Article

What factors predict the engagement of dropouts in alternative secondary schools in Chile?

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Abstract
Improvement in education has been one of the strategies of the government of Chile to reduce economic inequality. To that end, it recently established a system of Second Opportunity Centers that enroll out-of-school youth who have not completed high school. The system is modeled on so-called alternative schools operating in Europe and the United States. This study reports results on the first survey of students. Questionnaires were completed by a representative sample of 1112 students, drawn from 18 of the Ministry of Education's 134 Centers. Most of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their program, but there were significant differences between boys and girls, and across centers. Differences are explained by program activities in which students are engaged. Male students were more likely to have dropped out of regular high school because of academic difficulties; they are more likely to be engaged in the centers' sports activities. Girls were more likely to have left their school because of a family situation. They are more engaged in the centers' academic activities. The findings suggest how the centers' program could be made more effective in retaining students to graduation.

Keywords
Alternative schools, Chile, educational reintegration, gender, second opportunity, student dropouts

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Introduction

Student disaffection and non-completion of secondary school is of major concern in Chile where a progressive government seeks to reduce educational inequality (Cummings, 2015; Espinoza, González, McGinn, Castillo, & Sandoval, 2018). Chilean officials are concerned that while secondary school completion rates are relatively high (90% graduate), non-completers are disproportionately from lower socio-economic status (SES) groups (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional, 2014). Until recently, only a portion of early leavers have taken advantage of existing 're-engagement' programs, and most of those did not graduate (Espinoza, Loyola, Castillo, & González, 2016).

With the re-establishment of democracy in 1990, governments in Chile have sought to provide education for all through high school (Cox, 2012; Donoso, Castro, & Davis, 2012; Espinoza, Castillo, & González, 2013). Reforms have emphasized both improvement of quality and inclusion. Chile initiated separate programs and schools for students with special needs about 26 years ago. In 1998, the government mandated inclusion of these students in 'mainstream' schools (García-Cedillo, Romero-Contreras, & Ramos-Abadie, 2015; Godoy, Meza, & Salazar, 2004). Enrollments reached about 30,000 students. Dropouts, however, are an even larger group than students with special needs. Defined as 'excluded' by some (United Nations Children's Fund & Fundación Súmate, 2012), there are about 130,000 out-of-school youth who have not completed high school.

Non-governmental groups had since 1989 provided 'second chance' schools for younger dropouts (Alvarado et al., 2013). Six schools offered these youth a chance to complete high school, but until recently, the government's programs were limited to training for employment of older youth and adults.

In 2015 the Ministry of Education announced the creation of a special program aimed specifically at out-of-school adolescent students (MINEDUC, 2015). Designated officially as Integrated Centers for Youth and Adults (CEIA) and known as Second Opportunity schools, these institutions enroll adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age. They admit students who, for one reason or another, have not completed their formal education and who have been out of school for at least 2 years. Their programs offer either a primary or secondary school certificate, during the day or evening. The programs are intensive, and progress is accelerated; in one calendar year, students can complete two grades of high school.

The Second Opportunity schools in Chile combine elements from two kinds of public alternative schools. Both were designed to reduce the non-completion rate. In the United States and the United Kingdom students at risk of failure or expulsion were offered enrolment in special schools that used different methods but taught the same curriculum (Foley, 2006; Raywid, 1994; Schwab, Johnson, Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016). In Europe, some alternative schools were designed to attract older youth who had withdrawn from school before completion. These 'second chance' schools put more emphasis on skill training and job preparation (Day, Mozuraityte, Redgrave, & McCoshan, 2013). Several Latin American countries (other than Chile) adopted the second chance model of Europe (Eroles & Hirmas, 2009).

In Chile as elsewhere young people withdraw from school before graduation for many reasons (Bernard, 2018; Rumberger, 2011). Some leave because of persistent failure, but more often because they are stressed by dysfunctional families (parents separated or absent), drug addiction, alcoholism, or early adolescent pregnancy. Researchers have reported more than 100 different reasons for early withdrawal (Bowers & Sprott, 2012).

An important number of students work and study, and have formed their own family (Espinoza et al., 2018). As a consequence, the risk vulnerability level of the (Second Opportunity) school population is much higher than that of the population in traditional schools.

The Ministry of Education first developed a detailed explanation of its expectations for how the new schools will be structured and operated. It then, at the national level, solicited proposals to organize and operate Second Opportunity Schools (MINEDUC, 2016). Proposals were evaluated, among other things on the extent to which the new school would promote significant changes in teaching practices and relationships between teachers and students. Proposals were allowed considerable autonomy in choice of pedagogy to develop knowledge anchored in the community and relevant to adolescents and young adults. Preferred teaching methods would include discussion, and group work focused on daily life and practical issues in the lives of the students. Teachers and students were free to develop their own materials, in addition to or replacing text books. As examples the solicitation referred to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Eroles & Hirmas, 2009) projects in other Latin American countries. Recreational and cultural activities were to be incorporated into the curriculum as a method for integration and inclusion, with special attention to the recuperation of ancestral knowledge and practices from the community.

In all this, schools were to be made open to the needs of the youth and the knowledge of the community in which they were located. Classrooms were to be distinguished by high levels of active participation of all. Teacher-centered, expository instruction (common in traditional schools), with little relationship with environment and community, was to be avoided. Emphasis was to be on development of emotional support and self-esteem among all the actors.

This study is the first system-wide assessment of student response to the new system of Second Opportunity Centers. Assuming that satisfied students would be more likely to remain to graduation, the study sought to identify which types of Center practices met with highest approval. Future studies will assess the effectiveness of specific practices within each type.

