Student Perceptions of Secondary School in Latin America. Relations, Belonging, and Valuation of School Knowledge in Late Modernity

Las percepciones estudiantiles de la escuela secundaria en Latinoamérica. Vínculos, pertenencia y valoración del conocimiento escolar en la modernidad avanzada

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Abstract

This paper examines the perceptions that Latin American secondary-level students have of their schools. These perceptions are compared across various countries in the region and between different social strata. Based on these comparisons, the paper tests the theses that have most frequently guided research in this field. The core of these theses is that, as a result of the cultural and technological changes introduced by late modernity, there is a devaluation of secondary education among high school students, which deepens among the poorest social strata. Based on data from the 2012 PISA tests, the study demonstrates that the majority of Latin American students have a positive view of the school, although with some nuances. These suggest that the school experience of secondary students is complex and presents certain ambiguities and ambivalences. However, these do not imply the preeminence of negative views of secondary education among Latin American students.

Keywords: education; perceptions; students; Latin America; modernity.

Resumen

Este artículo examina las percepciones de la escuela que tienen estudiantes de nivel secundario en América Latina. Se comparan las percepciones entre distintos países de la región y también entre diferentes estratos sociales. A partir de estas comparaciones, se ponen a prueba las tesis que han guiado más frecuentemente este campo de investigación. Estas proponen que, producto de los cambios culturales y tecnológicos introducidos por la modernidad tardía, existiría una desvalorización de la escuela secundaria, que se profundizaría en los estratos más pobres. Utilizando datos de las pruebas PISA 2012, se pone en evidencia que la mayoría de los estudiantes latinoamericanos mantiene una visión positiva de la escuela, aunque con algunos matices. Estos sugieren que la experiencia escolar de los estudiantes secundarios es compleja, y presenta algunas ambigüedades y ambivalencias, pero no confirman la preeminencia de visiones negativas de la educación media.

Palabras clave: educación; percepciones; estudiantes; Latinoamérica; modernidad.

Introduction

This article uses a comparative perspective to examine the secondary-level students' perceptions of the school in Latin America. Based on data from the 2012 PISA tests, it compares the perceptions of students from different countries and also from different social strata. Based on these comparisons, we analyze some of the premises that have guided research on how the changes introduced by the most advanced phases of modernity have affected perception of school among middle or secondary school students in Latin America.

Studies on the effects of late modernity on the school experience generally suggest there is an increasingly conflictive link between students and the school (Perelman, 1992; Duschatzcky & Corea, 2002; Dubet & Martuccelli, 1997; Tenti, 2014). This may have originated in two related processes. One of these would be more typical (although not exclusive) of sectors with higher levels of social integration and greater access to knowledge and technological changes introduced in this stage of modernity, while the other would affect less well-integrated social sectors, which have greater difficulties in accessing this knowledge and technology.

In both cases, students experience a certain estrangement from the school institution. However, in the case of the former, this is due to the influence of technological and cognitive advances on the perceptions of this social sector regarding the knowledge and modalities of engagement and teaching traditionally proposed by the school. In the second, on the other hand, it is the growing levels of exclusion to which some sectors of society are subjected that increase their distance from the school.

Although these premises have accounted for a large part of the research on perceptions of the school in late modernity, they have not always been confirmed by studies that have analyzed their effects in Latin America more empirically. As we shall see, some of these studies confirm that Latin American students perceive their relationships with teachers as conflictive and see the knowledge and forms of belonging proposed by the school as being irrelevant. However, others find student groups in which there is predominantly a positive view of the school and the links with educational authorities. Given that most of these results come from case studies, it is difficult to establish whether the differences found represent general trends or originate in the particularities of the groups studied.

In this paper, we attempt to make a contribution to this field of research by using a statistical approach to develop a comparative perspective across countries and social strata. While the limitations of these data do not allow us to fully determine the origin of the differences that emerge from the case studies, they do indicate certain general trends and ways in which to refine the assumptions that have guided this research in order to improve our understanding of these nuances.

Bearing these objectives in mind, in the next section we look in greater detail at the advances achieved in research on student perceptions of secondary school in Latin America. Subsequently, we explain the characteristics of the data sources used in our study, and the methods and variables applied. Then, we present the results that emerge from the analysis. Finally, we discuss the nuances that these results suggest with regard to the premises used to guide the research on the topic.

The school experience in late modernity

Those who have characterized the most recent stages of modernity describe it in terms of the association between new forms of sociability and social belonging, and the development of new knowledge and new technologies for production and communication. In short, technological and cognitive changes may be associated with a weakening of the institutional regulations of interpersonal relationships (family, friendship, work, etc.) and also with a transformation of the forms of organization of the productive process and a reduction in social security mechanisms, leading to greater levels of personal uncertainty and labor and economic instability (García Canclini, 1995; Castel, 1997; Giddens, 1997; Sennet, 1998; Lewkowicz, 2004)[1].

Taking into account the disparate effects of these transformations on different social sectors, the literature that examines the school experience at this stage has reported two associated processes: one that has greater effects on socially integrated sectors and another that has a larger influence on sectors with higher levels of exclusion.

