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Constructing School Belonging(s) in Disadvantaged Urban Spaces: Adolescents' Experiences and Narratives in Mexico City.

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Abstract:	School belonging is a topic of growing interest given its connection with school dropout, academic achievement, students' behaviour, and adolescent wellbeing. Until recently, most of this literature came from Anglo-Saxon contexts, mainstream schools, and quantitative analysis. As a result, there is still a research gap on this issue in different cultural contexts, social classes, and minority groups. This article makes a contribution exploring school belonging among adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds, in a developing country (Mexico), and using a qualitative methodology that prioritize meanings and experiences of individuals. Focusing on three dimensions (stigmatization processes, school climate, and social relations with teacher and peers) we capture how the engagement of adolescents with their schooling process is shaped by institutional as well as socio-cultural aspects. The study provides significant implications for a continuous professional development of high-schools in disadvantaged contexts regarding student involvement, teacher support, and social recognition.

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Constructing School Belonging(s) in Disadvantaged Urban Spaces: Adolescents' Experiences and Narratives in Mexico City

1. Introduction

In a context of increasing fragmentation, the "inclusion – exclusion" (in/out) binary distinction is not really helpful to explain social inequality and the living conditions of disadvantaged youth. During the last decades, while in many Latin American countries, previously excluded sectors increased their access to social rights and services, social inequality persisted, now mainly associated with the fragmentation of the quality and experience of those rights. "Unfavorable inclusion" (Sen, 2000) or "exclusionary integration" (*integración excluyente*) (Bayón, 2015) were some of the concepts developed to understand this phenomenon. Education is a paradigmatic case of this fragmentation: greater access to higher levels of schooling amongst disadvantaged youth went hand in hand with a growing segmentation and stratification of the educational system -in Latin America and elsewhere. As Cuervo and Wyn (2017) have observed, increasingly, youth's researchers are seeking to analyze the daily life of young people in contexts of social inclusion and exclusion. In this article, we attempt to contribute to such effort by exploring the sense and experience of school belonging among poor adolescents in Mexico.

In this country, more than half (60.3%) of the adolescents aged 12 to 17 live in poverty and another 23.1% are vulnerable due to social deprivations (CONEVAL, 2014). A significant proportion of them spend more time at school and reach higher degrees than adolescents in the past did, but, at the same time, most of the students dropping out from school still come from low-income sectors (INEE, 2016). The literature on educational development of working-class students in Mexico have focused either on the meanings of schooling or school dropout causes, highlighting material deprivation, the need to work, or lack of family support, among others (Guerra, 2009; Weiss, 2012; Gibbs and Heaton, 2014; Blanco, Solís and Roble, 2014; Díaz López and Osuna Lever, 2017). Less attention has received the experience of schooling, and particularly the experiences of school belonging. A large international literature, however, suggests that the sense of school belonging and the engagement students develop with the school, is a critical aspect in order to understand issues like school dropout, educational attainment, and adolescent wellbeing (O'Brien and Bowles, 2103; OECD, 2017).

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In general terms, there is some consensus about the positive effects of school belonging in all these aspects.

Departing from a sociological perspective, the purpose of this article is twofold. On one hand, to achieve a better understanding about the school experience of disadvantaged students in the Latin American context, where the study of school belonging is still underdeveloped. This could provide key insights to address critical issues in the region like school dropout, school achievement and the quality of education among disadvantaged sectors.

On the other hand, we attempt to enrich the international debate on school belonging, recovering and developing inputs from a sociological perspective on belonging. Most of the studies on school belonging have privileged a psychological approach and quantitative methods, assuming a univocal, positive and fix definition of belonging that prioritizes its emotional or affective character. Without ignoring the contributions of these studies, we explore belonging as a socially constructed, fluid, and multidimensional condition, where participation, conflict, and power relations are also involved. Thus, we suggest adolescents in different social and cultural contexts can experience school belonging in different and contradictory ways, there could be favourable and unfavourable forms of inclusion, as well as different qualities of membership. The aim is to explore and discuss tensions, contradictions and nuances, rather than prescribing 'good' practices to foster school belonging by itself.

