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Teachers' Perceptions and Interventions on Disengagement: A Qualitative Case Study in a Private School in Quito, Ecuador.
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RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo comprender el concepto de desvinculación a través de las percepciones de los docentes y sus intervenciones en clase para abordar este problema. El proceso de investigación se realizó a través de un estudio de caso cualitativo en un colegio privado de Quito, enfocándose específicamente en los años de Educación Básica Elemental. La desconexión del aprendizaje es un fenómeno que viene ocurriendo a lo largo de los años, y sus efectos se hicieron más evidentes luego de vivir la educación durante la pandemia. Este concepto considera la relación que los individuos crean y construyen con diversas variables que interactúan en su experiencia de aprendizaje dentro del sistema. Después de analizar los datos, descubrimos que los docentes tienen una comprensión incompleta de lo que significa el verdadero compromiso con el aprendizaje y, aunque ponen en práctica estrategias para motivar a sus estudiantes, existen muchas limitaciones que restringen las posibilidades de abordar el conflicto de manera efectiva. Además, al final de este estudio presentaremos nuestra percepción sobre cómo el sistema educativo frena el proceso natural de aprendizaje que puede ser visible en momentos espontáneos dentro de la clase.

Palabras clave: desvinculación, motivación, percepción, aprendizaje, relacionalidad, espontaneidad, restricciones y conección.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the concept of disengagement through teachers' perceptions and their interventions in class to address this issue. The process of investigation was made through a qualitative case study in a private school in Quito, specifically focusing on Elementary school years. Disengagement is a phenomenon that has been occurring over the years, and its effects became more evident after experiencing education during the pandemic. This concept considers the relationship that individuals create and construct with various variables interacting in their learning experience within the system. After analyzing the data, we discovered that teachers have an incomplete understanding of what disengagement means, and even though they put in practice strategies for motivating their students, there are many constraints that limit the possibilities to address the conflict in an effective way. Furthermore, we will present our thoughts on how the educational system restrains the natural process of engagement which can be visible in spontaneous moments in class.

Key words: disengagement, motivation, perception, learning, relationality, spontaneity, constraints, and connection.

TABLA DE CONTENIDO

INTRODUCCIÓN

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, education all over the world suffered several changes as it was suddenly forced to adapt to different scenarios such as remote or online learning environments (Montero & Trucatti). In Ecuador, these transformations caused around ninety thousand students to drop out of the educational system. This phenomenon is called *early school leaving (ESL)*, in which students abandon their studies before they achieve an upper secondary education degree. According to Montero & Turcatti (2022), disengagement was found to be one of the main causes of ESL during the pandemic. Although quarantine measures have been lifted and in-person schooling has largely resumed, disengagement still represents a risk or a threat for students to keep studying and find a desire to learn, which can be detrimental to their academic development and long-term professional prospects. Since the pandemic to the present day, disengagement has been rising tremendously in schools due to student's difficulty in establishing a personal connection with the different areas of their learning processes.

The prevalence of disengagement amongst students has compelled numerous scholars to attempt to theorize the causes of the phenomenon. The existing literature shows that disengagement in students can be caused by various factors that make up a unique experience in school for each student. Disengaged students feel that their relationships with teachers and peers are not meaningful, leading them to believe that they are not noticed, recognized, and valued in their community. These students can also view learning content as completely irrelevant to their personal lives, future, or the possibility of contributing to the world. On top of that, students disconnect from their learning process when they don't have the opportunity to make choices, explore, make mistakes, be challenged according to their capacities, practice their skills, engage with real-life experiences, and apply their knowledge.

Through these findings, scholars have largely defined engagement and disengagement as a multivariable concept that is both context and individually specific. Indeed, it involves several variables, including teacher-student relationships, the interaction between teachers and the education system, and the connection students can acquire with the content. Nonetheless, while disengagement is complex, it is often equated by practitioners to a lack of motivation. Fredricks (2014) distinguishes these two concepts when he states that "motivation emphasizes psychological or internal processes that are more difficult to change, while engagement reflects an individual's interaction with his or her context. Motivation is necessary, but not sufficient, for engagement" (p.39). Furthermore, motivation is usually confused with or internalized as equal to "engagement" given that in languages such as Spanish, the word "engagement" is usually translated to "motivation".

The literature on engagement/disengagement is rich and successful in theorizing and discerning why this phenomenon occurs. Many authors talk about engagement's best practices, strategies, and theories, which aim to support its importance in the learning process of every student. Nonetheless, there are limited studies on how teachers understand the concept and its accompanying best practices and translate it into their daily lives in the classroom. The absence of studies examining the relationship between existing best practices and the perceptions teachers have about their responsibility to reach this goal is an important gap in current understandings as to why disengagement remains prevalent within education. Inspired by this gap in the field, we started the research process with a guiding question: How do elementary school teachers in a private school in Quito address instances or ongoing patterns of student disengagement? Through this question, the purpose of this study is to make sense of how teachers conceptualize disengagement and how these understandings may inform behavior and teacher's own view of their roles and responsibilities.