In the case of the former, the studies suggest that the changes inherent to late modernity have affected the educational system in at least three ways: transforming the bases of traditional forms of authority and school order; generating interests and forms of belonging and sociability among young people that are removed from those that characterize the school; and introducing rapid obsolescence of school knowledge and forms of instruction (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1997; Tenti, 2000, 2014; Bauman; 2005; Giacobbe & Merino, 2015).

With regarding to the first issue, the *reflective* nature of interpersonal relations in the most advanced stage of modernity may have transformed the foundations of teaching authority[2]. Unlike the traditional school, where authority was legitimized in the institutional order, in the new school order the capacity for leadership is based on the teacher's ability to generate consensus among his or her students (Dubet, 2002, 2011; Martuccelli, 2009; 2017; Tenti, 2014).

The speed at which these transformations have taken place and their relatively tacit or implicit nature has not allowed teachers to be trained in this new modality of professional practice. Therefore, *discomfort* may have become a kind of feature that is characteristic of teaching, and the relations between teachers and students have become more indeterminate and conflictive (Sánchez, 2006; Dubet, 2009; Giacobbe & Merino, 2015).

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1. For reasons of space, it is impossible to provide an exhaustive description of late modernity here. These authors have provided some of the most relevant and well-known theories, about which we will offer some clarifications further on in the text.
2. Instead of being regulated by rigid institutional guidelines, interpersonal relations in late modernity would be the object of a reflective process: assessed and reworked according to the meaning they acquire and the degree of satisfaction they provide to the parties involved (Giddens, 1997).

The second source of conflict would arise from the growing incompatibility between the forms of communication and belonging promoted by the school and those of the sectors of young people (Martuccelli, 2009, 2017). Although some of these tensions had already been manifested in the middle decades of the 20th century (Coleman, 1961; Manzano, 2010), a new phase began to occur at the turn of the last century.

As Martuccelli (2009) pointed out, at this stage the new forms of communication *in networks* promote horizontal relational models, where there are no predefined and hierarchical senders and receivers. Likewise, the visual and oral culture that is typical of the new communication technologies do not provide bases that are compatible with the centrality of reading and writing in school practice. Finally, youth culture is dominated by spontaneity, the search for pleasure, creativity, and expression as an end in itself. By contrast, traditional school culture is characterized by promoting self-denial, fulfillment of duty, discipline, and patriotism as core values. Thus, the relational and communicational forms that are characteristic of the school system do not find fertile ground among the patterns of sociability and belonging that are developed by young people.

A third dimension of the conflict results from the rapid obsolescence of teaching modalities and knowledge disseminated by the school (Perelman, 1992; Burbules & Torres, 2013). This obsolescence is not only the result of more advanced information or knowledge surpassing that disseminated by the school, but that the immediate and multi-sited access to information through new technological devices removes the meaning from the traditional practice of obtaining it through memorized instruction conducted in the classroom (Martuccelli, 2016).

As we have already stated, in addition to these changes, the technological and cognitive transformations introduced by this stage of modernity have deepened the levels of social exclusion of those sectors that are traditionally excluded. On the one hand, this is due to the increasing levels of qualification and accreditation required to achieve full social integration. Although these greater demands have been accompanied by an increase in schooling, even among the traditionally more marginalized strata of society (although there are still significant differences between countries in this respect), this does not necessarily imply greater equality.

The increase in the population's access to higher levels of schooling has not fully solved the problem, although, in some respects, it has allowed greater proximity between the school and the sociability patterns of popular sectors. Like the fate of Tantalus, whose desires were always just out of reach every time he attempted to grasp them, this kind of massification of access to school increases the levels of education necessary to achieve full social integration (Susmel, 2012). Thus, as more sectors have gained access to higher levels of the educational system, these levels have lost their relative value. In tandem with this, the transformations that school institutions have had to undergo in order to include the traditionally excluded sectors has weakened their capacity to provide the necessary qualifications (Tenti, 2000).

In this context, a growing difference has emerged between educational establishments that have maintained or increased their capacity to provide these qualifications and those that have seen their capacity degraded. Differential access to these institutions depending on the social sector maintains or even deepens levels of social inequality, despite increased access to education for traditionally excluded sectors (Dubet, 2009). In this respect, access to school and greater familiarity with the roles performed within it may not per se guarantee access to the skills required by the labor market (Dubet, 1995). Thus, despite the massification of the educational system, it has maintained significant levels of segregation between social strata, reproducing the asymmetries of origin between students (Merle, 2012).

Another characteristic of late modernity that may have deepened inequalities is the incremental reduction of traditional social security mechanisms (the social security system, job stability, public health, etc.). These reductions have given the consumer and labor market priority as the locus of social integration (García Canclini, 1995; Lewkowicz, 2004). Therefore, sectors that lack easy access to them, including young people from the poorest strata, face a process of "de-civilizing" (Tenti, 2014, p. 7) or "de-subjectivization" (Duschatzky & Corea, 2002, p. 23).