Review of prior research on types of dropouts

Why students withdraw from school

Most research on early withdrawal has assigned causal responsibility for the act to the student (Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). For example, early leaving has been explained as a function of low self-esteem (generated in or outside of school) and frustration with the school experience (Finn, 1989). Disruptive behavior is more often the critical factor for older students (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). The pain or embarrassment of academic failure may be a sufficient motivation to leave, but so too may be unpleasant treatment (especially bullying) by classmates or teachers (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013). Students may feel isolated with no sense of 'belonging' in school, and attracted to leave by more pleasant experiences and relationships outside (Hughes, Im, & Allee, 2015; Mills & McGregor, 2010). In some instances, offers of employment may meet pressing family needs or contribute to self-esteem, encouraging students to leave school (Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999; Montmarquette, Viennot-Briot & Dagenais, 2007). As noted above, many different factors are associated with leaving school (Bowers, 2010; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Morrison & Shoon, 2018). None of these factors, taken individually, are highly predictive.

Some research has attempted to identify clusters of factors that account for withdrawal. Voss, Wendling, and Elliott (1966) identified three categories of dropouts. The researchers labeled these groups as the 'retarded' because of their low grades; the 'involuntary' because they more frequently were ill, had accidents, or had experienced family disruption; and the 'capable'. This last was a miscellaneous category including students who may or may not have had low grades and test scores but 'failed' for other reasons. It often was found to be the most numerous. A separate study

carried out in Quebec identified four categories of students at risk of early withdrawal. The first was labeled as Quiet, because they had no distinguishing characteristics. The second was called Disengaged because they participated in few school activities. Low-Achievers were those who received low grades. The Maladjusted were those with a history of misbehavior (Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000).

Voss and his colleagues also noted that the causal factors associated with leaving early change as students mature (Voss et al., 1966). Along the way, there are conditions that increase the likelihood of the decision to withdraw; these include the absence of family, parental and personal (intellectual and emotional) resources, and community and school experiences that make school unattractive (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Kern & Friedman, 2008; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Early withdrawal from school has been explained as a 'life course process' (Dupéré et al., 2015). Earlier events form interests and develop abilities that can restrict social and academic success in school, but not result in a decision to withdraw. At any given time, however, a particularly stressful event might trigger the decision to leave.

The effects of temporal events are mitigated by the adolescent students' level of 'integration', engagement, or involvement in the school community (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012), either through participation in the academic aspects of that community or its social aspects (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 2011). Defined in behavioral rather than emotional terms, engagement is an active process moderated by contextual variables (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2016). Family SES and parents' education, through their influence on prior academic success, are correlated with a student's current level of engagement, but are not direct determinants (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Instead, engagement is influenced primarily by (the student's perception of) the authenticity of the instructional process, and the level of support for learning in the school environment. Instruction that is challenging and seen as related to the 'real' world of the student is authentic. A supportive environment (classmates, teachers, and family) respects, encourages and assists learners, and sets high expectations (Gordon, 2010; Marks, 2000). Given the dynamic nature of engagement, however, it is difficult to predict with any accuracy which at-risk students will leave a given program. The complexity of relationships reduces the likelihood that any given intervention will result in retention (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Re-engagement of adolescent dropouts

The variety of situations that lead to dropping out is matched by diversity in the efforts to re-engage out-of-school youth in their education process (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager, 2009; Center For Promise, 2013; Polidano, Tabasso, & Tseng, 2012; Zachry & Crary-Ross, 2014). To do so requires inclusion in that process. It is not enough for the youth to just be present, instead he or she must be fully active in both the academic and social activities of the school. As Hornby (2015) has argued, it also is not enough to just change instructional practices and curriculum content, effective education must also actively include the learner in the process. The requirements of effective instruction (individual and planned, intensive and goal-directed, evidence-based, collaborative) must be met and accompanied by engagement of the learner in every aspect of the process (Salend, 2011). This latter requires a relationship of trust between teacher and student, which in turn requires teachers to respect an individual's diversity. This makes instruction differentiated or personalized, built upon close relationships between teachers and students (Putwain, Nicholson, & Edwards, 2016; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2016; Vázquez & Ojeda, 2010). What works to retain students in traditional secondary schools will not work as well for those who withdrew or were expelled (Hansell, 2016).

For some types of students, enrolment in an alternative school has been shown to be a better solution than re-enrolment in a traditional school. A 2001 longitudinal study of 3856 first-time ninth graders in an urban area in the United States found that 1735 (35%) students dropped out once. Of these, 419 (31%) eventually re-enrolled in a traditional school; only 77 (5%) graduated within 5 years (Berliner, Barrat, Fong, & Shirk, 2008).

This is accomplished by increasing time spent on instruction and learning, but also by changes in program structure and pedagogy. In this case, inclusion requires more than just presence of diverse students; it requires their active participation as collaborators in the teaching–learning process (Thomas & Loxley, 2001). In that respect, all schooling should be inclusive education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014).

The success of alternative schools is attributed to the following: operating in small settings, paying attention to students' needs inside and outside the classroom, providing more access to adults, attending to family or personal problems, and providing counseling (Bland, Church, Neill, & Terry, 2008; Dynarski, 2001; Raywid, 1994). Alternative schools in Australia called 'flexible centres' relaxed rules and did away with uniforms. Students in these schools frequently used adjectives such as 'caring, small, community, family, respectful, equal, supportive, non-judgmental, mutual responsibility' when discussing their 'flexi' school/center (Mills, McGregor, Baroutsis, Te Riele, & Hayes, 2016). What most pleased Canadian students in alternative schools was not what was taught but rather relationships with teachers (Morrissette, 2011). An extensive review of studies concluded that alternative schools can provide a sanctuary in which students build self-esteem and develop a sense of community (O'Gorman, Salmon, & Murphy, 2016).