The study was conducted in a private school in which we will refer to as "Long Life Learning School". Through observations and interviews, we found that teachers from the school largely equated engagement with motivation. This led them to perceive engagement as a form of personal disposition rather than a form of relationality. Based on this perspective, teachers identified disengaged students only by evaluating their visible behaviors in class, not considering other essential variables. However, despite this misconception, teachers still used some of the best practices for engagement described in the literature. They strove to construct rapport and a sense of community in the classroom, connecting their lesson plans to students' lives and/or interests. Sadly, teachers only used these strategies during structured teaching moments, ignoring spontaneous times which appeared as opportunities to generate meaningful connections and engagement in learning. All of this happened as a consequence of many constraints teachers had to face due to the lack of institutional support and external pressures. In the end, teachers ended up tossing the responsibility of engagement to their students, creating the exact opposite result to what they desired every day in class to occur: true love for learning.

DESARROLLO DEL TEMA

Literature Review

"The goal of education should not be to produce students who will do what they're told, but rather to foster critical thinking, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning" (Khon, 1999). Understanding engagement in education has been a subject of endless studies because as Khon says, the main goal of education is to transform the world by teaching students to love learning. However, as stated in the introduction of this study, disengagement is a real phenomenon that has been manifested as an alarming behavior perceived in students but not necessarily attended to adequately due to misunderstandings of concept. This often causes a loss of connection with the students and therefore in their learning process too.

Most students want to learn but often feel overwhelmed or demotivated by an educational system that disregards their needs. This is the main source from which many of the causes of disengagement come from. Students may feel discouraged when they do not see the relevance of what they are learning or when they are not allowed to apply what they are learning in real-world situations. As Fredericks says, "engagement tends to be higher in subject areas in which students think that they have high ability, find the content interesting, and/or see value in learning the content for their futures" (Fredricks, 2014, p. 19). Additionally, students can also become demotivated if they feel they have no control over their learning. Students can be more engaged and motivated when they are allowed to make decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it (Fredricks, 2014).

Another cause of disengagement is that if students are convinced that in school, who they are and who they want to become is not valued or even considered important, they will live in a constant state of disconnection. As Cozolino (2014) said, "secure attachments to teachers and other students optimize the ability to learn." Sadly, schools' work falls under a

pre-established structure, culture, and curriculum, that rarely favors students' expectations, dreams, and aspirations. Ultimately, nothing school-related will matter or make sense to students because it is not meaningful. This is why Washor and Mojkowski (2014) in their article: *Student Disengagement: It's Deeper Than You Think,* expose the idea that "student expectations capture what we consider essentials for a student learning experience leading to sustained engagement in deep and productive learning" (p. 10).

Students' expectations are significant since they are the main actors for whom the education system works and stays alive. These can help capture the essential ideas of the optimal learning experience, which, if used correctly, can lead to sustained engagement and deep productive learning (Washor & Mojkowski, 2014). The same authors cited above state that if the education system doesn't consider this, disengaged students will graduate but be completely unprepared for lifelong learning. Finally, to get a clearer view of the causes of disengagement, it is essential to talk about students' perceptions of their identity in the educational context. When learning activities are perceived as a threat to their current identity, students may exhibit defensive coping behaviors that result in disengaging attitudes in the classroom (Lund & Jolly, 2012). This can lead to a negative self-concept where students feel that they do not fit in with the teacher or school's beliefs and attitudes.

The complexity of engagement/disengagement often leads to several misconceptions regarding the concept. Wiesman (2012) points out that teachers' beliefs and perceptions about student engagement can influence their pedagogical approach and the way they design and implement their teaching strategies. For instance, he warns in his article *Student Motivation and the Alignment of Teacher Beliefs* (2012) that one of teachers' most common misunderstandings about engagement is assuming that only active and participatory students in the classroom are engaged in learning. Similarly, Fredricks (2014) challenges the myth that it is easy to identify who is engaged in the classroom. He highlights that there may be

misconceptions about engagement based on superficial perceptions and emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of engagement in education.

