistic for variables with three or more categories. In all cases, the significance of the differences observed is indicated (p). In the second group, one-way Anovas were conducted to analyze the principal effects on the variability of the dependent factors, as well as the interaction effects. This statistic is accompanied by the effect size of the model (or the combined effect of all factors), each independent variable separately and their interaction.

RESULTS

In addition to the results of the general variables (grades, perceived performance and overall school engagement), the tables also present the specific dimensions in which significant differences between means were observed, starting with place of birth as the independent variable (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in school adjustment in accordance with students' and their parents' place of birth

Variable	Place birth of	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Affective engagement	Natives (BC)	656	3.60	.54	5.584	.004
	Natives with immigrant parents	29	3.39	.64		
	Those born outside the BC	88	3.43	.63		
Overall engagement	Natives (BC)	656	3.22	.45	1.263	.283
	Natives with immigrant parents	29	3.09	.53		
	Those born outside the BC	88	3.23	.48		
Grades in mathematics	Natives (BC)	656	3.48	1.18	11.401	.000
	Natives with immigrant parents	29	2.79	1.24		
	Those born outside the BC	88	2.95	1.25		
Grades in Spanish	Natives (BC)	656	3.65	1.04	10.260	.000
	Natives with immigrant parents	29	3.41	1.15		
	Those born outside the BC	88	3.11	1.17		
Perceived performance	Natives (BC)	656	4.07	.96	.240	.787
	Natives with immigrant parents	29	4.05	1.14		
	Those born outside the BC	88	4.00	1.05		

The differences observed were in mathematics and Spanish grades, as well as in the affective dimension. In all variables and their corresponding dimensions, the highest scores were obtained by natives with at least one native parent, with the exception of two cases: one of the perceived performance items ("*I believe I am a good student*"), in which natives with immigrant parents scored highest; and overall school engagement, in which those born outside the BC scored just as high as natives with at least one native parent.

However, in neither of these two cases were the differences observed significant. In variables in which significant differences were observed, the post-hoc analyses revealed that:

-Native students with at least one native parent achieved better grades in mathematics than both students born outside the BC and natives born to immigrant parents.

-Native students with at least one native parent achieved better grades in Spanish and scored higher for affective engagement than those born outside the BC (the differences observed in relation to native students with immigrant parents were not significant here).

Tables 2 and 3 present the differences observed in accordance with students' sociopersonal variables.

Table 2. Differences in school adjustment in accordance with gender

Variable	Gender	*N*	Mean	Standard deviation	*t*	*p*
Affective engagement	Boys	423	3.52	.586	2.854	.004
	Girls	394	3.63	.519		
Overall school engagement	Boys	422	3.20	.471	1.153	.249
	Girls	394	3.24	.431		
Grades in mathematics	Boys	402	3.26	1.251	2.903	.004
	Girls	381	3.51	1.139		
Grades in Spanish	Boys	401	3.36	1.103	5.483	.000
	Girls	382	3.77	1.005		
Perceived performance	Boys	423	3.92	1,038	4.763	.000
	Girls	391	4.24	.879		

Girls were found to have better school adjustment than boys in all variables, as well as in all their dimensions, with the exception of the cognitive dimension of school engagement (t=.818; p>.05). However, with the exception of the affective dimension, the gender differences observed between students in relation to school engagement (overall score) were not significant. As regards academic performance, girls scored higher than boys for both perceived and objective performance (grades). In relation to age (educational stage), the differences are even clearer (Table 3).

Table 3. School adjustment in accordance with educational stage

Variable	Educational stage	*N*	Mean	Standard deviation	*F*	*p*
Behavioral engagement	First 2 years of secondary school	311	3.50	.460	36.236	.000
	Second 2 years of secondary school	317	3.27	.452		
	Higher education	197	3.17	.486		
Affective engagement	First 2 years of secondary school	311	3.71	.569	22.227	.000
	Second 2 years of secondary school	317	3.42	.563		
	Higher education	197	3.60	.468		
Cognitive engagement	First 2 years of secondary school	311	2.99	.770	31.830	.000
	Second 2 years of secondary school	318	2.57	.656		
	Higher education	197	2.64	.632		
Overall school engagement	First 2 years of secondary school	311	3.40	.468	47.229	.000
	Second 2 years of secondary school	316	3.08	.415		
	Higher education	197	3.14	.385		
Grades in mathematics	First 2 years of secondary school	292	3.67	1.168	13.479	.000
	Second 2 years of secondary school	310	3.22	1.207		
	Higher education	187	3.21	1.184		
Grades in Spanish	First 2 years of secondary school	290	3.72	1.033	8.367	.000
	Second 2 years of secondary school	310	3.37	1.104		
	Higher education	189	3.61	1.064		
Perceived performance	First 2 years of secondary school	307	4.42	.833	34.954	.000
	Second 2 years of secondary school	318	3.84	.978		
	Higher education	196	3.88	1.032		