We interpret the research reviewed above as suggesting the following hypotheses:

1. The youth who have enrolled in the Second Opportunity Centers in Chile withdrew from regular schools for a variety of reasons related to experiences that occurred at various times in their life.
2. Students vary in their level of motivation to continue in their current Center and to succeed in their adult life. This variation is related directly to more recent experiences linked to withdrawal and to gender.
3. Factors associated with withdrawal are also linked to student participation in Center activities.
4. Student engagement with their Center varies according to the kind of activities in which they participate.

Methods

The study reported here was designed to identify and characterize the factors associated with students' participation in activities of their Second Opportunity Center. The objective was to determine whether different categories of students participate in different kinds of activities, and their impact on student satisfaction.

Sample

Participants in the study were selected using a cluster sample, stratified by region. Other studies (MINEDUC, 2010) have indicated that dropouts are distributed proportionately across regions, in clusters corresponding to their location. The sampling frame was constructed with technical assistance from the Ministry of Education, using 2016 statistical data.

Table 1. Universe and sample size by regions.

Regions	Universe	Sample	%
Metropolitan region	9832	361	32.5
Other regions	20,429	751	67.5
Chile	30,261	1112	100.0

In 2016, there were 134 Second Opportunity Centers in Chile, at least one in each of the country's 15 regions. Total national enrolment was 30,261 students, about 3 percent of all students enrolled in secondary school in Chile during 2015–2016.

Sampling was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, Centers were chosen randomly from each region in proportion to the region's share of total enrolment. This yielded a total of 18 Centers. During visits to each of the chosen Centers, students were recruited to complete a survey questionnaire. The result was a sample of 1112 students, with a sampling error of 2.88 per cent. Table 1 indicates population and sample size distinguishing between metropolitan Santiago and other regions in the country.

Data collection

Each of the 18 Centers was visited at the end of 2016. At this moment the Ministry of Education lacked descriptive information about the new student population. A questionnaire survey was chosen as the most efficient way to collect basic data. Students filled out a 30-minute questionnaire that asked about their families and living conditions, personal characteristics, customary behaviors, ambitions for the future, and evaluation of the activities of their Second Opportunity Center. The questionnaire also recorded the number of persons living at their residence, students' age in years, and the number of times they had repeated. There were no missing data.

Analysis

Most comparisons in this study rely on cross-tabulations of simple variables. Some questions permitted multiple responses. To identify groups or clusters of students with shared responses, we applied (the SPSS version of) Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test of sampling adequacy to ensure that a factor analysis would be appropriate. If so, we then carried out a principal components analysis. If the analysis explained a sizable proportion (more than 50%) of the common variance, we then conducted a cluster analysis using the SPSS *k*-cluster method, *k* being the number of factors produced by the factor analysis.

Results

We have organized the findings in four sections. In the first, we describe the construction of a scale that measures student approval of or satisfaction with the Center facilities and staff. Research on alternative schools suggests that satisfied students are more likely to persist to graduation (Dulfer, Rice, & Clarke, 2017; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

The two sections that follow describe measures of characteristics or attributes, and behavioral patterns, of the students in the sample. The first covers experiences prior to secondary school; the second introduces variables based on more recent experiences. In each case, we report whether the variables are related to scores on the engagement scale.

In the next section, we describe Center activities and student participation in them. We identify variables linked to differential participation in activities. We conclude by examining the relationship of participation to levels of satisfaction or engagement.

Students' satisfaction with their Second Opportunity Center

Data were collected before any student had finished the academic year, and no academic performance data were available. It is possible, however, to assess student satisfaction with their experience up to this point in time. The level of satisfaction serves as a proxy measure of engagement in the Center and its program.

Students were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale ranging from 'Very Good' to 'Very Bad', four distinct aspects of the Center's operation and facility, or site. The average rating of 'professors' ability to listen' was 2.14, between 'Good' and 'So-So or OK'. The average score on 'professors' ability to solve problems' was 2.25; classrooms, 2.31; and computer labs, 2.45. The ratings are highly correlated with each other. We combined them in a sub-scale called Process Engagement.

A second set of questions asked students to rate Center staff. Professors were given an average rating of 2.04; secretaries and support staff, 2.13; other professionals (psychologist, social worker), 2.22; and the Center director, 2.25. Classmates were rated 2.45 on average. We combined the items into a sub-scale called People Engagement.

A single question asked whether the professors' activities had helped the student learn. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), the average response was 1.97. The score on this item correlated .42 and .40 with scores on the site and staff scales.

Factor analysis of the nine items yielded a single factor that accounts for 45 percent of the total variance. The nine items were combined in a single scale, called 'Overall Engagement', that is highly reliable (α = .843). The high average on this scale (2.22) suggests that the Second Opportunity Centers are approved by (about half of) their students.

Student background characteristics

There were 498 girls and 614 boys in the sample all of whom had left or been expelled from a traditional high school. As indicated in Table 2, about half the students were 17 years of age. The great majority had repeated one or more grades, one-third beginning in elementary school. About 55 percent failed once or twice in secondary school. Boys and girls did not differ in their age when they withdrew from the traditional school.

Only one-third of the students were living with both parents at the time of the survey. Some 42 percent live with their mother alone, and 10 percent with their father. Younger males are more likely than females to live with their single mother. The differences by gender in living arrangements are statistically significant, but not the differences by age group (see Table 2).