A limited conception of engagement can lead to teaching practices that focus only on superficial student participation, such as asking questions to students who are raising their hands or giving more attention to those who appear to be more active in class. Wiesman (2012) holds that this misconception can negatively affect students' intrinsic motivation and their actual engagement in the learning process. For example, students who are not comfortable raising their hand in class or who prefer to participate in other ways, such as through group work or individual reflection, may be misperceived as less engaged, which can affect their self-efficacy and interest in learning. In addition, students who are physically present in the classroom but not actively engaged may be perceived as disinterested or unmotivated, which can lead to a lack of attention and support from the teacher, thus perpetuating misconceptions about their engagement.

Similarly, Kohn (1999) criticizes the use of rewards and incentives as a form of classroom motivation and raises concerns about how these approaches may generate misconceptions about student engagement. The author argues that the use of external rewards, such as grades, prizes, or praise, to motivate students can create a reward-oriented mindset rather than a learning-oriented one. Students may focus on obtaining the reward or incentive rather than becoming truly interested and engaged in the learning process itself. In a more specific way, it can generate dependence on external approval and reward-seeking, rather than developing intrinsic motivation based on interest and satisfaction in learning for its own sake. In the same way, students may learn to do the minimum necessary to obtain the reward or praise, rather than actively engage in the learning process and seek a deep and meaningful understanding of the content. In addition, Kohn stresses that the use of rewards

and the incentive system can lead to competition and comparison among students, which can generate an unhealthy environment of rivalry and stress in the classroom. Students may be pressured to outperform their peers and get the reward, rather than collaborate and support each other in their learning processes.

In summary, misconceptions in engagement can be found and perpetuated in both teachers' and students' perspectives. Teachers' misbeliefs about engagement can influence how they design and implement their teaching strategies, while the use of rewards and superficial perceptions of engagement can also generate unconscious misunderstandings of what true intrinsic motivation means for students.

Strategies used to engage students

As previously stated, disengagement has a theoretical frame that showcases why teachers misunderstand and underestimate the importance of this issue. Consequently, teachers are likely to acquire a passive attitude toward disengaged students (Fredericks, 2014). However, the literature presents certain strategies which can be extremely helpful to counteract the negative effects of disengagement, considering that addressing these misconceptions is important to promote genuine and deep student engagement in the learning process. First, it is essential to remember that students connect to the environment around them and their interaction agents when their emotional needs are met and, in this way, learning occurs smoothly (Nelsen, 2018). Thereby, forming a bond between teacher and student is one of the most powerful tools that has been proven to be effective.

"Teachers should strive to create an environment in which students feel respected, valued, and safe." (Martin & Dowson, 2019, p. 44) Building a positive student-teacher relationship is a determining factor for the connection with learning and therefore, it reflects engagement. When students feel cared about them and notice teachers' attempts to connect

with them, this increases their comfort, trust, and respect levels (Nelsen, 2018). Even though creating this bond with students will require time, effort, and willingness from the teachers, it will guarantee a safe and supportive learning environment for each student.

In order to reach this meaningful relationship with students, teachers have to be intentional by creating daily activities that will enable this bond to develop throughout the school year (Martin & Dowson, 2019). However, some teachers have acquired resistance to creating a bond with disengaged students. Fredericks (2014) mentions "teachers often view relationships with disengaged students in terms of a deficit perspective (i.e., something about the student that is unchangeable) rather than seeing disengagement as an opportunity to intervene and cultivate a stronger relationship" (p.147). This showcases another misconception teachers have and prevents them from attending to students' needs accordingly.

On account of this, Wiesman (2012) proposes that teachers reflect on their beliefs and preconceptions about student engagement and be open to various forms of participation to foster intrinsic motivation in the classroom. Kohn (1999) talks about the importance of intrinsic motivation. There are two types of intrinsic motivation: one is based on individual interest, and the other is in specific situations or environmental factors that generate some interest. Teachers can help increase intrinsic motivation when they know their students because they can make content relevant to their lives by connecting it to real-world circumstances (Wiesman, 2012). Likewise, if teachers choose methodologies wisely, they can present content in a way that sparks students' interest.

With the same purpose, other practical strategies can be used every day at all levels to combat disengagement. According to Fredericks (2014), it is beneficial to increase opportunities for physical activities, such as short exercise breaks that involve students getting up and moving. It has been demonstrated that it improves on-task behavior and

achievement. It only requires at least fifteen minutes during lessons to meet the physical and energetical needs that children and teenagers have due to their biological development. The author reveals that this strategy reduces disengagement because it prepares their body and mind for optimal learning.

Another way to avoid disengagement in class is to provide students with various opportunities to achieve success. This means that teachers should personalize the curriculum according to students' readiness, which will prevent students from feeling frustrated or overwhelmed as they have their own goals that are within their range of capacities. Thus, the learning goals for each student need to be realistic and achievable. Moreover, teachers should focus on effort and improvement (Fredericks, 2014). Additionally, it is also essential to adjust the activities and the lesson plan according to the task difficulty and reading levels if the students require it.