That is to say, they find it increasingly difficult to develop socially recognized identities that facilitate their social integration, even through the devices typical of the classic stages of modernity: the family, the stable job and, of course, the school. The multiplication of conflicts with the institutional order of the school, as well as the emergence of new forms of aggression among students or from students towards teachers, constitute some of the emergent types of this transformation (Duschatzcky & Corea, 2002; Abramovay, 2003; Dubet, 2009).

In short, this group of studies also suggests that the conditions brought on by late modernity have led to increasingly conflictive links between young people and school. However, from this perspective, it is not that new knowledge and technologies have distanced young people from school, but rather that, for this social sector, the impossibility of accessing them have increased their levels of exclusion, to the point that the school experience has become unattainable or foreign to them.

Conflicting data

That said, if the premise that late modernity promotes conflictive links between students and the school in various ways has influenced much of the research in this field, this has not always been confirmed by the data collected by various studies in Latin America. It is not the case that these studies have always shown evidence that is incompatible with this general premise, but although some data are consistent with it, other data reveal a complexity that makes it necessary to consider this more carefully.

For example, a text by Miranda López (2012) shows that students in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay experience significant discomfort regarding the standards of behavior proposed by the school. Similarly, students in these countries perceive the school as demanding, removed from their interests, and relations with teachers as distant and cold (Miranda López, 2012). So, from a comparative perspective, the study finds evidence that is consistent with the premise that there is an estrangement between the forms of knowledge, relations, and belonging proposed by the school and those developed by the students.

In turn, the data presented in this study agree with those produced by other research in certain countries. In the case of Chile, for example, Sapiains and Zuleta (2001) or Metiffogo and Sepúlveda (2005) present interviews in which students also express discomfort in their relationship with teachers. Meanwhile, Tapia, Pantoja, and Fierro (2010)—in the case of Mexico—Dussell, Brito, Nuñez, and Litichever (2006) and Saintout (2007)— in the case of Argentina—or Rodríguez (2002), Calicchio, de León, Gutiérrez, Lorenzo, and Radakovich (2004), and Richards (2009)—in the case of Uruguay—show that students in these countries also express estrangement or distance from the school.

However, at the same time, other studies also reveal nuances. In the case of Colombia, De Giraldo and Mera (2000) find that for students in that country school generates feelings of satisfaction insofar as they manage to establish positive relations with their peers and progress with their studies. Meanwhile, Meza's (2017) analysis of the situation in Mexico shows varied perceptions. While in some cases students reject the rigidity of the disciplinary system, even the same students value other aspects of the institutional order. For example, they feel that certain regulation of appearance and forms of bonding that take place at school allow them to acquire a socially valued identity.

In the case of Argentina, various studies suggest the existence of complex or ambivalent perceptions among students, although they are not necessarily contradictory. Specifically, they show that different students can experience school in different ways or value the same experience in different ways. For example, a study carried out by Fundación SES (2018) based on a survey of 900 cases showed that the students who participated generally perceived school as an agreeable place. Only a minority linked the school to negative experiences, such as violence,

boredom, or being excessively demanding. Meanwhile, another study in Argentina found students who value aspects of the school experience, which appeared as a source of conflict in several of the previous ones, such as "the relation with the teachers who teach and support them; and … the demands, regarding the level of studies and the general standards" (Llinás, 2009a, p.96). Conspicuously, among these students, *criticism* of the school does not demonstrate distancing from the traditional institutional model, but rather the claim that it conforms to it. Students question the infrastructure problems of some schools and the deficits of those that have a low academic level and which generate inequality with respect to others that have a higher level (Llinás, 2009b).

Interestingly, the comparison of the perceptions of Argentine students from different social strata reveals a certain uniformity in their perception of school, although they do contain certain nuances. In all strata, school appears as a place of belonging and transmission of relevant habits and values. However, among the lower income sectors it is seen as a protection from the contexts and habits that lead to marginality, such as drug use or joining criminal gangs. On the other hand, among those with greater resources it is perceived as transmitting the cognitive and attitudinal predispositions that reproduce the social belonging of the new generations (Tiramonti & Minteguiaga, 2007).

In summary, the field of studies on student perceptions of middle or secondary school show an interesting tension. While some studies find data that confirm the premise that there is a process of estrangement between the students and the school, others reveal perceptions that continue to position secondary education as a relevant place in terms of being a space for sociability, belonging, and access to knowledge. As we have pointed out, although the statistical data presented later in this paper do not allow us to fully resolve this issue, they do provide a more generalized view of perceptions of the school among middle or secondary school students in Latin America.

Sources, Variables, and Methods

The data used in this study come from the student questionnaire implemented in the PISA 2012 tests. We chose that year because, due to flaws in the sample framework, the 2015 data were not representative in Argentina's case (OECD, 2016), and the 2018 data had not yet been published when this study was carried out.

It is important to explain that the PISA databases do not contain data for all Latin American countries. They only include Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. On the other hand, the tests include 15-year-old students who are in the educational system. It is therefore representative of a specific group of students, which is not characterized solely by its age composition. As school dropout in many countries occurs mostly in lower-income sectors and before that age, the tests certainly underrepresent the poorest social strata (Krüger, 2019).