About 35 percent of the students' parents or guardians were reported to have completed only primary education or less, 48 percent had completed secondary, and 17 percent had some level of post-secondary education (university or technical training). Education levels are not related to whether the family is intact or not. Slightly more than 60 percent of the students had lived in homes that were owned rather than rented; that proportion is significantly higher if the student is living with both parents or one or more grandparents. Almost half the students stated that the economic situation in their household growing up was 'good' or 'very good'. This proportion was higher (70%) if they were living with both parents and or their mother, and lowest if living with their father alone. Intact families are slightly larger in size. Slightly more than 20 percent of the students were currently employed (in entry-level jobs).

Table 2. Person(s) student lives with, by gender and age.

Gender	Age	Both parents (%)	Mother only (%)	Father only (%)	Grandparent (%)	Uncle, aunt, sibs (%)	Total
Female	13–15	21.3	41.7	10.2	5.5	21.3	127 (25.5)
	16	40.4	42.1	7.9	7.0	2.7	114 (22.9)
	17–18	37.0	41.6	10.5	5.8	5.1	257 (51.6)
n		168	208	49	30	43	498 (100.0)
Male	13–15	22.2	48.9	9.6	9.6	9.7	135 (22.0)
	16	31.6	44.9	10.1	11.4	1.9	158 (25.7)
	17–18	39.3	38.0	8.7	8.1	5.9	321 (52.3)
n		206	259	57	57	35	614 (100.0)

Most (83%) of the students stated that they do not belong to an indigenous population; of those that do, the majority are Mapuche, the largest indigenous group in Chile (130 or 12% of the total sample).[1] Ethnic identity does not differ by gender, and Mapuche students fail and repeat at the same rate as all other students. Mapuche students do not differ from others in their level of satisfaction with the Center.

Consistent with the findings of research in the United States and Canada (Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006; McDermott, Anderson, & Zaff, 2017), slightly more than half of the present had no discernible attributes or difficulties that would explain their early withdrawal. Their most common difficulty is concentrating (25.6%), followed by vision problems (19.4%; see Figure 1). Only 1.9 percent stated that they had 'intellectual limitations'. In one-fourth of all households, however, there was another person who has a physical or mental condition or difficulty. There is no relationship between the number or type of permanent conditions and age. Households that had fair or poor economic conditions were more likely to include a person with one or more permanent conditions. Boys were slightly more likely to report having a difficulty than were girls.

Only one of all the variables described above, including gender, correlated above 0.10 with scores on the Satisfaction scale. Students currently working were more positive toward the program than those not working. The small correlation coefficient (0.107), while statistically significant (given the large sample size), indicates that changes in a student's working status would have very little impact on their level of satisfaction or engagement with the program.

Variables measuring more recent experiences

Most of the students currently do not belong to any clubs or organizations. The most popular activity (among a list of seven items) had been participation in a sports club (about 21%); about 7 percent of the students were involved in religious groups and another 7 percent in a football fan club.

The most common place for meeting with friends was in someone's home (60%), followed by 'the street' or in a park (46%). Less frequent sites are on the Internet (20%), in restaurants, movies, or in a commercial center or mall (12% each). Setting the cluster analysis software to form three groups, the largest was composed of persons who chose only Meet in Homes. It was made up of 58 percent of the sample of students. Girls more frequently than boys are in this cluster. A second cluster (25%) included students who meet friends on the street and in parks; boys outnumber girls in this group. The third cluster (17%) was made up of persons who meet friends in various settings (Figure 2).

A third question asked students what they do to relax (Figure 3). Listening to music is their most common activity (reported by 81%), followed by talking with friends (59%), being with family
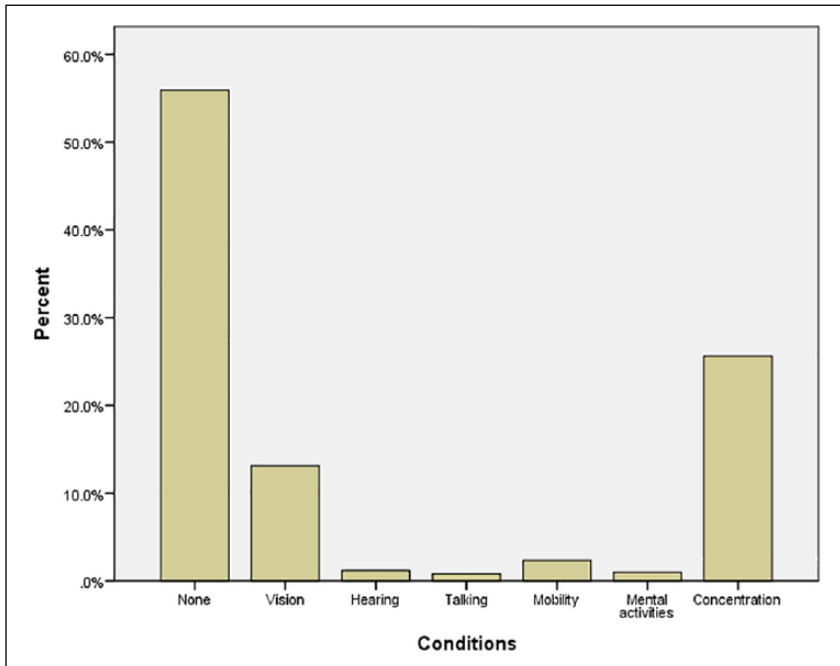
Figure 1. Distribution of responses to the question, 'Do you have any of the following permanent conditions or difficulties?'
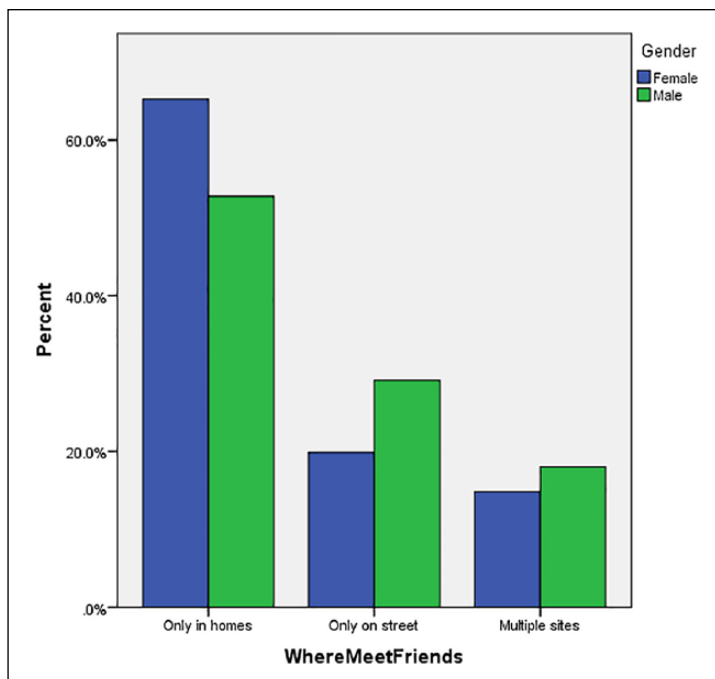

