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Social–ethnic school composition and disengagement: An inquiry into the perceived control explanation



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ABSTRACT

In many Western countries, increasing levels of immigration have raised concerns over the outcomes of social–ethnic segregation in schools. This study relates social–ethnic school composition to students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive disengagement. While previous research mostly remains atheoretical, this current study investigates the applicability of the perceived control explanation, with the expectation that attending low socioeconomic status (SES) schools and schools with a higher proportion of ethnic minority pupils lowers students' perceived control and hence produces disengagement. Multilevel analyses on data from the Flemish Educational Assessment, consisting of 11,759 students in 83 Flemish secondary schools, show that students in lower SES schools are more likely to disengage behaviorally and emotionally from school. This association is, as expected, mediated by feelings of perceived control. Higher ethnic minority concentration, however, yields lower disengagement, especially for ethnic minority students. The implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, many Western countries have been confronted by increasing levels of immigration. As a result, policymakers and researchers have worried about the consequences of social and ethnic segregation or desegregation in schools (for Belgium: Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2012; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009; for England: Johnston, Wilson, & Burgess, 2004; for France: Felouzis, 2003; for Germany: Kristen, 2005; for the Netherlands: Karsten et al., 2006; for Sweden: Szulkin & Jonsson, 2007; for the US: Bankston & Caldas, 1996). In most of these Western countries, policymakers strive for a dispersal of socially and ethnically diverse students across all schools. This choice is supported by studies that point

to the negative consequences of segregation. Most relevant studies investigate cognitive outcomes, showing that higher proportions of immigrant and working-class pupils are associated with worse performance (Agirdag, Nouwen, Mahieu, Van Avermaet, & Van Houtte, 2012; Agirdag, Van Houtte, et al., 2012; Bankston & Caldas, 1996). Other studies investigate non-cognitive outcomes, showing that a higher proportion of immigrant pupils is associated with increased levels of violence (Eitle & Eitle, 2003; Stretesky & Hogan, 2005) and higher rates of dropout (Rumberger, 1995). Moreover, desegregation leads to positive consequences, including more cross-ethnic friendships, both for ethnic minority and majority students (Goldsmith, 2004; Quillian & Campbell, 2003), more ethnically diverse friendship networks (Quillian & Redd, 2009), and higher aspirations (Goldsmith, 2004).

Engagement is also among the outcomes of social–ethnic composition that are studied (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). Engagement is a multifaceted concept, encompassing behavioral,

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emotional, and cognitive components (Fredricks et al., 2004). Disengaged students face adverse consequences, such as poor grades (Covington, 2000), higher chances of dropping out (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008), and criminal behavior (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003), which stresses the need to investigate the determinants of disengagement. While studies into the effects of social–ethnic composition on disengagement focus on the behavioral and emotional dimensions (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Johnson et al., 2001), they neglect to investigate cognitive disengagement. For instance, no study investigates the relationship between social–ethnic composition and motivation. Nevertheless, if social–ethnic composition is related to the other two disengagement dimensions (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011; Johnson et al., 2001), it is plausible that it also affects motivation. This cognitive component of disengagement is a vital one to examine, as myriad studies point to the important beneficial outcomes of motivation (Fredricks et al., 2004). For instance, motivation is pivotal in initiating self-regulated learning, which is crucial for educational growth (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2013). Moreover, the studies that investigate social–ethnic composition effects on behavioral and emotional disengagement paint a mixed picture. These varied findings most probably originate from the fact that previous studies utilize myriad measurements to gauge disengagement components. Furthermore, the measurements are inadequate to investigate the three dimensions of disengagement. In order to reach firm conclusions in the segregation/desegregation debate, it is important to obtain a clear grasp of social–ethnic composition effects on disengagement. This current study investigates all three disengagement dimensions using measurements that capture as closely as possible the definitions of disengagement formulated by Fredricks et al. (2004), specifically the school misconduct scale (Stewart, 2003) for behavioral disengagement, the school belonging scale (Goodenow, 1993b) for emotional disengagement, and the task orientation scale for cognitive disengagement (Maehr & Midgley, 1996).

Moreover, most previous composition studies are atheoretical (Agirdag, Nouwen, et al., 2012; Agirdag, Van Houtte, et al., 2012). They usually link composition to student outcomes, without explaining the patterns that they find. Thus, even after decades of research, composition effects are barely understood, which renders them hard to counteract. This critique also applies to engagement studies. For instance, relevant literature neglects the perceived control explanation, which states that students are prone to disengaging when feeling powerless to control educational matters and life in general (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990; You, Hong, & Ho, 2011). It is noteworthy that students' academic achievement and teachers' expectations tend to be lower in schools where ethnic minority students are overrepresented compared with other schools (Bankston & Caldas, 1996; Brookover et al., 1978; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). As a result, students in those schools expect less from their academic career (Caldas & Bankston, 1998; Miller, 1980). Moreover, low SES schools

are also disadvantaged, being poorly esteemed, equipped with fewer resources, and characterized by lower academic norms and lower teacher expectations (Brookover et al., 1978; Van Houtte, 2003; Willms, 1992). Research shows that students in these schools have lower future expectations and eventually may conclude that putting effort into educational tasks is pointless (Miller, 1980; Stretesky & Hogan, 2005). Accordingly, the expectation in this study is that the impact of social–ethnic school composition on disengagement operates mainly through students' perceived control feelings. The aim of this study is to better understand the mechanisms underlying the impact of social–ethnic composition by investigating the mediating effects of perceived control feelings.

The research for the current study is guided by the following activities: First, investigating whether social–ethnic school composition relates to perceived control. Second, investigating whether social–ethnic school composition affects behavioral, emotional, and cognitive disengagement, and investigating whether perceived control mediates an eventual relationship between social–ethnic school composition and disengagement. It should be noted that previous studies find ethnic composition effects on various non-cognitive outcomes to differ between ethnic majority and minority students (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011; Demanet, Agirdag, & Van Houtte, 2012; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012). Consequently, the third specific aim of the current study is to investigate whether social–ethnic composition effects on disengagement vary between ethnic majority and minority students.

2. Background

2.1. *The topic of student engagement*

A consistent conceptualization of 'engagement' remains lacking in scientific research (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Johnson et al., 2001). For instance, the term has been used with regard to the time students spend on their homework or studying for tests (Manlove, 1998), self-regulated learning and conforming behavior (Ryan & Patrick, 2001), or participation and identification with school (Finn, 1989). In an influential review, Libbey (2004) notes that engagement has been confounded with other terms, such as school bonding, attachment, involvement, school climate, and teacher support. This conceptual confusion impedes indisputable conclusions regarding (dis)engagement, as the use of other constructs is likely to yield differing conclusions.

Fredricks et al. (2004) argue that engagement should be seen as a meta-construct. First, it includes a behavioral component, dealing with the behaviors that students display on school premises. The second subdimension is the emotional component, which involves whether students feel contented at school. The third component is cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), which concerns students' motivation to invest time and effort in mastering the subject matter. While these three subdimensions have been studied from various angles, empirical studies attest to their interdependence. For instance, research demonstrates that misbehavior, a sense of disconnection

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