“Teachers Should Be Like Second Parents”: Affectivity, Schooling And Poverty In Mexico.

Secondary School, Affection and Poverty in Mexico

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Abstract:
Based on empirical data collected in various secondary schools in Guadalajara, this article focuses on a dimension that has received little attention in research on educational attainment: affectivity. The article argues that in contexts where students must often make educational decisions on their own due to economic difficulties or family pressures, students' feelings about their school and teachers can influence their decision to remain in school or abandon their studies. The article also reflects on the role of educational counseling in secondary schools: it is suggested that school counselors could do much to promote student well being, but that students currently do not always view the service as inviting or positive.

Key words: secondary education, affectivity, poverty, academic failure.

Introduction

School effectiveness research has done much to nuance the rather bleak debates on the link between public schooling and poverty in Mexico.¹ A growing number of studies have shown that schools can have a positive influence on academic persistence and school performance. Among other dimensions, studies have shown that students obtain better results in states where the quality of schools is higher, and that schools offering adequate resources, effective teaching, and relevant curricula and schedules have been able to combat the initial disadvantages of poorer students (Palafox, Prawda y Velez, 1994; SNTE, 1994:61; Martin, 1998a; Reimers, 2001). Other studies indicate that some of the problems that undermine academic performance, but whose roots lie outside of the school's normal ambit, could be prevented with the help of the school's intervention (Sánchez Escobedo y Pinto Sosa, 1995). Various compensatory programs² in Mexico have attempted to do just that by improving school infrastructure and quality, and providing material support for poorer students and their families in the form of grants and school breakfasts (Ornelas, 2001). The aim of such extra-academic initiatives is to improve retention and performance, thereby promoting equity and destroying the vicious circle in which disadvantaged students are further handicapped by a truncated education.

Secondary schools in Mexico suffer from high dropout rates, especially in the poorest sectors. Secondary level has become critical for Mexican education in terms of young people's life and employment opportunities, as well as the reproduction of inequality on a national scale.
As a result, academic persistence in poor neighborhoods has become one of the most pressing items on secondary schools' agenda, and an important measure of their effectiveness. Numerous studies have been carried out on the link between primary school performance and poverty in Mexico, but until recently secondary level has been somewhat neglected by researchers. Various studies on Mexican secondary schools have, however, lately begun to cast light on the complex association between poverty and school failure. Among other factors, it has been proven that school failure (Meuly Ruiz, 2000; Blasco, 2001), low family income, educational inequality (Martínez Rizo, 2002), gender discrimination (normally against daughters, particularly when small children or other family members require care by an older child) (Parker y Pederzini, 1999) and family spending on secondary education (Bracho, 1997) may exacerbate student attrition in poor sectors.

Such studies, however, have tended to focus on economic, cognitive and/or cultural factors, with comparatively little attention paid to students' affective experiences (Blasco 1998; Sammons, 1999; Morley y Rassool, 1999). In other cultural contexts, greater emphasis has been placed on the role of emotions and affectivity at school (Hargreaves, 2000 and 2001; Noddings, 1992; Nias, 1997). It has been recognized that emotions permeate all organizations, including educational ones, and that academic performance and affectivity are closely linked in schools. It has also been shown that closer emotional bonds between students and teachers can have a positive impact on performance, well being and academic persistence, particularly at secondary school level (Sammons, 1999:84; Hargreaves, 1998, 2000, 2001; Martin, 2000).

In Mexico, it has been shown that the most effective schools combine “a warm, non-discriminatory emotional environment and well trained, committed teachers with high academic expectations” (Martin, 2000:7). Affectivity has proven to be a factor that can positively influence school performance, provided that it is combined with higher quality in teaching and school surroundings. As expressed by Shaw (1995, in Morley and Rassool, 1999:126): students are not only containers of facts but also “containers of feelings.”

Based on a case study of a secondary school in Guadalajara, this article focuses on affectivity, a dimension that has received little attention in educational research, administration, policy or in the design of compensatory programs. It is suggested that in disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts like the one studied here, the affective experiences of students at school can influence retention since at secondary school level in such contexts, schooling decisions are often left up to the students themselves. Although secondary education has been compulsory since 1993 (SEP, 1993:21), sanctions are not applied to parents whose children do not attend. As a result, students’ feelings about the school take on greater importance than in contexts where the compulsory nature of secondary schooling is not questioned— as in the more affluent classes of Mexican society in which parents oblige their children to attend.