Figure 2. Where students meet friends by gender.
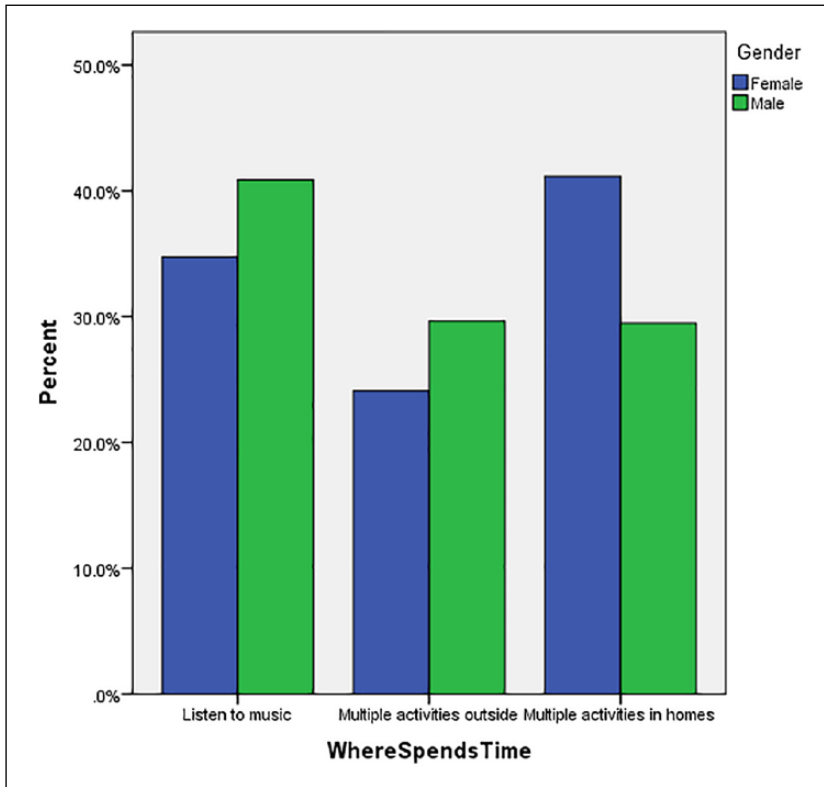$\chi^2 = 18.52$, $p < .000$.

Figure 3. Where spends time by gender.
$\chi^2 = 16.65$, $p < .000$.

(58%), or watching television (54%). Sports engage 40 percent (more often boys). Boys and girls differ significantly in the three-cluster model. Girls are more likely to meet friends in homes and listen to music and watch TV with their family, while boys more often (than girls) meet friends on the street, and are less likely to listen to music with family.

When asked to indicate the kinds of (problem) 'situations' that occur in their households, 20 percent of the students list none; 70 percent report 2 or fewer; 65 per cent are classified in the 'no special problem' cluster. Among students with problems, the most common is economic (41.5%), followed by lack of communication (40.6%) and lack of time for shared activities (31.2%). 'Bad relationships between parents and children' was chosen by 22 percent. Girls report (slightly) more problem situations than do boys.

Slightly more than half of the students (54.2%) report no discrimination by fellow students or others prior to coming to the Center. Physical appearance is the most common reason for being discriminated against (20%), followed by social class (12.1%). Girls and boys do not differ in terms of feeling discriminated against.

The questionnaire asked students to check all those 11 activities they would most like to do in the future. Slightly more than one-quarter indicated that up to now they had not thought about what to do in the future, but more than half could not be classified by their objectives. Most common among the objectives chosen was to 'earn money' and 'get a good job'. Only 18 percent checked 'study in a university'. The analysis indicated three distinct clusters of students: 23 percent

specified 'get a good job'; 25 percent combined four different outcomes: 'finish school', 'get a good job', 'earn money', and 'be with friends'; and 52 percent could not be classified. Boys are less explicit (less well-defined) than girls, but the difference is small.

What were the students thinking about the future? Almost all agreed that the education they were receiving is important for their future, but they differed in specificity. The cluster analysis identified one group (51.4%) associated with the more general response, '(The Center) is the only thing that will allow me to get ahead'. Another group (42.6%) was placed in the category 'will serve to make me a professional or technician (post-secondary diplomas)'. Girls were more likely than boys to choose the more specific response. Slightly more than half of the students would go to work, another third would continue studying. Less than 10 percent indicated they would go to work and perhaps go back to school several years later. There were no differences in responses of boys and girls.