Likewise, it is crucial to recognize that engagement may manifest itself in different ways for different students and that not all students will actively participate or raise their hands in class. This is why teachers must use various pedagogical strategies that encourage active and deep engagement of all students, such as using open-ended questions, encouraging individual reflection and group work, and recognizing and valuing various forms of participation.

Besides that, helping students to deal with frustration and failures is another strategy that has been proven to be effective. Teachers must ensure a safe and respect-based space for their students during the whole process of learning so students will be more engaged when they work in a supportive, familiar, and safe place. As a result, students will be open to learning and failure without any fear. It is also recommendable to offer additional help to students such as tutoring hours that will help students have individual intervention from the teacher (Fredericks, 2014).

Another strategy that has been proven to be successful to eradicate disengagement is the involvement of families and connection with the values and beliefs of the school. According to Montero & Turcatti (2021), "Student engagement is furthered by facilitating partnerships between parents and schools by training parents and teachers to view the school as a joint learning enterprise." (p.7). This means that families' involvement and connection with the school play an important role in students' academic engagement because they are both aligned to collaborate for the same goal with their students. When schools foster opportunities for socialization to get to know the student's families and teachers, it generates an environment of empathy and mutual understanding. Therefore, these attitudes improve students' engagement, as they are provided with sources of support at home as well as in school.

All these strategies mentioned above can be summarized into what Nelsen (2018) suggests as practical implications to address disengagement. Learning activities should be assessed in terms of the extent to which the affective reward matches or exceeds the perceived risk. Also, the teacher should not be the sole source of feedback, and students should be given more control over their learning processes, outcomes, and environments. The idea is that students have a leading role in their learning process and can interact in a self-reflective way to understand and connect with the content. Eventually, by aligning the classroom identity with students' self-perceptions and identities, teachers can improve students' self-esteem and create a better learning environment where students can actively engage in learning activities, leading to improved learning outcomes. Furthermore, by valuing and incorporating students' voices and participation, teachers can effectively address generalized disengagement in their classrooms and create a more engaging and inclusive learning environment (Rodriguez, 2017).

In conclusion, instead of relying on rewards and the incentive system for extrinsic motivation, educators should focus on fostering intrinsic motivation and genuine student engagement in learning. This involves creating a classroom environment that promotes students' curiosity, exploration, critical thinking, and active participation in the learning process. It also demands valuing student progress and effort rather than just grades or awards and providing constructive feedback that supports student growth and development.

Constraints that restrain the application of engagement strategies

Even though there are many alternative strategies and tools to engage students, previous studies also show that there are external and structural factors of the educational system that inhibit their everyday application in the classroom. Peterson, et al. (2020), mentions that many teachers face the urgency of covering content as one limitation to spending time engaging their students. This phenomenon is called *the tyranny of the lesson plan*; it is common among teachers when they feel the need of reaching the standards and it is believed that to achieve this goal it is crucial to stick to the lesson plan. This fixed mindset impedes teachers from being involved in a reflexive process and consequently being flexible to changes that will benefit their students.

Additionally, Peterson, et al., (2020) also indicated that the lack of time restrains the opportunities to change the courses or adapt the curriculum to students' needs, for them to be engaged with the content and learning itself. They mentioned, "teachers lack the time to reevaluate their courses to make decisions about content reduction because of their busy schedules". For these reasons, teachers' duties affect the decisions that they make on behalf of their students. It often interferes with the reflective processes that should lead teachers into realizing that their students are disengaged and do something about it.

Nonetheless, as Fredericks proposes,

> "Teachers need to change the way they view disengagement. They should not
> view disengagement as a character flaw of the student or a shortcoming of the
> teacher. They should view it instead as a signal that this student needs more
> support and often a different type of support than they are currently receiving"
> (p. 47, 2004).

As the quote implies, identifying disengagement in a classroom should never be felt as a burden but as a motive of joy since, more than anything, it can become an opportunity to support students differently, in the way they need to connect and make sense of the world around them. It is also crucial to consider that students will not be engaged all the time, because for that to happen, all variables should be perfectly aligned, which is an unreal statement to hold on to. Students' experiences in school and the quality of their relationships can vary daily.

Methods

The study aimed to understand how teachers perceive and assimilate the concept of disengagement and their role in dealing with this issue. To address this goal, we conducted a qualitative case study in the school we refer to as Lifelong Learning School. The following study was made in a K-12 private school that originated in 2006 by two American missionaries in Quito, Ecuador. Initially, it started as a "Home School" with 19 students from the area living in poor and vulnerable conditions. Their project was to assist this group of children to provide them with shelter and a good quality of education. Therefore, they could achieve better opportunities, despite the difficulties in their economic and family reality. Over time, the school kept growing and other students joined because it offered a different education system. Currently, the school has over 650 students at all levels. This institution focuses on learning paths aligned with Christian formation and family values. It offers

subsidies to students in need after a process of analysis. However, it is a private coeducational school that appeals to equal opportunity and excellence.