This article also focuses on an institution found in many Mexican secondary schools that according to the study’s results could be a valuable space for addressing student needs and contributing to their having a more positive image of school: the school counselor (orientador) (see Meuly Ruiz, 2000), whose functions include counseling and supporting students. At present, it is important to take a fresh look at the counselor’s work since some Mexican states are considering removing this service from secondary schools. In fact, the specialization in counseling— psychological and pedagogical— was eliminated in 2000 by federal degree from the program of the secondary teacher training schools (Escuela Normal Superior).
It should be emphasized that the work presented in this article is exploratory, since the results are based on an in-depth study of one secondary school, with supplementary data from three nearby schools. The intention is to encourage future studies and reflection on the role that affectivity may play in school performance, at the secondary as well as other levels, without suggesting that affectivity alone is the answer to the poverty-school failure conundrum.

Case and Context

The study focuses on third-year secondary school students from three disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (referred to in this paper as “La Colina”) on the southern edge of Guadalajara, Jalisco. Although Jalisco is one of the wealthier states in Mexico, it is socioeconomically heterogeneous and includes marked poverty-stricken zones, especially in disadvantaged urban and rural areas (Escobar y De la Peña, 1990; Ramírez, 1990; Durán y Partida, 1990). According to some scholars, the employment structure of the city of Guadalajara has generated a workforce divided into the privileged workers of the formal sector, and those who subsist on the margins of the formal economy, such as the families studied here (Escobar, 1986:32). La Colina was populated by squatters in the early 1970s.

At the time of the study, most of the families of the involved students were experiencing quite severe economic difficulties. The survey indicated that most {this is a particular study, the fathers in the study} fathers were working as bricklayers, drivers or salesmen—often with irregular employment contracts—while 25% were electricians, mechanics or cleaning personnel and 4% were professionals. Few {same as above} mothers had paid employment. In terms of the effect of parental employment on their children’s schooling, underemployment was arguably the most damaging factor, not poverty in itself. The households of irregular workers suffered from economic insecurity, which undermined their ability to plan and save for the major expenses at the beginning of the school year, or other ongoing school expenses.

The study focused on third-year secondary school students in order to discover their school trajectories and identify the contingencies leading to drop-out or poor performance; in other words, on the basis of the students’ own statements, an attempt was made to determine the fragile moments in their school careers. The decision to study the success stories may seem paradoxical, given that the participants had almost completed their basic education, unlike many of their peers who had dropped out. The reason behind this decision was the desire to document the positive side of academic persistence, and explore the students’ motives for remaining in school or returning after sometimes long periods of absence. The students constituted a wealth of information about times that their own school attendance, or that of their peers, had been in danger. The focus on success stories was also due in part to the difficulty of locating students who had dropped out much more time would have been required to locate them than was available for the study. This focus did not, however, enable the author to document concrete cases of student drop-out from the secondary school under study, which would have resulted in a more complete analysis.

School: An Appealing Alternative to Home? Theoretical Reflections
In critical educational literature, the school has typically been conceptualized as a site of alienation for students, and not as a place where they might seek solace, affection or a respite from home. Structuralist theories regarding the link between school performance and poverty, as well as theories of cultural “mismatch” and reproduction—such as Bourdieu and Passeron, Bernstein and the theorists from the Birmingham school—emphasize various types of symbolic violence that schools supposedly inflict upon students. Within such perspectives, families have been portrayed as the principal source of cultural and class identities, which students are assumed to inherit unequivocally from their parents. Thus, conflicts between the family and school culture are believed to undermine school performance (Connell, 1983:227). According to Bourdieu, one of the main proponents of this theoretical current, the “cultural capital” that children inherit from their parents proves inadequate when it comes to adapting to the school’s culture.

These theories portray schools as spaces of cultural and generational negotiation, of resistance and conflicting values, while families are seldom described in such terms. Initial socialization in the family is treated as a quite harmonious process, “ignoring the crises, resistance and discontinuities that child-rearing really encounters, the significance of intra-personal conflict, of divided motives and purposes, in shaping practice in later life” (Connell, 1983: 153). When this type of perspective is applied to schooling, little space remains to explore the positive contributions that schools can make to students’ lives over and above academic aspects, or the ways in which these contributions might be promoted and reinforced. As Connell (1983:154) points out, the theories of cultural reproduction as expounded by Bourdieu and Passeron, for example, focus exclusively on the symbolic violence that they claim the school does to students, and on students’ resistance to this.