When asked what might cause them to leave, 60 percent of the students chose the alternative, 'For now I have no reason'. Only 13 percent were in the 'want to work' cluster, and 27 percent picked 'if they expel me'. Students saw the consequences of leaving as having to take a bad job and look for some other training (54%), being paid badly (32%), or 'I wouldn't know what to do' (14%). In response to the third question, 54 percent of the students felt they would acquire useful skills by working.

None of correlations between the above variables and Overall Engagement were larger than $r = 0.07$, and for our purposes are considered insignificant. There were, however, several very significant differences between boys and girls in their scores on these variables. Boys are more likely ($p < .000$) to belong to more organizations than do girls. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to meet friends in homes (rather than in public places), and to list more plans for the future than do boys ($p < .000$). In part, this difference may be because more girls live with their own children than do boys.

Participation in the center and center interventions

Students were asked about organized activities in which they participated in their Center. Five alternatives were listed. The most common activity for students was sports and recreational activities (29.8%). Second were workshops offering psychological and social assistance, which attracted 19.2 percent of the students. Other workshops provided work-related training (14.5%), art and cultural activities (12.6%), or a variety of activities (18.5%). Most students (56.56%) participated in only one kind of activity. Cluster analysis distinguished three groups: those engaged in sports (41.5%), those in one or another workshop (23.6%), and the rest essentially inactive (34.9%). As expected from responses to other questions, boys were more likely to be in the Sports cluster, and girls in the other two (see Figure 4). These differences are highly significant.

Students were also asked what the Center had done to keep them in the program. The most common response was 'help students who have low grades' (47.7%), followed by 'help with family problems' (44.4%). Other alternatives were 'Talk with parents or guardians' (37.8%) or 'Help students who have behavior problems' (36.6%). Principal Component Analysis defined these four items as a single cluster that explains 52 percent of the common variance. Scores on the scale called NumberOfHelps ranged from 0 to 4. Girls reported more helps than did boys ($p = .002$).

Variables related to satisfaction or engagement

To understand the distinct reactions of groups of students to the Center's program, we constructed dummy variables (scored 1 if a member, 0 if not) based on the various cluster analyses. The
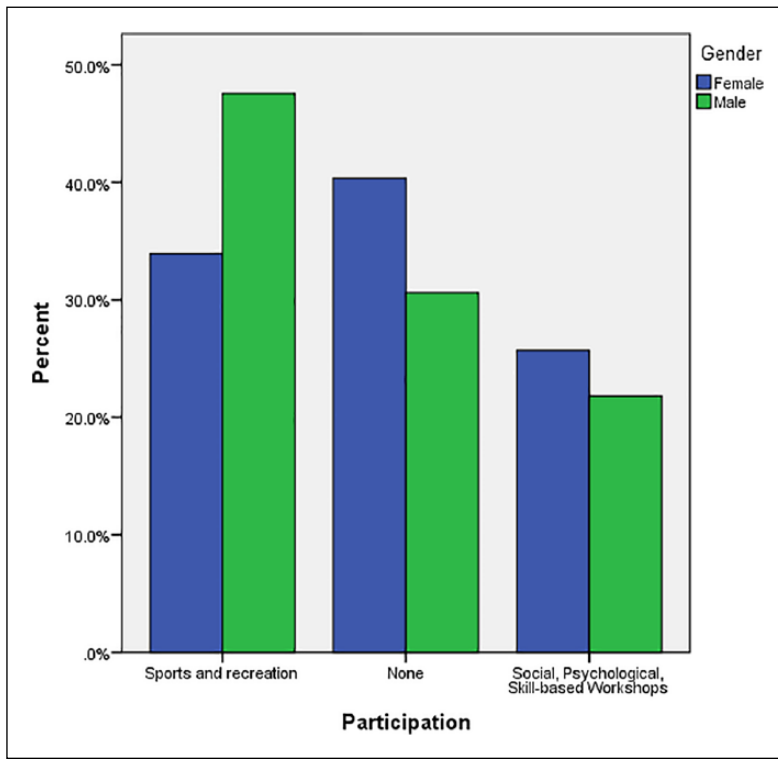
Figure 4. Participation in center activities by gender.
$\chi^2 = 21.52$, $p < .000$.

variables, listed in Table 3, are based on previous studies (e.g., Cornell et al., 2013; Day et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2011). The first cluster, 'Lives with both parents', includes one-third of the boys and the girls. Students in other living arrangements are scored 0. In some cases, two of the possible positive responses were similar in wording; we combined these into one category.

Most of the variables are scored with a 1, indicating a greater level of engagement. Two of the questions, however, one which asked about relationships with others in the household, and another the financial situation of the household, appeared likely to evoke a favorable response bias. In that case, it seemed that negative responses would provide a more reliable indication of the student's experience. For these variables, a value of 1 was assigned to students in the negative cluster. The variable 'Failed in Primary Level' is based on our calculation of the age at which the student first repeated. All students who repeated between the ages of 8 and 13 years were assigned the value 1 on this variable.

The only variable listed in Table 3 that is not a dummy variable is the last, 'Number of ways in which the Center helps'. As Table 3 shows, girls report receiving more helps than boys. We expected, therefore, that boys and girls engage differently with the Center program.

As a proxy for content of a Center's program, we computed means of student responses for each of the variables Sports, Workshops, and NumberOfHelps. The Centers differ significantly from each other in terms of mean scores on these variables. In one Center 67 percent of students participated in sports, compared to a low of 21 percent in another. In a different Center 59 percent attended one or more workshops, while in another only 21 percent. The lowest mean score of reported helps

Table 3. Differences in characteristics by gender.