Research on school belonging is still dominated by studies developed in Anglo speaking countries and most of them use surveys and quantitative methodologies. A sociological perspective could enrich our knowledge on the topic given its traditional disciplinary interest and knowledge in social and cultural differences, as well as in the power relations and inequalities between social groups. Some recent studies have focused on minority groups either ethnically or socially in developed countries (Zena et al., 2012; Roundfield et al., 2016), but our understanding of school belonging amongst youth in poverty is still limited and needs further research (Slaten et al., 2016), particularly in Latin America where studies in this field are still scarce. Moreover, qualitative and ethnographic approaches are more sensitive to capture the nuances of belonging and its social and cultural imprints.

To accomplish our twofold purpose, the article is organized in four main sections. The first, discusses the concept of school belonging from a sociological perspective. The second section describes the methodology and characterizes the public schools where the study was

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conducted in Mexico City. The third presents our empirical analysis of school belonging in disadvantaged contexts, focusing in three main issues: the public images and stigmatization of schools, the general school climate and student's involvement at the classroom level, and students' social relationships with teachers and peers. The last section, the conclusion, summarizes the main findings and discusses some of their implications.

2. School Belonging: a critical reflection from a sociological perspective

In general terms, there is a common agreement that school belonging refers to an affective and emotional dimension of students' experience at school. For Neel and Fuligni (2013) school belonging refers to students' social and emotional connection with both the staff and their academic institution. According to O'Brien and Bowles (2013) belonging requires students feeling affective school experiences and the assumption is that students flourish when adults care about them. The sense of belonging is conceptualized by different authors as affect (Ma, 2003; O'Brien and Bowles, 2013), or a psychological state (Chiu et al., 2016) expressing the level of students' identification with the school.

This characterization is also present in some studies using similar terms such as connectedness, bonding, attachment, or engagement. In many cases, school belonging is defined as the affective or emotional dimension of these concepts. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) there are three key dimensions of school engagement: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement which are also named as the sense of belonging among students. Finn (1989) associates identification with the feeling of belonging; and, more recently, Tarabini, Curran, Montes and Parcerisa (2018) refer to emotional engagement as the sense of belonging and the affective bonds that students forge with their school, teachers and peers.

From a sociological perspective, we understand belonging as a social construction, emphasizing its relational, multidimensional and dynamic character. This does not mean to neglect or underestimate the affective dimension; the emotional content of individuals' relations with their communities, objects or places of belonging is particularly significant for a sociological understanding of the concept (Bell, 1999). But belonging also implies political, performative, and interactional dimensions. A sense of belonging means that persons collectively share some social norms, values or customs that allow them to develop a sense of easy or 'feeling at home' in some specific social spaces, but it also requires the right to

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participate in the construction or development of those social spaces. As May (2011: 369) has observed, "belonging is therefore more than just an individual feeling – it is also a hotly contested political issue" associated to who are able to participate and who are marginalized, excluded or subordinated in this process. Yuval Davis (2006) refers to this aspect as the "politics of belonging". There are different forms or contents of belongings constructed for different collectivities which are the result of specific power relationships. This political dimension is particularly significant for the study of belonging in institutional settings, like schools, characterized by the interaction of different actors and power relations.

The construction of belonging also have a performative dimension. One does not simply or ontologically 'belong' to the world or to any group within it; belonging is an achievement (Bell, 1999). This is particularly relevant for adolescents, for whom being accepted, included and valued by others becomes a critical issue (and aspiration) in a process of transition and identity construction. The performative aspect of belonging allows considering young people's struggles to belong in a range of different settings (like school). Both deliberate and casual performances could be involved in their efforts to achieve belonging. The analysis of school belonging, therefore, should take into account the active practices and connections young people made every day to stay well and feel included, as well as their different tactics to cope with or resist misrecognition (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014).

Thus, belonging is intrinsically relational and constructed in interaction with others; it is bound up with being able to act in a socially significant manner that is recognized by others. Therefore, it is not just about constructions of individual and collective identities and attachments but also, as Yuval Davis (2006) observes, about the ways these are valued and judged. Peer recognition is important to develop a sense of belonging, but it is also the symbolic weight of more abstract social perceptions, judgments and valuations of those spaces or groups of belonging. Social recognition or misrecognition of some places and groups permeates our feelings and affective relation with spaces of belonging. Social classifications of schools, their students, and their locations may have different effects on school belonging, particularly when they are stigmatized and devaluated. In such cases, as Hollongworth and Archer (2010) point out, students have to negotiate the elision of their own identities, feelings and attachments with the reputation and dominant representations of their schools.