Children and young people, however, do not necessarily share their parents’ attitudes, values and viewpoints, especially as they grow and acquire other points of reference from institutions of secondary socialization (Erikson, 1994; Muuss, 1997). Such institutions can include their schools or friends, and alternative experiences that provide points of comparison. As in this study, students may even identify more with school than with their families in various respects, both in their immediate daily lives as a comparatively pleasant alternative to their family settings, where they typically enjoy little freedom; or in terms of their future, where the school may symbolize the hope of escaping from a life of poverty (Blasco, 2001).

In the context of Guadalajara, Martin (1985; 1993 a y b; 1994; 1996 a y b; 1998 a y b; also see Guzmán y Martin, 1997) is one of the few researchers who have considered students’ experiences and lives in a more holistic manner, studying the affective setting of students’ homes and the “moral economy” of the domestic unit and its influence on the performance of children in primary schools in poor sectors. Martin discovered that the principal relationship affecting school retention at primary level is the link between “teachers and their clients (parents and their children)” (1998b:167), which he refers to as the “relationship of educational provision.” Emphasis is placed on the parent/teacher link since at primary level, it is parents who decide if children are to attend school (Martin, 1996b:177, 1996b). If parents have conflicts with the teachers or if they feel that the teachers demand too much, their children’s attendance at school is endangered.
Although many aspects of Martin’s analysis are also valid for secondary schools in poor zones, this paper proposes that the parent/teacher relationship is not as crucial at the secondary level as at the primary level. According to this study’s results, parents were notably passive in terms of their children’s academic future, and often the students themselves had to make the decisions in this regard. The importance of the young person’s voice in educational decisions has been underplayed in literature on basic education in Mexico, perhaps because it is often assumed that parents take the decisions, i.e. that what is valid for primary school is also valid for secondary school (Sandoval, 1993:6).

In La Colina, however, many students had taken the decision to continue in school in spite of their parents’ indifference or opposition; and vice versa, others had dropped out of school on their own account or due to inertia combined with the absence of parental coercion to attend. Students seemed not to be particularly encouraged by their parents to continue their studies (Meuly Ruiz, 2000). Students referred to former classmates who had dropped out of school for apparently very trivial reasons, e.g. “problems with a teacher”, “social” problems, problems with other students or had simply failed to return from a supposedly temporary absence due to illness or health problems. In one case, a girl dropped out because of her anxiety after an earthquake that had occurred during school hours. The teachers indicated that many cases of student drop-out were because students simply “didn’t feel like studying any more”. The fact that such decisions were made by students suggests that their experiences and feelings about school and their relationships with teachers may have a very important impact on academic persistence.

**Conceptual Framework**

The students’ school experiences were explored using an interpretive framework based on Alfred Schutz’ concept of the lifeworld. This type of analysis seeks to understand the subjective meaning of social action, and as a result its focus is on the subjective perceptions of reality that determine actions, and not on the results of those actions (Schutz, 1972). Schutz and Luckmann define the life-world as “that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense” (1973:3). The lifeworld is not conceptualized as harmonious or continuous: social actors in modern life must navigate in their daily life among spheres of meaning or multiple realities that are at times very different, such as the home and school.

Berger and Luckmann have developed Schutz’ concepts with a greater emphasis on identity and socialization. They divide socialization into two main phases: primary and secondary. The primary phase is the first process of forming identity in the family: the person’s “base world” (1966:158). The secondary phase, in contrast, involves the “internalization of institutional sub-worlds or sub-worlds based on institutions” (1966: 158). These sub-worlds constitute “coherent realities characterized by normative as well as affective and cognitive components,” although they may be experienced as “partial realities” in comparison with the base world (1966:177). According to Berger and Luckmann, although strong affective identification normally exists with the socializers of early childhood (most usually the parents), during the secondary phase “alternative realities and identities appear as subjective options” (1966:177 and 191).
Within this framework, institutions such as schools may conceivably represent a viable alternative to the students’ family worlds, at least in some respects. This is where Berger and Luckmann differ from other theorists of socialization (like Bourdieu), who assume that perceptions of the institutions of secondary socialization are determined by the dispositions acquired during the primary phase.