Variable	Girls n = 498		Boys n = 614	
	n dummy	% of total	n dummy	% of total
Lives with both parents	169	33.7	206	33.6
Guardians' education, secondary and above	294	59.0	431	70.2
Not Indigenous	425	85.3	496	80.8
Not handicapped	277	55.6	345	56.2
Failed in primary level	145	29.1	225	33.6
Likes all forms of relaxation	186	37.3	137	22.3
Has never felt discriminated against	183	30.7	220	35.8
Ambition: Get a good job	140	28.1	137	22.3
Relations at home poor	117	23.9	129	21.0
Home economics poor	278	55.8	340	55.4
Participate sports	169	33.9	292	47.6
Participate workshops	138	25.7	134	21.8
Importance of Center: Gets me a diploma or degree	237	47.6	237	35.6
Number of ways Center helps	M = 1.42, SD = 1.08		M = 1.18, SD = 1.07	

was 0.99, compared to 2.0 for the highest. Participation in Sports and in Workshops is negatively correlated (–.597). Larger Centers have higher Sports scores and lower Workshops scores. Center average scores for boys were significantly different for all three variables, and significant for Sports and Helps for girls. We conclude that Center programs are not all the same and vary as a function of size (see Table 3).

Linear regression analysis was used to assess the relative influence or impact of the student variables on Engagement. We tested four different equations or 'models' assessing the joint effect of different sets of variables. The first model assesses the relationship of positive scores of variables defined by events at an earlier stage in the student's life. The second model employs answers to questions referring to more recent experiences and thoughts. The third includes three variables that refer clearly to the student's experience since enrolling in the Center. The fourth model includes all the variables which, for either girls or boys, were significantly related to Engagement.

Table 4 presents the results of tests of the student-level models for the 498 girls in this study. The column 'Family Background' includes the set of variables referring to earlier experiences. None of these variables are significantly related to the score on Engagement. Nor are the variables in the second model, based on more recent experiences and ambitions. The second model does indicate, however, that on average female students who consider their home life difficult (because of stress and bad relationships) are attracted to their experience in the Center. The third model is more helpful. It tells us that girls react positively to the kinds of assistance they have experienced in their current Center setting.

Using all the statistically significant variables (model 4) explains a higher proportion of variance in Engagement scores but requires some interpretation. The Get a Good Job variable is opposed to its counterpart (Keep Studying, Earn More, Make Friends, Get a Good Job). The negative beta loading means that girls who seek just a good job are less engaged in the Center. Participation in the Center's workshops has a direct effect on engagement, however, along with help from the Center's staff. The R^2 of 0.13 indicates that a few more students will persist to

Table 4. Regression of student variables on engagement, for girls.

	Family background	Current relationships	Center activities	Combined model
Constant	2.738*** (.081)	3.832*** (.049)	3.571*** (.052)	3.523*** (.079)
Lives with both	−.075 (.054)			
Secondary up	−.056 (.052)			
Not indigenous	.131 (.073)			.097 (.068)
Not handicapped	.091 (.052)			
Failed in primary	.024 (.056)			
Relaxes with family		.053 (.053)		.020 (.050)
Never discriminated		.046 (.055)		.008 (.052)
Get a good job (no further study)		−.061 (.060)		−.120* (.086)
Poor relationships		−.186** (.062)		−.142 (.059)
Home economy bad		.083 (.053)		
Gets me a title		.072 (.051)		.038 (.048)
Sports			−.025 (.057)	
Workshops			.093 (.062)	.130* (.055)
Number of helps			.272*** (.019)	.139*** (.019)
R^2	.017	.033	.092	.144
Adjusted R^2	.007	.021	.086***	.130***
Number of cases	498			

$*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .000.$

graduation in those Centers that choose to offer workshops and help to their students. The workshops have a modest effect.

The findings for boys are reported in Table 5. Boys, more than girls, are more likely to be engaged in their Center if they are happy at home (and experience little stress). Similarly, they can more easily engage with the Center if they have never been discriminated against or bullied. Perhaps these factors dispose them to be more favorable toward learning (rather than just going to work and earning a good salary). Boys also react well to workshops and appreciate the helping atmosphere of their Center. Perhaps they are more disposed to engage in Center activities when they are encouraged to believe that they can complete their education.

Although the size (enrollments) of Centers is related to how many students participate in sports or workshops, size has no direct effect on engagement. Addition of the size variable in the regression equation does not change the amount of variance explained.

Discussion

The data describing characteristics of the sample confirm what was reported in earlier research: students fail and leave school for a variety of reasons (Cornell et al., 2013; Day et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2011). Most leave with low (but not failing) grades. There are multiple explanations for their low academic performance. Academic ability is among the less important reasons for leaving, but it may affect attitudes (especially self-esteem) and social skills. If students enjoy positive relationships with other students (and/or with their teachers), they are more likely to remain in school even if they are not achieving high marks. In other words, early leaving is the result of an interaction between student characteristics and aspects of the traditional school environment and is the result of a long process (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The discomfort that results in early leaving is influenced by school social structures and practices, and attributes of fellow students.

Table 5. Regression of student variables on engagement, for boys.

	Family background	Current relationships	Related with center	Combined model
Constant	2.621*** (.080)	3.775*** (.049)	3.398*** (.055)	3.349*** (.066)
Lives with both	.031 (.055)			
Secondary up	−.079 (.056)			
Not indigenous	.157* (.065)			.067 (.060)
Not handicapped	.061 (.052)			
Failed in primary	.094 (.054)			
Relaxes with family		.117* (.060)		.141* (.056)
Never discriminated		.152** (.053)		.172** (.049)
Get a good job (no further study)		−.184** (.063)		−.222*** (.059)
Poor relationships		−.251*** (.063)		−.203** (.060)
Home economy bad		.008 (.051)		
Gets me a title		.153** (.051)		.099* (.048)
Sports			.104 (.056)	
Workshops			.234** (.068)	.154** (.057)
Number of helps			.183*** (.023)	.156*** (.019)
R^2	.020	.078	.121	.188
Adjusted R^2	.012*	.069***	.116***	.177***
Number of cases	674			

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .000$.