Despite these limitations, the base used includes variables that allow us to grasp certain dimensions of the school experience that have been considered to be affected by the most advanced stages of modernity: teacher-student relations, feelings of belonging to the school, and the valuation of schooled knowledge. However, it is important to acknowledge that they do so only partially. By asking closed questions, surveys tend to mold the opinions of respondents to a limited set of answers that tend to limit the nuances or ambiguities they capture to a certain extent (Cicourel, 1964).

For this reason, quantitative approaches to intersubjective phenomena tend to record their emergent dimensions, but are less sensitive to those that underlie them. That is to say, they recognize what is manifested at the level of discursive consciousness, but do not fully represent the preconscious dimensions that constitute these perceptions[3]. As we demonstrate below, although this does not invalidate the use of the variables from the PISA tests, it does oblige us to examine the possibilities and limitations that they show in each case.

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3. We refer to the distinction between discursive consciousness, where perceptions are reflectively elaborated and can be verbalized, and practical consciousness, formed by pre-reflective dispositions that actors do not fully control, although, when required, they can be reflectively elaborated by discursive consciousness, albeit only partially (see Giddens, 1984 for a more detailed discussion).

In this regard, a first set of variables that allows us to capture certain aspects of student subjectivity refers to student/teacher relations. In the tests, students are asked whether they think that they 'get along well with their teachers'; 'teachers are interested in them'; 'teachers listen to them'; 'they offer them help', and 'they treat them fairly'. Students can answer: 1) strongly agree, 2) agree, 3) disagree, and 4) strongly disagree. Lower scores represent good relations with teachers and higher scores represent more conflictive relationships. As these variables showed a positive level of association with each other (Cronbach's alpha = 0.810), we integrated them into a single common index called teacher/student relations.

These variables obviously do not capture the way in which students relate to their teachers in all its complexity. It is possible that, underlying these explicit manifestations, there are other perceptions that constitute this relationship and which could show different aspects. Notably, the questionnaire does not include questions on the strictly pedagogical aspects of the relationship: whether teachers explain clearly, if they stop when faced with content that is not understood, etc. Even so, the perceptions captured by these variables are not superfluous. While it cannot be assumed that they represent all of the components of the relationship between teachers and students, whether students feel listened to and helped by teachers or if they are treated fairly by them are still relevant aspects.

In addition to data on the relationship between students and teachers, the PISA tests provide a set of variables referring to the sense of belonging with respect to the school. In this case, students are asked whether they feel 'like outsiders' at school; if they 'make friends easily'; if they feel like they 'belong at school'; 'if they feel awkward at school'; 'liked by other students'; 'alone at school', whether they feel that the 'school is ideal or if they are 'satisfied with it'. This set of variables did not show a good level of association with one another, so it was not converted into a single common index.

However, those that represented negative or positive attitudes towards school did show a positive level of association. So, we composed two indicators that grouped different variables. The indicator of negative feelings towards school includes the variables 'I feel like an outsider', 'I feel strange', and 'I feel lonely' at school (Cronbach's alpha = 0.798). In turn, the indicator of positive feelings towards school gathers the remainder of the variables that forms the category of feelings of belonging that we discussed previously (Cronbach's alpha = 0.796). All of these variables could be answered according to a scale identical to the previous one. In the case of negative feelings, low scores represent greater aversion to school. In the case of the indicator of positive feelings, these represent greater affinity towards the school.

Along the same lines as the previous case, these variables do not allow us to fully examine the relationship between the forms of belonging proposed by the school and those that characterize the students. For example, they do not include specific questions regarding disciplinary standards that are a frequent source of conflict. However, although they do not capture all the dimensions that could characterize them, they do allow the estimation of some that are certainly relevant (such as feelings of belonging and satisfaction with the school, or feelings of loneliness or estrangement that the school could cause, etc.).

The questionnaire presents another set of variables in the category of attitudes towards school. This includes statements such as school: 'provides little preparation for life'; 'is a waste of time'; 'is useful for work'; 'is useful to get a job'; 'provides preparation for university'[4]. Students could agree or disagree with these statements on a scale just like the previous ones. In this case, lower scores could represent good or bad feelings about the school depending on the wording of the statement. These variables were not significantly associated with each other, so we did not convert them into a common indicator and will analyze them independently. Here, the possibilities and limitations of the two previous cases are repeated. It is possible that not all of the valuation of school knowledge

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4. Other variables were contained in the category, but they were not included because they referred to highly varied attitudes: 'I enjoy good grades', 'making an effort is important', 'it gives me confidence', etc.

is based on its usefulness for entering the labor market or continuing studies. In fact, the questionnaire does not ask about the *interest*, beyond its usefulness, that the knowledge transmitted by the school may generate. However, although these variables do not allow us to assess the students' perception of the knowledge disseminated by the school in all its complexity, they do at least enable us to estimate some of its relevant aspects.