The mission and vision of the institution consider fostering a culture based on core values that inspire and train students to have a proactive attitude of lifelong learning. This is achieved through rigorous academic training, aligned with international standards. In addition, it focuses on instructing teachers in an effective methodology that promotes deep and transferable understanding, beyond the memorization of facts and content. On the other hand, to be part of the institution, the teachers must have these skills: teamwork, flexibility, self-regulation, honesty, leadership, assertive communication, problem-solving, spiritual opening, growth mindset, and critical thinking. Finally, it seeks to guide students to understand that education and success in life are means to open the world to them, sharing values based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. In conclusion, some of the most relevant values and institutional commitments to reflect upon when considering our audience are unequivocal attention to planning, management, compliance, hard work, teamwork, collaboration, and continual research and implementation of best practices.

Data collection in the school began with classroom observations. During classroom observations, we focused on discerning specific behaviors that showed disengagement and how teachers reacted to these visible conducts. Through the insights gathered through observations, we invited a group of teachers to engage in semi-structured interviews aimed at eliciting their perspectives on disengagement and clarifying any emerging questions we had from the observation process. Interview participants were selected from the Elementary section from the classes which we had observed earlier in the process. Interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes and questions focused on strategies to engage students, their perceptions of disengagement, and their educational philosophies. Once data collection was completed, we began the analysis process.

Data analysis consisted of two complementary approaches. The first step was inductive and consisted of periodic team meetings to discuss emerging insights which were later formally written as analytical memos. The ideas emerging from the analytical memos were used to create a coding scheme. This allowed for the second step, which was largely deductive and entailed using the coding scheme to formally code the entirety of the data set. Through the coding process, we were able to identify a series of themes such as manifestations of disengagement, relationships (student-teacher, student-content, teacher-system), and strategies of connection. Once themes were established, we examined their relationship in the effort to write assertions. Once assertions were written, we returned to the data set in an effort to identify any disconfirming evidence.

Findings

Our main goal during the observations and interviews was to identify different attitudes and behaviors that help us understand how teachers perceive disengagement. What we found is that most teachers believe engagement is synonymous to motivation. Consequently, their efforts concentrate on planning for extrinsic motivation using various strategies they think will encourage students to be more responsive to learning. More precisely, we found that teachers perceive engagement as a form of personal disposition rather than a form of relationality. If we consider that engagement is a measure of students' level of interaction with all the variables involved in their learning process, teachers were believing the myth that engaged students are simply the ones who are on-task and actively participating in class. This means that their behavior is the most visible, or it could even be the only variable used to evaluate the extent of engagement in the classroom.

In Long Life Learning School, understanding that engagement equates to classroom behavior was evident in how teachers described student disengagement. Most teachers claimed that disengagement was evident either through students' body language or different

forms of behavior that suggest a lack of attention. For instance, during an interview, Mrs. Maria stated: "This student seems bored, maybe putting their head down, looking away, maybe talking to a friend, and perhaps they're looking at you, but when they have to answer a question, they don't know what the question was." Ms. Karen said something similar: "They're just observing; they're looking through the window; they're seeing what's happening outside. So, usually by their body language, you can tell."

As we can see, there is a common denominator in the approach teachers use to identify disengagement. Teachers are constantly evaluating students' capacity to follow rules and procedures, the presence or absence of disruptive behaviors, and the level of involvement in class activities (paying attention, focusing on the task, concentrating). However, other essential factors such as the sense of belonging and value in the class, cognitive investment in learning (choosing challenges, putting all effort into understanding and mastering content), metacognition, and self-regulation (Fredericks, 2014) are not usually evaluated or considered as important or determinants of true engagement.

However, it is important to note that despite an incomplete understanding of the concept of engagement, various teachers who participated in our interviews and were observed, promoted practices that aligned with best practices within the literature of engagement. They even expressed their thoughts on how important it was for students to develop long-life learning and consider school as a safe place where they could grow and take away meaningful lessons for their lives. For example, Mr. Elías said: "That is what I hope at some point they can take away, something that stays in your mind and your heart, beyond the content, and that can be taken to apply at any time in your life." Also, Mrs. Giuliana said, "First of all, they need to feel safe; they need to love it and create this love for learning."