What are we to make, then, of the data in Table 3, which show that satisfaction with current educational experience (in the Second Opportunity Center) is not predicted by knowledge of background characteristics? When placed in a different kind of educational setting, some dropouts do find schooling to be a rewarding process. Our findings replicate those of Day et al. (2013) and Marks (2000). They found that a positive environment normed for respect, fairness, safety, and positive communication enhances the engagement of some students despite past failures. Supportive classroom environments, in which students experience high expectations and receive help from teachers and peers, promote student engagement.

This study confirms that changes in schools can increase student engagement. The changes include (but are not limited to) low student–teacher ratios, paying attention to students' needs inside and outside the classroom, providing more access to adults, attending to family or personal problems, and providing counseling (Bland, Church, Neill, & Terry, 2008; Dynarski, 2001). Flexible scheduling, casual dress, and overt expressions of interest in and care for others have worked effectively in Australia (Mills & McGregor, 2010). US and Canadian dropouts in alternative schools were especially affected by relationships with their teachers (Free, 2014; Morrissette, 2011). Re-engagement in learning in England was facilitated by teacher support, frequent feedback, and scaffolding (Putwain et al., 2016). Schools that make students feel safe build self-esteem and develop a sense of community that results in persistence (O'Gorman et al., 2016). In Spain re-engagement was achieved by shifting from formal teacher-centered instruction to a 'globalizing, interdisciplinary teaching methodology' like that found in primary schools (Vázquez & Ojeda, 2010, p. 183).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that dropouts are not a homogeneous group but as noted above can be classified into various types (Fortin et al., 2006; Janosz et al., 2000; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). A longitudinal study in the United States followed almost 2000 dropouts for several years into young adulthood, recording the proportion of each of various types that

eventually completed their secondary education (McDermott et al., 2017). The profiles for three types of drops were labeled as Quiet Dropouts (high family support), Instability (low family support and geographic mobility), and High Adversity (crisis events in their lives). Those most likely to graduate were in the smallest (High Adversity) classification; encouragement from others was the most frequent cited reason for continuing in the alternative setting.

Tables 4 and 5 offer limited support for our second hypothesis, that students who are more highly motivated to succeed in life will be more satisfied with the program. The variables linked with satisfaction are not the same for boys and girls, which might be expected given that they experience different events in life. For most girls (in this age group), satisfaction is related primarily to relationships at home, while for boys, aspiring to get a degree and not seeking just to get a good job are correlated with satisfaction scores.

Involvement in Center activities (Hypothesis 3) offers more information. As noted in reviews of more and less successful alternative schools (Center For Promise, 2013; Rennie-Hill, Villano, Feist, & Legters, 2014), a first step is to offer students help in dealing with the issues associated with their withdrawal from school. This can be done by staff members talking with individual students and their parents, and by more formal workshops that describe ways to confront and overcome various problems. As many students have emotional (rather than cognitive) issues, workshops that deal with interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and depression are most helpful. In this study, boys and girls who participate in these workshops are more engaged in the Second Opportunity Center. Sports and other recreational activities, for their part, keep students busy but have little effect on overall satisfaction with the Center.

Limitations of this study

In the absence of data from students who reached adulthood, we can only infer the likely future effect of Center practices. High levels of engagement now may or may not result later in a significant proportion of students completing their secondary-level education.

The study does, however, provide information about the effect of current practices, of great help to those operating the Centers. The findings generated are like those reported from a variety of other countries, providing a weak measure of validity for Chile.

Little direct information is provided about the Centers and their practices, which limits our ability to identify effective structures or practices. For example, no information was available on the qualifications of staff, staff/student ratios, variety of programs, academic curriculum, or instructional practices. This was a study about students, even though one of the conclusions is that attention should be paid to the Centers themselves. Future studies should focus on the specific interventions experienced by different kinds of students, and the consequences of those interventions.

As a first endeavor, this study does provide baseline data that will be helpful in assessing the impact of changes in the Chilean Centers as they formalize and improve their programs.

Conclusion

Previous research has argued that early withdrawal is a product of schools just as much as is academic learning. Regular schools provide a school climate and instructional process that favors the learning of youth from socio-economic groups to the detriment of others; some children receive less encouragement (in the form of social approval and academic grades), and consequently disengage from the process. Because the labor market assigns wages (at least in part) on the basis of academic performance, youth who withdraw early from school suffer reduced earnings as adult workers (Sirin, 2005). In effect, the current education system contributes to economic inequality.

To date, the Second Opportunity Centers in Chile have been successful in retaining a large proportion of their students. If these Centers eventually bring a significant proportion of these students to graduation, the Ministry of Education should consider how the regular school system can be changed to incorporate their strategies. In effect, in that circumstance the Ministry should radically reform all schools so that they can educate all children. Rather than uniformization of content and instruction, the system must be responsive to the full range of human capabilities and needs (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014; Hornby, 2015; Salend, 2011). By educating all, societies can achieve a fuller range of social and economic benefits.

For the moment, research should be done to

- understand how different categories of learners react to different strategies of instruction;
- assess the learning impact of the various practices of the Centers;
- estimate the approximate costs of different practices per learning output. With that kind of information, it will then be possible to begin the task of designing and building an education system for all.

Funding

Note

1. Indigenous people were in 2015 about 9.0% of the total population of Chile (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2017).

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