All differences observed in school adjustment in accordance with educational phase were significant, with those in the first two years of secondary school scoring higher in all cases. The only element that varies is the tendency, 1) with behavioral engagement scores and mathematics grades dropping as students move up the school

system; 2) and students in the first two years of secondary education scoring highest for all other variables (affective and cognitive dimensions, Spanish grades and perceived performance), with those in the second two years scoring lowest and those in higher education (Spanish baccalaureate) scoring somewhere in between.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze hypothetical differences in school adjustment among students in the BC, in relation to both their performance and school engagement, in accordance with three variables: place of birth (both theirs and their parents'), gender and age (educational phase). One of the most striking findings were the differences observed in school adjustment in accordance with place of birth. Native Basque students from native families achieve better Spanish grades than students in the other two groups, and native students born to immigrant parents achieve better grades in this subject than first-generation immigrants. This finding is consistent with those reported by previous studies (Azzolini et al., 2012; Mera et al., 2014; Salinas & Santín, 2012). In relation to mathematics grades and affective engagement, native students with immigrant parents score significantly lower than first-generation immigrants, a finding which has not been reported in other studies. It seems logical that someone who has recently arrived from another country and must therefore learn a new language will score lower in Spanish, but the reasons why the same results were not found in the other two dimensions (mathematics and affective engagement) are not so clear. Could it be that the family and, in general, the environment in which recently-arrived students live constitute a strong support, thereby preventing them from vulnerability? Or is it that the educational policies in participating schools include effective orientation plans and resources earmarked for providing extra support to these students? Whatever the case, it should be remembered that the sample group comprising natives born to immigrant parents was smaller than the other two, meaning that the results can only be generalized to a relative extent. It would therefore be interesting to replicate the results with a larger number of participants.

What is evident is that native students from native families scored highest in all aspects measured, consistently with that reported by previous studies and despite the fact that our native sample was made up of students born specifically in the BC, not in Spain in general. It remains to be seen whether the fact of being born outside the autonomous community, which has its own specific language, is in itself a key reason for explaining the poorer level of adjustment found among non-natives, or whether this result has more to do with other socioeconomic factors (Obabe, 2016; Schnell & Azzolini, 2015).

School adjustment among girls is clearly better than among boys, a finding which is consistent with the results of previous research, i.e. that girls perform better in both language-based tasks and in general terms (Costa & Tabernero, 2012; Hernando et al., 2012). The most controversial finding is that the girls in our study also scored higher in mathematics, an area traditionally linked to male capacities. In some previous studies boys were found to score higher than girls in mathematics, while in all other areas girls scored higher than boys, a result which may be influenced by gender stereotypes which act as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy for girls (Appel et al., 2011; González-Pienda et al., 2012).

The differences in school engagement in favor of girls were replicated in this study. This finding is consistent with those reported by prior research (Rodríguez-Fernández, Ramos-Díaz, Ros et al., 2016; Ros et al., 2012), although in our case, the differences were only significant in the affective dimension, as found also in other studies which failed to find statistically significant differences in the cognitive dimension of engagement (Fernández-Zabala et al., 2016). Here again, gender-specific patterns of socialization and expectations may be influencing the results.

Finally, the differences observed here in school adjustment in accordance with age confirm that students in the first two years of secondary school score highest, with levels gradually dropping as students move up the education system (Fernández-Zabala et al., 2016; Hernando et al., 2012; Ibabe, 2016; Ros et al., 2012). However, in some dimensions, scores recover somewhat during higher education (Spanish baccalaureate), a finding which may be explained by the non-compulsory nature of this educational phase, students' ability to choose their field of study and their greater degree of general maturity. In other words, students whose meta motivation is not linked to the compulsory nature of their schooling obtain better results in relation to performance and school engagement.

In light of the above, further research is required into the factors that influence school adjustment among students, particularly in relation to immigration, which is an issue that is of great concern to politicians, school managers, educators and society in general.

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