Based on their understanding of engagement and motivation, various Long Life Learning School teachers reported using several strategies to keep students motivated. The most common strategy was to purposefully build rapport with students and a sense of community within the classroom. Some teachers claimed to use these strategies at the beginning of the year, while others suggested the constant use of strategies throughout the school year. For example, Mrs. Isabel said, "I try to incorporate interactive activities so that they're moving, thinking, discussing, so it falls back on my planning and using activities that are going to integrate them as a whole to keep them engaged."

Moreover, most teachers in Long Life School tried to motivate students by connecting with them in some way even when there was not enough time or there were other variables that made it difficult. For instance, Mr. Will said he worked on the relationships he had with his students, opening a safe space for communication and confidence. The students enjoyed his classes because he made them laugh. On a specific occasion, a comment that he received from his students was that he should be an actor or become a clown because he is very funny. As we can see in this example, students felt connected to the learning process when they found a connection with the teacher as well. This teacher specifically found that connection space in their relationship and was able to create a noticeable and meaningful bond.

In addition, teachers expressed that using the relationships they had built with their students, they use this as an open door to dig deeper into their interests that later will serve to connect meaningfully with the content. For example, Mrs. Andrea said in an interview that she learns the names of all her students on the first day of school, tries to connect them with something relevant to them so they feel heard, and continues to develop her relationship throughout the year with relevant connections. Still, she said that it was never enough. Mrs. Camila also commented that she likes to observe the students' interests outside of the classroom so that she can connect with them in class activities. Both educators showed

interest in generating emotional connection with the students, and through the observations that were made in practice, it was observed that the students felt more willing to learn and more interested in the content that the teachers wanted to impart.

However, this was not always the case. For instance, Mrs. Gabriela mentioned that she practices discipline and that her students should understand that they cannot always do what they like. In the observations made during class hours, we could see that the students were afraid to ask questions, had little group interaction, and had low general participation. As a result, we can see that the teacher-student link is essential for the learning process and student-content bonding. In the literature, Nelsen (2018) asserts that setting clear boundaries and realistic expectations for students helps create a safe and respectful learning environment. Teachers must use active listening, empathy, effective communication, and an understanding of individual students' needs to establish trust and mutual respect. He mentions that when students feel that teachers care about them, they feel more confident to express themselves and communicate their concerns or ideas in class. When the link with the teacher has been generated, the link with the content flows more easily.

Beyond establishing an emotional bond with students, several teachers tried to adapt course content to align with students´ interests. In an interview we conducted with Mr. Xavier, he told us that he uses a lot of concrete material for his class lessons, being a math teacher, he needs students to be able to understand concepts that may seem abstract and complicated but are unconsciously used every day. Mr. Xavier affirmed that when students feel a connection between the content and their contexts, they are much more interested, and curiosity is generated in them. Several examples were given, such as a lesson on fractions in which students had to prepare a recipe at home using fractions and they practiced using the example of a pizza or a cake that is cut into several equal parts. This generated curiosity and connection with the content as students were able to see its relevance in their lives. The

impact achieved on their intrinsic motivation was reflected in the parents' comments as they observed the students happily performing the exercise and understanding the target concept.

Finally, as another strategy for students to create real meaning in the content presented, Mr. Simon explained that he uses stories. He said: "Tell stories that are not fictitious, but real-life stories, stories that can be put into practice." He gave this example in a class in which he told how he wanted to buy food in a store and the products he bought were on a supposed promotion, but he realized when paying that with the promotion he was paying more than if he had paid for the food. This not only surprised the students, but they were able to connect with the teacher and with the content by being exposed in such a real and concrete way. Fredricks (2014) states that emotional engagement can be fostered by valuing tasks that students perceive as useful for their future. Students who possess certain characteristics, such as high achievement, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, mastery goal orientation, and utility value, are more likely to be engaged in the learning process for a longer duration. When students view learning as important and valuable and enjoy activities because they feel capable of completing them and receiving social approval, their engagement is heightened. Close and secure relationships with teachers create a safe learning space that supports students' overall growth. This challenges teachers to look beyond surface-level assumptions and consider important factors that influence student engagement such as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive variables.

Although there were many strategies that teachers used to engage their students more in their classes, there were also many factors that restricted teachers from applying these techniques. This is mainly because teachers sense many pressures and demands in their professional lives that do not allow them to consider engagement as essential in their classrooms. In Long Life Learning School, we found out that most of the teachers claimed to know about strategies to engage their students. Notwithstanding, there were other factors

from the system that inhibit them from putting these strategies into practice. For instance, the lack of time was considered a barrier because teachers were under a lot of pressure to meet standards. As a result, during class, teachers needed to stick to the lesson plan, rush to cover content, and get their students to achieve the learning goals that were established for the school year. The lack of time and curricular demands were described by most of the teachers during the interviews. They mentioned how the pressure received from the school and supervisors restrained teachers from caring for students' needs, such as engagement. To illustrate this, during an interview, Mrs. Camila stated,

> I might be able to do more with them if I could have more than just a 40-minute class. For example, when it's like, "You have to get this done!" You have to reach this standard! And I think the learning process takes a little more time, and I would want to give my students that time. I feel like the pressure of meeting the standards is always in the back of my mind.