Finally, the database includes an indicator of economic, social, and cultural level (ESCL), which we use to estimate the students' social stratum of origin. This indicator takes into account the highest educational level attained by the parents, their type of occupation, and the availability of durable, technological, and cultural goods in the home (see OECD, 2013, for more details). The indicator is presented as a continuous quantitative variable, which we divided into terciles in this case in order to establish the average perceptions of the school on the part of students from different social strata. By allowing us to differentiate student perceptions by social sector, this variable indicates whether there are indeed higher levels of conflict in sectors with greater social exclusion. This does not enable us to assess the underlying causes of these perceptions, such as whether they are linked to frustrations related to the impossibility of attaining the knowledge the school imparts or conflict with the forms of belonging or behavior that it proposes. However, it does allow us to estimate generally whether different social sectors have higher or lower levels of conflict with the school.

Results

In this section we show the behavior of the variables that measure the relations between students and teachers, feelings of belonging to the school, and the valuation of school knowledge, beginning with an estimate of their general incidence. We will then show the distribution of the data by country and then by social sector. In line with this plan, Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of the indices of teacher/student relations, negative feelings towards the school, positive feelings towards the school, and the different questions referring to attitudes towards the school.
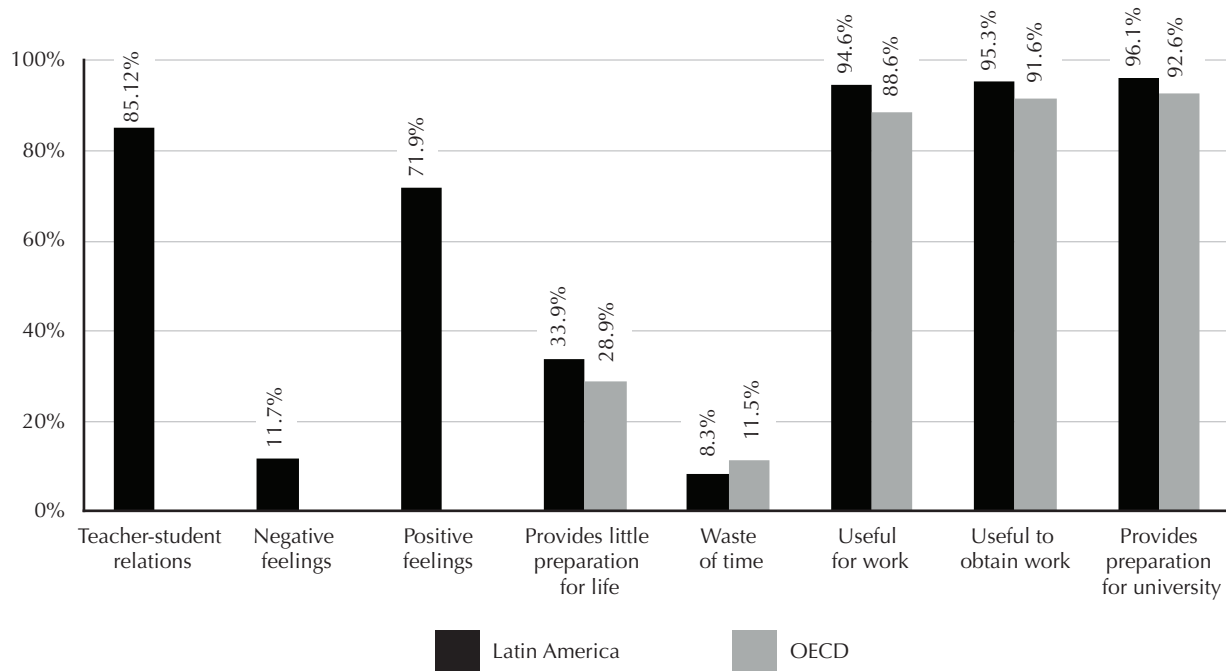

Figure 1. *Perceptions of secondary school(percentage of students that agree or strongly agree).*
Source: PISA 2012.

The data show that, with regard to these aspects, the majority of Latin American students have favorable perceptions of school. More than 80% of those surveyed say they have good relations with their teachers, 70% express positive feelings towards school, and more than 90% say that school is useful for work or future studies. The variable that expresses the greatest distancing of students from school is that which refers to general preparation for life. Around 30% of the students feel that the school provides poor or little preparation in this regard. That is to say, although the majority value the knowledge disseminated by the school as an input for work and higher education, a small but significant percentage does not believe it is useful as a resource for a more comprehensive life project.

It is clear that when we consider that these variables only capture certain aspects of the students' perceptions, we cannot assume that they express the totality of their school experience. As we stated, due to the limitations of the research instrument itself (the survey), the result possibly emphasizes the more explicit or conscious dimensions and tends to make them more homogeneous than they really are. However, what these data suggest is that, if there is a distancing or estrangement between the students and the school, it does not occur in all aspects of that connection. Although the survey cannot fully capture these relationships, it does indicate that, in some aspects of the student experience, forms of belonging and appreciation do still exist between the students and the school.