Belonging is associated with the social character of human beings and, in this sense, it is assumed as a positive condition for wellbeing. This positive conceptualization is particularly

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evident in the literature on school belonging. Most studies consider that developing a sense and experience of school belonging among students has a significant array of beneficial consequences (Finn 1989; Johnson, 2009; O'Brien and Bowles, 2013; Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock, 2015). Chiu and colleagues (2016: 175), for instance, state the "students' sense of belonging at school is central to both their psychosocial well-being and their academic success". Consistent with this assumption, authors identify and suggest a set of good practices that could warranty and/or promote a sense of belonging of students at school, such as having friends in class, interacting with peers, engaging in academic work, obtaining good grades, experiencing fair and effective discipline, having caring and supportive teachers, provision of and participation in extracurricular activities, among others (Ma, 2003; Libbey, 2004; Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). All these good practices could strengthen an affective bond with the school, which is clearly something good and positive by itself.

From a sociological perspective, however, it is possible to introduce some nuances to this virtuous characterization. Belonging is a concept that tends to be laden with positive connotations. However, as May (2011) asserts, not belonging, is not inherently harmful. A feeling of not belonging need not always be experienced negatively. For many of us, there exists a tension between wanting to be similar to and belong to others, whilst wanting to be unique and different from others, which is common among adolescents. A sense of not belonging sometimes can open up new possibilities of, for example, political action, if we become conscious of the fact that the routine paths we have so far traversed are not the only possible ones (May, 2011). In this sense, it is worth exploring how a sense of belonging can be achieved and by whom.

The political dimension of belonging also warns us against assuming it as an essentially positive condition. Belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity; a particular state of belonging, is always a naturalized construction resulting from a specific form of power relations but subject to change (Yuval Davis, 2006). In other words, belonging could be, for specific -subordinated- groups or individuals, the result of resignation or domination and / or a motivation for participation and change. Sometimes it becomes a contradictory and conflictive condition between the aspiration of being accepted and included, and the personal disagreement with the social and cultural practices, norms and values of belonging in these groups or spaces.

Shared cultures and values, are the result of struggles over representation and membership reflecting the structure of power relations (May, 2011). As a result of these struggles and power relations it is possible to identify hierarchies of belonging (May 2011), processes of elective belonging (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst, 2005) and selective belonging (Watt, 2009) driven by the desires of exclusion or avoidance of "others", or favorable and unfavorable ways of belonging. When these aspects are applied to different youth settings, it makes sense to think on belonging as a "relational metaphor" that brings into focus the nature and quality of connections between young people and their worlds (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014).

3. Methodology

Qualitative data presented in this article come from a research study, currently in progress, on school belonging among disadvantaged upper secondary students. Research is being conducted in three cities, in six different schools (two schools in each location). The locations of the study are: Tijuana, located in the north of the country, in the border with the United States, and affected by violence and migration issues; Mexico City and its working-class peripheries in the centre of the country; and Tuxtla, a southern city in Chiapas, one of the poorest states in Mexico. This article focuses on data collected in Mexico City.

Both are public schools, with a similar number of students (about 600 pupils in both morning and evening shifts), and cater to students from a similar working-class background. However, they are located in different districts, belong to different educational authorities, and provide a different diploma. The first school, named *Escuela Sur*, provides technical education, offering vocational training in three different areas of health services and belongs to a decentralized public body called CONALEP. In these schools, students take 35 percent of general subjects and 65 percent of vocational subjects. It is located in a well-known neighbourhood in the south of the city. In this school, we conducted 11 semi-structured individual interviews, and one focus group with 6 students (in total, 17 adolescents were involved, 9 girls and 8 boys), and 5 interviews with teachers from different courses.

In the second school, named *Escuela Oriente*, students follow a general or academic education, it is under the control of the State of Mexico's educational authority, and is located in Netzahualcoyotl, a municipality in the Eastern (and most deprived) periphery of the metropolitan area of Mexico City. In this school, we interviewed 13 students and conducted

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1 focus group (18 students in total, 8 girls and 10 boys); and interviewed 5 teachers from different classes.

This article focuses on students' narratives and experiences, and therefore the analysis is primarily based on their interviews and focus groups; teachers' interviews were also analysed but here they are used as a secondary source of information about adolescents' experiences at school. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in a three-month period -from May to July 2017. Students were in the second term of their first academic year, and their ages range from 15 to 19 years old. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups focused on students' integration and school experiences, exploring topics such as the school selection process, school and neighbourhood images, transition from lower to upper secondary education, school climate, and relationships with teachers and peers, among other topics.