This part of the interview shows that despite the teachers' preparation, intention, or efforts to create an engaging classroom, teachers feel the pressure of the system as it represents a great restraining force to apply different teaching approaches that would adjust better to students' needs. This systemic pressure that teachers received could be glimpsed during the observations when teachers had to rush to cover the content. In that situation, teachers did not identify the students that were disengaged. Due to lack of time, teachers could not address this problem immediately, therefore some students' needs were ignored.

Additionally, in the interviews and observations, it was noticeable that the lack of systemic and institutional support also increased the pressure on teachers. Consequently, teachers were not able to come up with solutions to address disengagement in the classroom because they did not have the appropriate tools or support structures that would provide relief in their roles. In the school studied, most of the teachers could relate to this phenomenon

when they cannot deal with disengagement due to overcrowding classrooms. Ms. Valeria claimed,

> When you have a class of 25 students, there are going to be multiple times when the students are not going to be focused, and that's the reality of the classroom. You must figure out how you're going to respond to those micro-moments that are happening constantly. So, if I'm constantly responding to those micro-moments, I'm going to drive myself crazy.

This statement reflects that the system itself has been created to gather a great number of students, ideally learning at the same time and the same pace. However, as was mentioned by teachers from this institution, learning processes do not follow this specific path. Despite their good intentions to provide enjoyable learning experiences, teachers mentioned they could not suddenly switch to engaging classrooms because it is difficult to observe and obtain specific information from each student who is disengaged, as it represents a huge challenge.

Finally, these findings restate that it is necessary to alleviate the systemic pressure experienced by teachers to encourage them to engage their students effectively through new methodologies or strategies. However, the knowledge of this problem teachers have is not the only necessity that must be attended to. It is also essential to consider that based on the previous examples mentioned, we can notice that most of the application of strategies teachers claim to know are in very specific and structured moments that are inside the planning. This means teachers are ignoring moments of spontaneity, losing many opportunities to create and strengthen connections in their relationships with students, the content, and their peers.

For instance, in Ms. Karen's Language class, one of her students suddenly exclaimed happily out loud "I have read a whole book on my own" while the teacher was explaining to the whole class. The teacher suddenly burst out and told him to be quiet and threatened to

take points away from the class online platform. Throughout the rest of the class that student did not participate again, and it was evident that he was embarrassed because his attention was called in front of his classmates. In this case, when teachers do not use the appropriate techniques to harness students' genuine desire to be involved, it can lead to resistance in the class. Teachers can use these moments of interest to make their students connect with the class and with the content that is being learned.

On another occasion, in Mrs. Norma's Science class, there was a large group of students disengaged from the class. However, these students did not receive any intervention from the teacher or the teacher's assistant. These students remained passive the whole class, talking to each other and sometimes moving around a lot. These are behavioral indicators that tell us that students are disengaged. But in this case, the teacher did not address this problem and she preferred to ignore it to move forward with her lesson plan. Therefore, when the teacher decided to continue with the class even though her students were not engaged, she missed the opportunity to connect with her students and find the reasons for their disengagement. Teachers mustn't miss the opportunity to let their students know that they are concerned about them and that it is in their interest that they become passionate about learning. In this way, when the teacher-student relationship is strengthened, it is much more likely that the engagement will eventually happen.

Interestingly, it became evident that during our observations in Long Life Learning School, in a 2nd-grade literacy class, a student asked if she could write more than the assignment asked for because she likes reading and writing very much, practices every day, and does it very well. However, the teacher told her that she must only do what the assignment asked for. The student's expression changed immediately; her motivation was affected. It was noted that an immediate gap was created between the student and her interest in the content since it was presented as a mandatory task to be performed but not as a

meaningful learning practice. But not only was her relationship with the content evidenced, but also the link with the teacher, who despite having had the opportunity to connect with the student because of her interest, did not take the time to generate a connection.

For the reasons mentioned above, most teachers from Long Life Learning School, have acquired a misconception about disengagement. They perceived that it was not their responsibility to engage students when they experience an overload of work and expectations from supervisors, schools, and the system. This misconception of disengagement can be evidenced through excerpts from the interviews, in which some teachers argued that engagement is solely the student's responsibility, and it is not something they should worry about. Ms. Karla mentioned,

> If the kids aren't engaged, don't push them, don't do it, because it's frustrating for you and it's frustrating for them. So even if you know they're distracted, sometimes it is up to them.