Figure 2 shows that this result tends to be common to all Latin American countries. Although there are some differences that we will discuss below, in all of them the majority of students have similar perceptions of their relations with teachers, show similar feelings about the school, and value the knowledge that it imparts in a similar way. Therefore, the trends that we captured for the region are also confirmed for each country, albeit with slight variations.
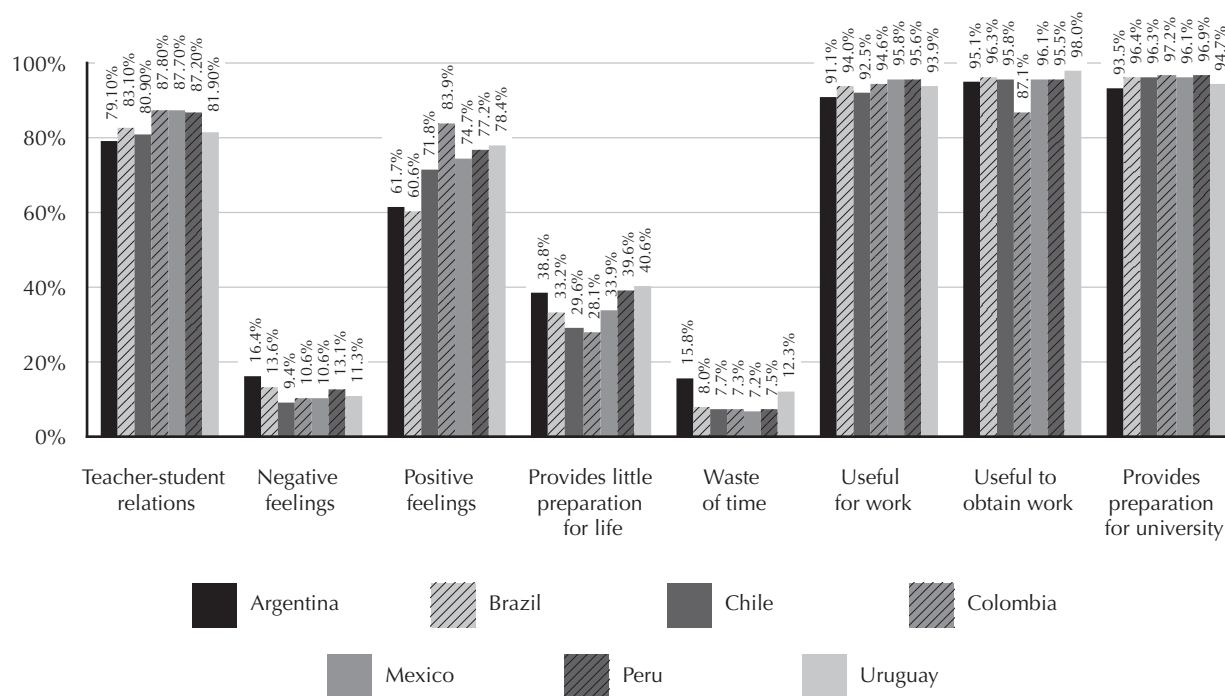

Figure 2. *Student perceptions by country(percentage of students that agree or strongly agree).*
Source: PISA 2012.

The countries that show certain differences from the average are Argentina and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay. The former has a lower proportion of students who say they have good relations with their teachers (although they are still the vast majority). Argentina is also the country that has the largest minority of students

who have negative feelings towards school, who consider that it does little to prepare them for life, and that it is a waste of time. It is also the country where the fewest students believe that school is useful for work, helps to obtain a job, or prepares them for university (although those who do believe this are still a considerable majority).

Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay, meanwhile, show a less consistent pattern. In all three countries, the minorities who have negative feelings towards school, or who believe that it does not prepare them for life, or that it is a waste of time, are higher than the average for the region. However, unlike Argentina, these are not countries where the proportion of students who believe that school adequately prepares them to continue studying or enter the labor market is consistently lower than the regional average.

In other words, although these three cases show some differences, they do not display particularly different patterns to the rest of the countries. Strictly speaking, although in the case of Argentina the differences are more consistent, they are also not of a magnitude that substantially distinguishes them from the rest of Latin America[5]. Thus, what emerges from these figures is remarkable regional homogeneity, which, notwithstanding the nuances, suggests that there are aspects of the school experience that are common to most students in Latin America.