All interviews and focus groups were personally conducted by the authors after a presentation of the research project to a group of students and teachers. Participants voluntarily agreed to be interviewed and were previously unknown to the researchers. Gatekeepers at both schools allowed access: a tutor in the *Escuela Sur* and the headteacher at the *Escuela Oriente*. They hand out consent forms to be signed off by parents, teachers and students prior taking part in this research. The interviews had an average extension of 45 minutes and the focus groups almost two hours. They were recorded, fully transcribed, and a codification using thematic analysis was undertaken (the codification and analysis were processed using NVivo 11). Notes of informal talks and observations as well as photographs of daily activities at school and the local neighbourhoods, complemented our corpus of empirical materials. To assure the anonymity of all participants, pseudonyms have been applied to schools, students, and teachers.

4. Constructing school belonging in disadvantaged contexts.

4.1 Coping with school stigmatization

Representations of most disadvantaged sectors tend to be spatialized. Negative valuations are often translated into a pathologisation of their spaces (neighbourhoods, schools, streets, etc.) resulting in place images that associate types of places and types of people (Reay, 2007; Silbey, 1995; Watt, 2006). One of these stigmatized spaces are public schools, basically those placed in poor urban peripheries, but also those attended by disadvantaged children and

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youngsters, usually with a vocational profile. The public images of schools, including academic reputation, social prestige, and devaluation of poor urban schools, have been studied in relation to new forms of educational inequality (Reay, 2004). However, few studies have paid attention to its effects on school belonging.

It is worth reminding here that stigma is not an individual attribute -of students or schools, in our case- but context dependent (Goffman, 1970); it is a social construction and a collective representation that involves, labelling, negative stereotypes, symbolic boundaries between *us* and *them,* and loss of status and discrimination, in the context of a power relation (Link and Phelan, 2001). Negative school's images are built by merging and confusing school profile and location or passing the derogatory characteristics of the poor (considered as carriers of personal flaws and moral deficiencies) to their schools.

In the schools we studied, devaluation and discrimination seem to begin with school selection process. In Mexico City and its metropolitan area, students who wish to attend public upper-secondary schools sit a general exam, and its results determine the schools where the student could be admitted. Students can select up to 20 different schools, ranking them according to their preferences; the most preferred and demanded schools will require a higher score to be accepted.

Regardless of their socio-economic status (SES), most students select high demanded schools as their first options (mainly those belonging to the university system). However, the probability of been accepted in these schools is not independent of the student class condition. The schools in which we conducted our study seldom are among students' first options. As Franco told us during a focus group "almost nobody selects schools like this as their first choice", "except -Lola added- that you know that you will not continue studying or you don't really know what you are choosing" (Focus Group-B01, *Escuela Oriente*: Franco, 16, and Lola, 16). As previously observed, public images and judgements shape the individual sense of belonging.

According to Solis, Rodríguez Rocha and Brunet (2013) the estimated likelihood of been accepted in their first option is 0.65 for students from the highest SES quartile, but it decreases to 0.35 among students from the lowest quartile. Students' feelings regarding their exam scores evidence self-devaluation and self-blaming. Not achieving enough points to attend the most demanded schools is experienced as a personal failure, as an evidence of individual deficiencies; they feel "dumb", "undeserving", against those who "achieve" the

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goal. As usual in neoliberal times, structural problems -a fragmented school system that reproduces and reinforces social inequalities, relegating the most disadvantaged students to the least desirable schools- are experienced by the lower classes as individual failures. This individualization of social problems has the double effect of eroding disadvantaged students' self-esteem, and, to some extent, undervaluing their future studies –attending schools no one choose: 'the schools for the worst students', 'for those without a future'.

> L: […] well CONALEP and CETIS have always been something like a marker for the lowest in education in Mexico… always, always… usually CONALEPS are for the ones that usually get the lowest scores on the COMIPEMS exam and like… it´s everyone´s last choice, like the very last, for most people here [in Mexico] it is the last thing you would wish for your education. (Interview A-01, *Escuela Sur*: Lucía, 15).