According to this theoretical perspective, it is difficult to imagine that young people could have a positive attitude or adapt to an institution whose values differ significantly from those of their homes. Such logic underlies many versions of theories of “cultural mismatch”, which assume that students cannot adapt to school in the event of a conflict of “cultures”, irrespective of whether this is linguistic, class-based or racial.

The present study did not seek to portray students’ life-worlds fully. Rather, as previously stated, an attempt was made to understand their qualitative experiences and their expectations of the school, which are assumed to be partly shaped by their home settings. Thus school and home are conceptualized here as the principal spheres that influence students’ school experiences, with the main actors therein being family, teachers and friends. This does not mean that students are not at all exposed to influences outside these two spheres, but they were found to have little free time after school to carry out independent activities with their friends, for example. They were expected to comply with parental demands by helping with domestic tasks or working to contribute economically to the home and earn the right to remain in school, since parents were often required to make considerable sacrifices to cover the indirect expenses of sending their children to secondary school. In addition, La Colina, where most of the students lived, is considered part of a “dangerous” area, with no distinct sense of community that could encourage a more autonomous youth culture. Parents’ main attitude towards the outside world seemed to be a fear that something could happen to their children if they let them out of their sight, even just on the way to and from school, and as a result, parents controlled their children closely. The youth of La Colina seemed to be roughly divided into those who had dropped out of school and had started working, those who belonged to youth gangs and did not attend school, and secondary school students (who sometimes also carried out paid work alongside their studies).

Defining Affectivity in Relation to Schooling

I think that in general, more personalized treatment from the teachers is needed. They just get there, give you instructions and this and that, but they should be like second parents for students ... because you spend more than half of your life at school and you always need teachers to help you.

This comment from a fourteen-year-old student was typical of how students described their relationships with teachers at La Colina: a mixture of longing for more personal treatment and disappointment because they seldom received it. Students attached great importance to their affective relations with teachers, and they were more academically responsive and disciplined with teachers who were interested in them and treated them as multifaceted human beings with feelings, rather than relating only to their academic side. Approximately a quarter of the students interviewed indicated that what they liked most about school were the teachers, and
they praised teachers who were “understanding”, “easy-going” or “cool”; more than three-quarters of them wrote that they liked a teacher and his class because he “talks to us”, “listens to us”, “acts like a friend”, “is understanding”, “understands me” or “we have good communication”. When asked why they attended school, many students answered “to get things off my chest”, “to talk about stuff I like” or even “to get away from home”.

These types of feelings can be roughly grouped under the concept of “affectivity”, defined here as students’ “emotional susceptibility”, a concept used in the study in conjunction with the “affective climate” at school and at home. The choice was made to utilize such concepts instead of “emotions”, which are understood to be very specific types of mental “feeling” (pleasure, pain, desire, repulsion, surprise, hope, fear, etc.). Three main dimensions, described below, are considered to influence the affective climate at school.

**Disciplinary Structure and Style**

The first dimension is the formal structures of school discipline, i.e. the rules, demands, sanctions, etc. that structure the relationships between students and teachers. In addition, and even more important, is the school’s “disciplinary style”, i.e. the way the formal regulations are applied in practice. The teachers of La Colina, recognizing that many students were from relatively undisciplined homes, and that others had serious problems and/or commitments at home that sometimes prevented their compliance with the rules, had adopted an informal policy of leniency when it came to rule enforcement.

Teachers, for example, mentioned turning a blind eye to students who arrived late or clad in incomplete or incorrect uniforms. In addition, the school had implemented various strategies in an attempt to soften the disciplinary climate and adapt it to what they considered the special needs of the restless student body. One strategy was what they called the “classroom workshop” system: each teacher had a set classroom and the students changed classrooms from lesson to lesson, unlike in most Mexican secondary schools where the students remain in the same classroom and the teachers go from room to room. This change was made in order to give students the opportunity to stretch their legs and rest between classes. In the same experimental spirit, the teachers at La Colina had obtained permission from the zonal school inspector to “experiment” with continuous assessment instead of the frequent examinations applied in other secondary schools, since they believed that their students would not respond well to the pressure and discipline of exams.