That said, when we look at the differences by social sector, there are no major changes in the general panorama, but some interesting nuances do emerge. Figure 3 shows that the majority of students in all social strata report having good relations with their teachers. Only a minority have negative feelings towards the school, while the majority express positive feelings. Similarly, a minority, albeit significant, suggest that school provides little preparation for life in general, and a very small minority believe that attending school is a waste of time. Meanwhile, almost all students believe that school prepares them for work and is useful to obtain a job, and also for moving on to higher education. So, in principle, comparing the variables by stratum indicates that the same trends seen at the general level are maintained in all of them.
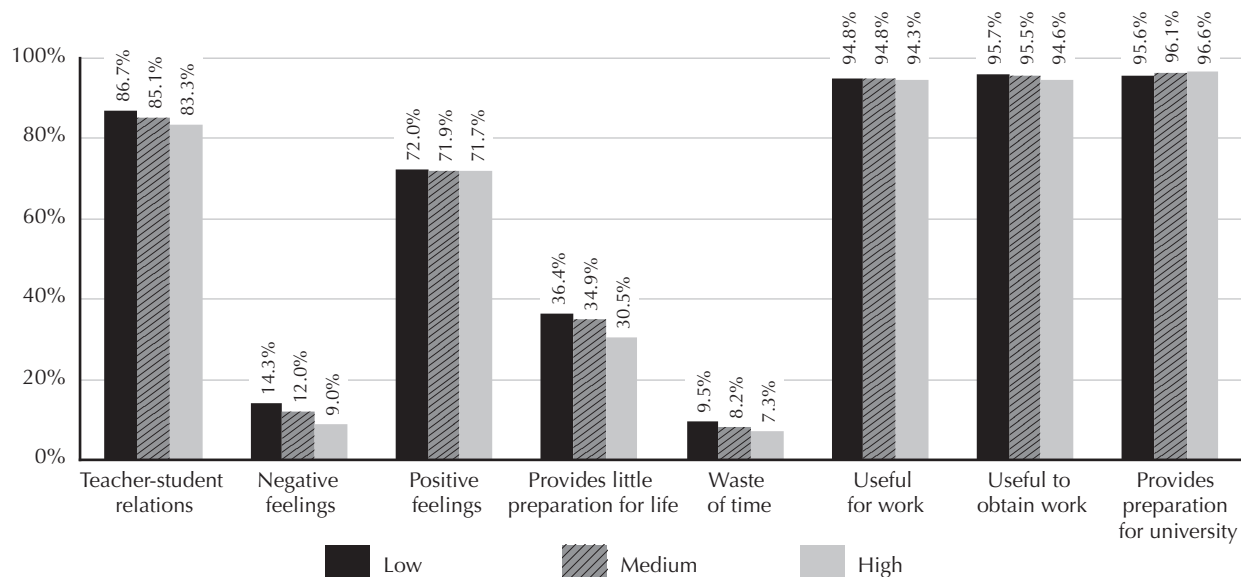

Figure 3. *Student perceptions by social stratum (percentage of students that agree or strongly agree).*
Source: PISA 2012.

5. The available evidence does not enable us to make clear conjectures about the reasons that could explain these variations. In the case of Argentina, its educational system has undergone deterioration, losing its capacity to act as a mechanism for social equality (Guadagni, Cuervo, & Sica, 2002), which could explain the more negative perceptions than in the rest of the region. However, this same trend cannot be confirmed in the other countries, where in some cases, such as Brazil, the inclusive capacity of the educational system has improved. Explaining these patterns would require additional research that is beyond the scope of this study.

However, if these general trends confirm what we learned from the figures above, the relative differences that emerge when we compare the incidence of each variable by social sector reveal interesting nuances. Some of the variables show that, in the social strata with the greatest material and cultural deficiencies, devaluation of and estrangement from the school tends to be greater. However, other variables reveal similar or even slightly more favorable perceptions than in other social strata, suggesting that this propensity is not homogeneous for all aspects of the school experience.

Specifically, the data indicate that there are more students from the poorest strata who believe that school is of little use for life, experience negative feelings towards it, and believe that attending school is a waste of time. At the same time, the proportion of students from this social stratum who believe that school provides preparation for university is lower. However, the proportion of students in this group who believe that secondary school provides preparation for work is somewhat higher. The majority who have positive feelings towards the school is also slightly higher in this stratum and, significantly, the majority who state that they have good relations with teachers is also relatively larger.

The data therefore suggest that certain aspects of the school experience are indeed more negative for the lower social strata than for the higher social strata, as suggested by the premises referring to sectors with greater difficulties regarding social integration. However, the data also indicate that this experience is heterogeneous, and that, as preparation for work and in terms of the relationship with teachers, it is satisfactory for a similar or even slightly higher proportion of students from these strata than others.

It is likely that this heterogeneity is linked to the position in the social structure. For example, the higher proportion of students from the lowest strata who report having positive feelings towards school or good relations with teachers may be due to the fact that the school appears as a space of containment that they do not find in other areas (Reimers, 2000). The lower proportion of students in this stratum who believe that school prepares them for university is linked to the fact that they consider pursuing higher education to be a more distant possibility (and perceive insertion into the labor market insertion as being more realistic, which may be why the majority who suggest that the school provides preparation for work is somewhat higher than in other strata).

But if these nuances show that there are indeed variations in the perceptions of students depending on their social origin, at least in the aspects that are captured by these variables, this does not imply that there is a homogeneously more negative perception of the school in the most disadvantaged sectors. What it does show is that the valuation of the various aspects of this experience is diverse among students of different social origins.

In short, although the variables we analyzed do not allow us to draw conclusive results, they do suggest that certain aspects of the school experience generate favorable perceptions among students. Some aspects of their relations with teachers, certain forms of school belonging, and certain knowledge imparted by the school are still relevant to them.

For the reasons already mentioned, these results do not allow us to make definitive conclusions. Some of the previous research based on case studies suggests that underlying these perceptions there may be others that do not fully agree with those that emerge from the PISA tests. Therefore, what seems to be pending in order to achieve greater understanding of students' experience of school is a more exhaustive and representative analysis of which aspects of the school experience still generate identification and which continue to generate estrangement in late modernity.