In contrast with the elective belonging among middle classes analysed by Savage et al. (2005), social devaluation of these (not chosen) schools, considered as the last option for the worst students, has a significant impact on self-esteem and, at the same time, can weaken -at least initially- the development of student attachment with the school. Although this is a common feature of both schools, there are some nuances between them, basically related to school location. *Escuela Oriente* is located in a distant municipality on the outskirts of Mexico City, which is socially associated with the crowded and poor periphery. Most students come from nearby neighbourhoods and even their teachers reside in the same area. As a result, beyond the external perception of the locality (as poor and unsafe), the school is immersed in a homogenous local context where stigmas dissipate. Students are less exposed to this and other types of stigmatization and exterior labelling, and they frequently revalue their own school in comparison to other local schools. In this context, the ability to resist devaluation and foster a sense of belonging towards the school community seems to be greater.

In contrast, *Escuela Sur* is placed in a more central location of the city -although in a more deprived area than the rest of the neighbourhood-. It is a vocational school that belongs to a national educational system known as CONALEP. Thus, as CONALEP schools are identified by having the same profile, stigmatization extends throughout the country, and students are much more exposed to discrimination and devaluation in everyday life. In fact, interviewee students from *Escuela Sur* spontaneously mentioned numerous experiences of school devaluation in their interactions with relatives, friends or neighbours, also describing

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discriminatory "memes" about CONALEP spread in social networks. These memes show strongly derogatory and humiliating images and terminology about these schools and their students. While girls are presented as vulgar, "slags", young mothers or pregnant teenagers, boys are showed as hideous, dummy, drug addicts and dealers.

> G: […] Everyone says: No to CONALEP! That it's full of stoners, or that girls end up pregnant… and all that. Once… a classmate from secondary school told me: "at CONALEP all girls end up pregnant, and this and that […] that CONALEP students were… I don't know, he said a word… meaning that we're all lazy, tramps, or something like that (Interview A-02, *Escuela Sur*: Gaby, 15).

Resembling a "culture of poverty" discourse, pathological and deviant behaviours are homogeneously attached to students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending public vocational schools. Besides being academically questioned, schools are also morally condemned. It is common, for instance, to refer to CONALEP in derogatory terms such as "Nacolep" (*naco:* vulgar, chav, skanger), passing the moral devaluation of these poor youngsters to their schools. As Hollongworth and Archer (2010) observe, while derogatory judgements are internalised and can contribute to negative self-perceptions, they are also resisted and contested by young people.

In reaction to stigmatization students deploy rhetorical and strategic tools (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012), such as revaluing some aspects of their schools (e.g., the vocational training), constructing localized and specific representations of them (e.g., this CONALEP is better than others), or constructing nuanced images that include good as well as bad aspects (e.g., there are good and bad teachers as in every school). Resistance to stigma becomes part of the process of constructing some kind of school belonging. In some way students are able to 'reframe' and 'refocus' images of their school (Hollongworth and Archer, 2010). Among poor Latino students, Roundfield, Sánchez and McMahon (2016) found that the negative reputation of their school promoted a sense of school belonging or pride: "students often mentioned that the school's negative reputation influenced them to defy the low expectations of others and achieve in school" (2016: 10).

"What everyone says seems wrong to me", says Luis, "but it makes you feel bad, because they make fun of you, saying 'oh you go to a CONALEP, to a NACOLEP'" (Interview A-08, *Escuela Sur*: Luis, 15). Thus, school belonging involves different strategies to cope with

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stigma in their everyday lives; a resistance, that, as well as belonging, is dynamic and permeated by contradictions and doubts, and can result in socially devaluated senses of belonging.

4.2. School Climate: between resignation and resistance

Different dimensions of school climate, such as discipline, classroom structure and teaching strategies, have been understood as conductive (or not) of school belonging. Some of these dimensions are generic to public and private schools internationally, especially at the upper secondary level when students tend to evidence their personality more assertively. In this respect, the use of traditional teaching strategies as well as the application of severe rules in school could be contested aspects of school life for students at this phase of education and both schools in Mexico City were not the exception to this.

Students expressed concern about the teaching strategies employed at both schools. Whilst they considered that some teachers explain well, give interesting examples, know their discipline and teach with enthusiasm, many students perceived other teachers in both schools as not well prepared and unable to explain clearly. Lessons were dull and detached from real-life situations. As a result, students tend to skip the lessons they consider boring because tutors just talk to themselves whilst teaching, do not interact with students or even let the students present the topics alone.