The way these strategies were put into practice, however, was almost entirely at the discretion of each teacher. Disciplinary reports and personal observation by the researcher showed that students were often punished or sent home if they arrived late or with an incomplete uniform. The teachers recognized that their innovations had not always functioned as planned due to difficulties in achieving coherent application. They faced internal as well as external obstacles in their endeavour to be “different”. Internally, not all teachers followed the principles of leniency, since each teacher worked unsupervised in his or her classroom, while externally the school had faced academic pressures. Low results in various interschool contests had unleashed serious discussions among teachers about the school’s low academic levels and as a result formal examinations were reintroduced.
Although teachers were willing to make exceptions due to students' family situations, their good will seemed to be “neutralized” by their perceptions of adolescence as a difficult and restless stage of life that required a firm hand. In Mexico, discipline in secondary schools tends to be much more strict than in primary schools or post-secondary institutions (Levinson, 1999). The teachers described adolescence as a problem, a stage characterized by unpredictability, rebellion and confusion. As one counselor stated: “Adolescents are very prone to ignore authority [...] it’s not only about talking and being understanding, because the time comes when that doesn’t work and you have to turn to repression.” Two contradictory discourses, therefore, existed at the school: on one hand the need to promote more lenient treatment due to students’ family situations, and on the other hand, a discourse on the dangers of adolescence and the need for a firm, controlling disciplinary style.

Students’ reactions to the disciplinary style at La Colina were also ambivalent. They did not reject discipline as such, but responded well to teachers who maintained order in the classroom with a fair, friendly and respectful attitude. The survey showed that 51% of the students earned the highest grades in classes given by their favorite teachers. Some typical examples of why they liked a teacher included:

- She really listens to us and gives us advice. She’s a good friend.
- He listens to everything we tell him, our problems and all that, and he helps us solve them.
- He’s not like a teacher, he is like a friend.
- He knows how to listen to students.

In contrast, students resented teachers who did not take them into account or were disrespectful or “despotic” towards them, and they lamented the impersonal treatment that often characterized their contact with such teachers:

- Some teachers talk to us, but the rest don’t care [...] I’ve seen teachers who don’t respect students.
- The teacher doesn’t understand us or pay attention to us [...] There is a lot of unfairness.
- If my grades go down, the teachers put pressure on me [...] They don’t tell me, “Come, I’ll explain it to you.” They say, “You have to improve. It’s up to you to figure out how.”
- Teachers say, “Leave your problems at home. Concentrate on your studies.” [...] They hear me but they don’t listen to me.

Students also resented disciplinary measures which they considered trivial, “despotic” or senseless, such as strict rules about uniforms or haircuts, or being denied what they considered “basic” needs such as going to the toilet. They commented that many friends had dropped out because of “problems with a teacher” because they had been “scolded” or simply because of a “lack of affection”.

The importance that students assign to personal contact with teachers may help to explain the difficulties they experience in the transition between primary school and the less intimate, more disciplined environment of secondary school (Rockwell, 1990; Blasco, 1998). This may be one reason why drop-out rates in secondary schools tend to be higher the first year. In primary school, students have a single teacher for all subjects, and can therefore establish a
closer relationship with him or her. In contrast, secondary school students may see up to eight teachers in a single day; classes last fifty minutes, and very little time remains for personal contact between teachers and students.

The above findings demonstrate the importance that students attach to more personal, congenial treatment from teachers, and suggest that when this is forthcoming, students can develop a more positive attitude towards their studies. In contrast, treatment perceived as harsh, despotic or unfair may be sufficient cause for a tired or troubled student to give up and drop out of school, especially if his parents do not encourage his studies or if he is aware that the expense implied by school represents difficulties for his parents.

**Conditions for Interaction between Teachers and Students**

The second dimension of the affective climate at school has to do with the institutional conditions for interaction between teachers and students. The working conditions for secondary school teachers have until recently received little research attention due to the predominant focus on the working conditions of primary school teachers; however, further studies have lately focused on this (for example, Sandoval, 2001; Levinson, 1993; Quiroz, 1990 and 1992). The teachers in this study were well aware of the importance of contact with students, but their workload had increased, especially since the 1993 reform (Quiroz, 1990 and 1995). The reform modified the program by making it denser and introducing individual subjects instead of areas, starting in the first year of secondary school (SEP, 1993). In addition, the reform made teachers responsible for implementing the curriculum and adapting it to local circumstances (Martin, 1998b; Quiroz, 1990 y 1995; Rockwell, 1990).