Discussion and Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to investigate Latin American students' perceptions of their secondary schools as a result of the changes introduced by late modernity. Based on the analysis of these perceptions, we sought to assess some of the premises that have guided multiple studies in this field. In short, we can identify a general premise (that late modernity generates increasingly conflictive links between students and school), which is supported by four complementary premises: (i) that the changes in models of school authority generated by the reflective character that interpersonal relationships have assumed in late modernity have resulted in more conflictive relations between teachers and students; (ii) that the new forms of communication and sociability of young people result in estrangement between students and the school; iii) that the speed with which information and knowledge accumulate and circulate in late modernity make the knowledge and learning modalities promoted by the school obsolete; and iv) that the cognitive and technological advances introduced by late modernity increase the degrees of exclusion of the most vulnerable sectors, increasing levels of conflict between them and the school.

As we have stated, the available data do not allow an exhaustive evaluation of the sophisticated theoretical elaborations from which these premises emerge. However, even with limitations, they do allow us to consider some important aspects and suggest ways in which to refine these starting points.

With respect to the first premise, the indicator on teacher-student relations allows us to estimate students' perceptions of the interest that teachers show in them, the degree to which they feel supported and listened to by their teachers, and the level of fairness with which they feel they are treated by their teachers.

Although the data from the PISA test show that students predominantly have favorable perceptions in this respect, this data alone does not allow us to draw definitive conclusions. Indeed, some of the case studies we cite show that, when taking into account other aspects of the school experience, such as levels of academic requirement, the perception of relations with teachers can be different. The students may feel that they are cold and distant. That is, while in some aspects the teacher/student relationship may generate favorable perceptions, in others it may not be perceived in the same way.

The investigation of the second premise shows a similar trend. The variables in the PISA tests estimate the feelings of belonging that the students have about the school. Specifically, they establish whether students perceive it as 'ideal, are 'satisfied', and feel that they 'belong' to it, or whether they feel lonely or strange at school. The results demonstrate that positive perceptions are predominant in these aspects. However, when contrasted with the results of the case studies, these results again point to the multidimensionality of the school experience. For example, some studies reveal that, when exploring disciplinary systems or interest aroused by the school, it can be perceived as excessively rigid or boring.

Analysis of the third premise produces a similar result. The variables in the PISA tests estimate students' perceptions of the knowledge transmitted by the school. Specifically, they consider how useful that knowledge is for work, continuing higher education, or developing a life project. In general, students consider that the knowledge transmitted by the school is useful, although in the latter case (general life) the proportion of students who think this is lower. However, we cannot consider that the usefulness of knowledge is the only parameter that influences student perceptions. Indeed, one of the case studies reveals that even though it is considered relevant, the perception that this knowledge is not distributed homogeneously across schools can lead to a negative valuation. In other words, it is not only the usefulness of knowledge that is valued, but also the equality of its distribution.

Examination of the final premise also shows nuanced results. Although the perception of school is fairly homogeneous among the different social sectors, some parameters show that certain aspects are more conflictive for the lower income sectors. For example, in the lowest stratum, there are larger minorities who have negative

feelings about school or perceive that it is a waste of time. However, at the same time there are slightly larger majorities who have favorable perceptions of their relations with teachers or who consider their school experience to be positive. This suggests that there is heterogeneity in the school experience in these sectors. In agreement with the fourth premise, in some aspects the school experience in these sectors is more conflictive than in others, but, contrasting with that premise, in other aspects it is more favorable. This result does not seem to enable confirmation or refutation of this premise. Instead, it suggests that there is a need for more careful analysis of which aspects of the experience lead to remoteness and which lead to belonging.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that several of the theories from which the premises that we have assessed in this paper emerge specifically propose that the school experience has a multidimensional nature. However, they tend to focus on the variation of that experience between different social sectors and also emphasize the most conflictive aspects. In comparison with this perspective, the PISA test data show that the school also produces experiences that are valued and generate feelings of belonging. That is to say, in at least *some aspects*, significant proportions of Latin American students have favorable perceptions of school. Although there are some nuances, this is a general trend across several countries and social sectors in the region.

Nevertheless, the limitations of these data do not enable us to assume that these perceptions are unique. Bearing in mind the findings of various case studies, we can consider the alternative that underlying these favorable perceptions there are others perceptions that conflict with them. Therefore, the possibility arises that both positive and negative experiences of the school coexist in the same group of students, or even that the same variation is part of the experience of the same student.

To sum up, what this suggests is that our understanding of the school experience in late modernity could be enriched by introducing premises that allow us to identify this complexity. That is, by incorporating questions or parameters that allow us to discern which aspects of the school experience have become conflictive and which continue to contribute to the formation of knowledge, forms of belonging, and socially valued relationships. Although the case studies contribute to this project because of their greater sensitivity to these nuances, they are limited because they do reveal how widespread these variations might be. In this respect, quantitative approaches that enable more extensive recognition of the positive and negative aspects of students' experiences are also relevant. Although we cannot propose a complete research agenda here, what this study does suggest is that this methodological combination could possibly enable us to make more progress in understanding this complexity.

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