In other cases, students expressed that some teachers lack effective teaching skills and interest in their profession. "We do not even see their interest in teaching or their interest in our learning" (B-01, Focus Group, *Escuela Oriente*, Edu 15). Youth are particularly sensitive to these behaviours from adults, and they have a significant effect on their interactions and connections with them (Buehler et al., 2018). In both schools, students complaint that even if some teachers do explain well or solve their doubts they do so in an unfriendly manner, perceiving them either as lacking patience or being authoritarian. Some tutors do not like to explain twice what they have already covered. We found that teachers' intolerance towards classroom noise, taking off points from students' marks or unnecessary assertion of authority undermine students' emotional and cognitive engagement as well as their active participation in school activities. Students reported being apprehensive of some of their teachers challenging thus students' motivation. According to students, teachers' negative attitude towards students' learning affects their motivation and commitment to their education.

Similar experiences were found by Tarabini and colleagues (2018) who explored student (dis)engagement in public secondary schools in Barcelona.

Whilst we recognise students' concerns, we share Smyth and Hattam's (2002) view of young people's identities and narratives as shifting instead of fixed. According to these authors, "the role of teachers in students' representation of school culture needs to be viewed as a part of students' active construction of aspects of that culture" (Smyth and Hattam, 2002: 378). Therefore, when taking into account teachers' views about their teaching strategies, different interpretations emerge from those of students alone. We identified that in some cases there are teachers who seek to interact with their students and motivate them in their respective subjects. Some teachers before the beginning of the semester are interested in knowing what resources their students have (access to the Internet, smart phone, computer, cybercafé, library or artistic material) to give them the necessary elements so that they can learn more effectively. Other teachers, noticing that their syllabus are very theoretical, combine them with practical elements. These examples show that, although not generalised at the school level, there are individual cases of teachers who are more reflexive than others in relation to their teaching practices.

Strict rules were not only set up by teachers themselves in their classes. Both schools operate in a strict environment. In both schools, for instance, there is a rigorous control over the appropriate use of the uniform as well as over some aspects of the personal appearance of their students (e.g., haircut, use of piercings, hair colour, etc.). While many students in both schools conform to the rule of wearing the school uniform as they feel identified with their institution or have naturalize it, they also complaint about the none-sense of these rules and the inflexibility of them finding them far too strict. Girls, find unreasonable the imposition of using skirt even in dangerous and unsafe contexts for women (which is the case of both school neighborhoods). In addition, many students do not understand why piercings or fashion haircuts are prohibited in their schools. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) report that fairness and flexibility in school rules tend to reduce the risk of disengagement. Contrary to this, when some students have tried to challenge these rules, teachers might respond: "if you don't like these rules you can find yourself another school" (Interview A-05, *Escuela Oriente*: Rosi, 16), accentuating the feelings of exclusion and lack of respect and recognition. These aspects undermine key aspects of belonging such as involvement and participation or being

considered and listened as an individual. However, at the same time, students make an effort to comply with these rules to feel integrated with the rest of the school community.

Homework is another aspect that was identified by students from both schools as non-conductive of an effective school climate. They reported having a heavy workload and again a strict policy is implemented in both schools in relation to it. Students explained that often they do not socialise much because they have to spend long hours revising for exams and doing homework. Due to their long commutes, they arrive late at home, have dinner, take some rest and then spend hours doing homework. The provision of formative feedback was not mentioned by teachers nor students which shows that academic support and an emphasis on students' learning (two important components of school belonging) have not yet been prioritised in both schools. Students' excessive amount of homework often makes them feel anxious, exhausted and doubtful about being able to finish their courses. There could be certain flexibility but it depends on the tutor.

One aspect, which is not general across public and private high schools, is class size, which is particularly relevant in our case. In Mexico, and particularly in Mexico City, public high schools are usually overcrowded and this represents a crucial factor that shaped school climate. Classes, in our two schools, have approximately fifty or more students across all subjects. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) mention that several studies report that students in small schools have more opportunities to participate in school activities and develop thick social relations with staff and peers. In both schools, class size promotes that teachers and authorities resort to the application of strict discipline methods and more passive teaching strategies.

The qualitative data about the school climate show some tensions in students' experiences of school belonging. On the one hand, students value and respect the knowledge of their teachers, and based on this they might be willing to accept a strict discipline. Firm rules are accepted as a naturalized condition and integral part of a hierarchical institution. In this sense, there is some kind of conformism associated to a subordinated social class condition. On the other hand, students complain about having unnecessary or unfair rules, traditional teaching methods and a generalised authoritarian school environment, experiences that were also externalised by some teachers. School belonging in these public upper secondary schools seems to be placed on a continuum between adaptation and resistance.