As it has been presented, teachers react with a defense mechanism when they face disengagement in their classroom. It is easier to delegate students that responsibility because teachers are already dealing with other things that go beyond their role, such as covering as substitute teachers, long meetings, reaching out to parents, doing material, grading, and trying to maintain a balanced life. As teachers carry a burden of responsibilities and handle a lot of pressure from the system, it seems easier to make students accountable for their engagement. Moreover, Long Life Learning teachers' perceptions of engagement are shaded by their educational philosophies and the different types of constraints they encounter in the reality of their jobs every day, resulting in a possible detachment of responsibilities dealing with this issue.

According to Fredericks (2014), "It is not uncommon to hear statements like these from teachers: "This student is disengaged because he doesn't care or is not trying hard

enough!" (p.228). This phenomenon is a clear result of teachers' burnout. Therefore, it appears to be a working assumption among teachers in Long Live Learning School, as they do not find it possible to keep all the students deeply engaged (Frederick, 2014). Some teachers from this school declared they would stop trying to use techniques to hold the engagement of their students because their overwhelming reality reduces the time teachers can spend engaging their students and planning for it. Ms. Jennifer claimed,

So, I think to be someone who's engaging or to engage the kids, you have to be able to do that. If you have many demands from life, when it comes to planning, sometimes it's hard to get to that place of engagement because you're feeling tired or because the kids have kind of gone off the walls, and so it's difficult to kind of zoom them back and get them to be engaged.

Overall, the findings about teachers' reality showcase the limitations that they experience in their day-to-day activities. It is necessary to highlight that the main reason why teachers have not addressed this problem is not due to a lack of strategies, but rather they have acquired an incorrect conception of disengagement and, they experience systemic struggles that do not allow them to change this idea. Fredericks (2014) claims "Many teachers struggle with balancing the time and emotional effort that is required to develop high-quality teacher-student relationships with their instructional demands and academic responsibilities" (p.124). This confirms that this issue has to do with the external pressures to which teachers are exposed and is not related to their willingness to change students' engagement. These factors interfere with their professional performance and inhibit teachers from applying their skills and attending to their students' physical, mental, affective, and psychological needs.

CONCLUSIONES

Therefore, our research findings point out different conclusions based on the interviews and observations made. Firstly, most Long Life Learning School teachers perceived that engagement and motivation mean the same thing. Also, we found that this group of teachers could identify disengagement mostly through behavioral indicators such as body posture, attitude, and participation. On the other hand, we discovered that some teachers used several strategies to connect with their students, but they did it sometimes, especially at the beginning of the year. In addition, some of them try to connect students with the content they are learning through real-life activities, however at times they witness disengaged students. Lastly, we were able to identify in the data collection that teachers fail to engage their students because they miss opportunities to enable engagement to happen naturally in spontaneous moments in the class. In these micro-moments, students show a natural desire to engage and sometimes it is lost during the process of learning.

However, after analyzing our findings we realized that a full understanding of what engagement represents for teachers is not enough to propose a complete solution to this issue. Thus, even though teachers would be willing to adopt a different perspective about disengagement in their professional practice, some constraints hold teachers back from engaging students in day-to-day activities (Peterson et al., 2020). This happens because although teachers are a key part of the solution, other external factors make teachers' efforts insufficient to truly engage students. The Education System is a retaining force that prevents teachers from putting into practice the principles for engagement (connection with peers, the content, and the teacher). This happens because the system is not designed to foster connections in the classroom. Educational standards and requirements prevent teachers from acting to change this reality in which students find themselves disengaged.

One of the main reasons for this situation is the work overload and bureaucracy that teachers face in today's education system. Educational standards and requirements often impose an additional workload on teachers, limiting their ability to focus on connecting with their students and developing their engagement and motivation in the classroom. This means that their center of attention is following the planning and pre-established structure for a "successful class", instead of exercising spontaneity that will lead them to connect with students. A strong and significant connection can never happen by force; so embracing spontaneity is crucial for fighting a system that discourages genuine learning and interactions.

In addition, teachers are often faced with large groups of students, which limits the possibility of finding spaces for connection as a transversal axis to the academic area. To conclude, after all that has been previously explained, in addition to the lack of knowledge that may exist around the term engagement, there are also limits that go beyond the possibilities of the teacher. The real changes for the solution of this phenomenon come from the base, the educational system, and must be addressed from a curricular amendment to an organizational one, with the main purpose of not losing the natural desire for learning all students once have.

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