4.3. Sociability at school: a distant respect

There is a widespread consensus in the literature on "school belonging" about the crucial importance of students' relationships with teachers and also with classmates (Tarabini et al., 2018). The idea behind this assumption is that a supportive, caring, and respectful relationship with tutors and a friendly integration with peers, foster a sense of school belonging (Demanet and Van Houtte, 2012; Slaten et al., 2016; Uslu and Gizir, 2017). In both schools, however, students describe their relationships with teachers as distant and cold, and, in some cases, with their classmates too. It is worth noting that this perception is shared even by those students that do well at school.

Class size could be one of the reasons explaining distant relationships both with teachers and peers. This structural feature of the public-school system affects class engagement and teaching strategies -as we have seen- but also imposes severe limitations to develop meaningful relations with teachers.

The cultural framing of the student-teacher relationship becomes also relevant. Most students tend to assume that a closer and friendly relationship between them and teachers does not correspond to their respective roles. That kind of relationships is unexpected, and in a sense, they are perceived as inappropriate. During the focus group with students from *Escuela Oriente*, one of the participants said: "a teacher can't take time to talk with you about his life or your life, to know more about you… he just has to teach" (Focus Group-B01, *Escuela Oriente*: Edu, male, 15). This "technical" or "bureaucratic" delimitation of everyone's roles and functions at school could be associated to a rigid and hierarchical structure of institutional roles and inter-generational relationships that is prevalent in Mexican society.

Chiu et al., (2016: 178) has pointed out, students in hierarchical countries "perceive greater status differences with teachers, interact with them less, and have fewer friendly relationships with them, *and consequently feel less school belonging at school,* compared with students in egalitarian countries". Although cannot compare with other countries to say if there is more or less school belonging, we prefer to say that in different contexts belonging can assume different contents. In our case, for instance, students and teachers seem to perceive this distant relationship between hierarchical roles as a manifestation of mutual respect. Respect is perceived as a kind of reciprocal indifference and distance, crossed by a rigid sense of authority and hierarchy.

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However, some discussions during the focus groups suggest that students also appreciate and long for a different type of relationship with teachers. Belonging could be contradictory as a result of power relation structure; in this case, students accept and naturalize a particular kind of (hierarchical or respectful) relationship with teachers, and simultaneously they imagine other possibilities. In the same focus group previously quoted, for instance, Lola recognises that "it'd be important that teachers take some time or give us a place to know more about what we think, or what we need" (Focus Group-B01, *Escuela Oriente*: Lola, 16). All participants agreed with her.

A distant and cold relationship is not the spontaneous result of group size, hierarchical roles, or students' apathy. It is also associated to a lack of trust between teachers and students. According to a recent national survey (self-applied), conducted by the National Electoral Institute (2015), less than half of adolescents aged 14 to 17 trust their teachers (44.1%) and only one out of three would ask a teacher for help if they have a problem. This survey also provides a significant input about the relevance of trust: students with confidence in their teachers feel more secured at school (Saraví, 2017).

Generally speaking, this lack of trust come up from students feeling insecure about the possible reactions of teachers if they ask for help, say something wrong, or express an opinion or concern. For instance, talking about the school rules and the possibility of students to discuss them with tutors, Sergio said: "what happens is that we don't trust the counsellor to discuss with her this kind of things; she scolds us, or she could tell us that we are immature, or something like that" (Interview-B01, *Escuela Oriente*: Sergio, 16). This kind of practices neglects an equal membership and foster a subordinated experience of belonging.

Students frequently express insecurity and fear about the possible reactions of teachers. As we have noted before, they could recognise positive academic qualities and attitudes in their tutors, but simultaneously they avoid a close and personal relation with them because they are afraid of unexpected reactions. Some students told us they prefer a distant relationship in order to avoid personal conflicts and the use of teachers' power against them. However, according to the teachers, distant relationships are the result of institutional guidelines "I cannot talk one to one with a student without a witness, because then the student could say that I told him anything ... There are procedures"(Interview T-04, *Escuela Sur*: Teacher Estela). This shows a reciprocal and institutionalized lack of trust.

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When students talk about their relationships with classmates, similar attributes arise in their discourses. The most important thing for them is respect. Friendship is not expected amongst classmates. This does not mean a hostile or unpleasant school atmosphere. In fact, contrary to public stigmatization of some urban public schools as violent, unruly and unsafe places, we found in both schools a peaceful, quiet and well-organized environment. Students value positively these attributes as well as the respectful relationship between classmates.

> F: We can say that we are respectful between us, but we are not friends, we are not going everywhere together. E: Yes, exactly, we have respect for each other, but each of us goes with her own friends… (Focus Group-B01, *Escuela Oriente*: Franco, 16; Edu, 15).

Students make a clear distinction between classmates and friends. Most of them recognize they have a lot of classmates and a respectful and nice relationship with them; but they also point out that their friends are really few. What makes the difference between friends and classmates is trust. Students do not trust their teachers, and they do not trust their classmates either. This is not a surprise in a society currently characterized by a very low level of institutional and interpersonal trust.

Some characteristics of these schools undermine the possibility of constructing friendships between classmates. One of the most important factors is the spatial distance between school and students' place of residence. This is evident in *Escuela Sur* where many students usually travel two hours or even more from home to school. Additionally, both schools have morning and evening shifts, which is also an impediment to develop some extracurricular activities or to stay at school when classes are over -as several authors have observed, extracurricular activities promote friendship and a sense of belonging (McNeal, 1995). As a consequence of fear and insecurity, in both neighbourhoods where schools are located, students also avoid being outside after school. The result of these and other structural aspects -such as lack of money-, is a restricted and limited social life for these adolescents. They spend most of their free time at home with other family members or neighbours.

5. Conclusion

Departing from understanding school belonging as a social construction, in this article we explored what kinds of school belonging emerge in public urban schools of Mexico City. As members of a society, all of us need to construct some kind of belonging, even when it is under unfavourable conditions; especially during adolescence, we need to feel recognized and socially valued by others. Regarding the analysis of school belonging, this means that we have to explore not just the good and virtuous circles that foster attachment, but also the social and cultural contexts and dynamics in which the sense of belonging is moulded, as well as the characteristics it assumes.

Students' accounts here analysed showed how structural processes, cultural patterns, power relationships, and school institutionalized practices, shape the senses and experiences of school belonging of disadvantaged urban adolescents. After being assigned to a school "no one desires", stigmatized due to school orientation, location or both, students have to deal with the negative images and stereotypes usually attached to low-income youth. Developing belonging among students attending these schools involve multiple ways to negotiate, manage and resist negative images and stereotypes regarding their schools, families, and themselves. The sense of belonging is not indifferent to the public social prestige and stratification of schools; students developed an affective relation with their school but simultaneously they are aware these are socially devaluated schools, which could be described as a devaluated inclusion.

In general terms, the school atmosphere in both schools is characterized by minimal student involvement and participation, strict norms, and rigorous supervision of the students' behaviours and personal appearance. Youth identities and their own interests and abilities have no place at school and in most cases, they are censured and rejected by the institution. The responses and attitudes of students, however, are ambiguous. On the one hand, they question the authoritarian, hierarchical, and uncompromised school climate, but simultaneously they want to be included and accepted, and therefore they tend to naturalize this rigid structure and to develop a performative adaptation.

Interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers are based on formal respect and some kind of mutual indifference. As Buehler and colleagues (2018) observe in a recent study, the disconnection in adult - youth relationship affects self-esteem, motivation, and (in this case) educational interest of adolescents. These attributes could undermine the generation of strong ties with the school, but it does not mean, however, the absence of any sense of

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school belonging. For many students the school, even under these characteristics, is a pleasant space for sociability (e.g. in contrast with their neighbourhoods), as well as a hope of social mobility. Beyond this, distrust is one of the attributes we found with more negative consequences for constructing any kind of school belonging since it promotes individual and family closure and isolation.

In summary, two important elements emerge from our findings: on one side, belonging does not have a unique content, students can develop different forms of belonging; on the other, it is not a monolithic condition, and usually crossed by contradictions and the intermeshing of positive and negative aspects. The dichotomy belonging/not belonging can be an oversimplification, not very helpful for the understanding of a more dynamic, complex and contradictory relation that students usually have with school. Examining just the presence or absence of a sense of school belonging could be confusing and insufficient. Our study shows that it is relevant to identify the content and quality of different forms of belonging. Thus, instead of developing standardized practices or recommendations, school communities could reflect on what kind(s) of school belonging(s) they want or wish to promote among their students; these belongings also tell us about different kinds of social inclusion among different social classes.

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