Teachers also complained that they were also frequently obliged to carry out time-consuming nonacademic tasks such as cleaning the classroom or working at the school cooperative store (see Rockwell, 1990; Calvo, 1998). Some also worked second shifts at other schools (see Sandoval, 2001), and their time was further eroded by meetings and union activities. They stated that they always felt rushed, and often had to teach groups of 50 to 60 students (Sandoval, 2001). Some claimed that their private lives had suffered due to work pressures, to the extent that teaching was described as a “mission” requiring great personal sacrifice: “Pure giving and no receiving” as one teacher expressed it.

In this context, closer individual attention to students from teachers represents a personal decision rather than a pedagogical strategy or institutional requirement (see also Hargreaves, 2000). As one expressed it: “If I don’t care, I can just let my class come and go and solve their problems as best they can.” Because of such pressures, teachers devote themselves as much as possible to academic affairs in order to achieve faster and more “efficient” learning, and as a result, they tend to limit their personal contact with students (see Schmelkes, 1992; Quiroz, 1992; Rockwell, 1990). Regardless of teachers’ desires to the contrary, they cannot get to know their students or gain an insight into their concerns or the problems they may be experiencing at home (Quiroz, 1992:95; Sandoval, 2001). In the students’ words, teachers insist they “leave their problems at home”.

**Affective Relationships in the Family and Students’ Expectations of School**
The third dimension that influenced students’ expectations of school was their affective relationships at home. Few students seemed to have a close relationship with their parents, and many mentioned being unable to concentrate in class due to concern about problems at home: physical violence, verbal abuse and alcoholism were frequent. Furthermore, although the index of broken families was not particularly high among the families living in the area, many students reported experiencing stress due to tensions between their parents. In fact, they mentioned liking secondary school because:

- I forget a little about my problems.
- It turns my thoughts away from home.
- I feel better here [at school] because my parents fight all the time at home, and my brothers and sisters do too, and here it’s better because we can have a break and forget about the problems at home.
- At home I have a lot of problems, and not so many here. There is a lot of companionship, you can share your opinions with the others and they tell you theirs. But at home I don’t feel good.

Few students at La Colina received much parental encouragement with their studies. Most parents had only attended primary school, and hence few were able to help their children with homework, much less understand their experiences at secondary school. The students interpreted this attitude as a lack of interest in their studies and were demotivated by it. Some parents even attempted to discourage students from attending school or made it impossible for them to concentrate on their homework. One girl commented:

If I tell my father, “I’m going to study”, he tells me “What for? You’re never going to do anything.” He always discourages me. For example, if I’m doing homework, he makes me do something else. He sees that I am very busy, but he makes me get up and I feel pressured.

Some parents’ lack of interest in their children’ studies may derive from a feeling of insecurity since their children are surpassing them in knowledge: they may fear losing authority at home. Since this attitude appeared almost exclusively among fathers, and not among mothers, it may reflect a paternal wish to maintain total authority over the family. Some fathers did not see the sense of sending their daughters to school since they assumed they would end up getting married and taking care of a home, and would not put their education to good use (see Levine, 1993). In general, mothers were more concerned about their children’s studies, although some were fearful of supporting them against their husband’s will.

Students who live in this type of family environment, in addition to the normal dose of dedication to schoolwork, need great determination and encouragement to remain in school in spite of their parents’ inertia or even attempts to sabotage their studies. Given the fragility of the link between the student and the school, in this type of situation it is not surprising that any deception or problem, although apparently trivial, may become the straw that breaks the camel’s back.

Rethinking the Functions of the Secondary School? The Potential Role of the School Counselor
A space in secondary schools that may be able to attend to students’ affective needs is the school counselor’s clinic (gabinete). This service is present in the majority of general and technical secondary schools in urban zones and in theory is open to students at all times. The counselor’s functions include: being the final arbiter when students have serious disciplinary conflicts and are in danger of expulsion; addressing personal and health problems; and carrying out home visits in cases where students drop out or face severe family situations that affect their school performance. Although part of the counselor’s job is to attend to students’ affective needs, in practice the counselor’s ability to support student well being at school is limited by various factors.

First, counselors tend to have low status in secondary schools compared with other teachers, which counselors attribute to their carrying out a nonacademic function whose impact is hard to measure. Counselors reported that other teachers accused them of “not doing anything, just sitting around in their offices”. Because of their low status, the counselor at La Colina and those at nearby secondary schools mentioned they were often required to run errands or stand in for absent teachers. In addition to the indignation caused by this treatment, it also means that counselors are not always available when students need them.

Second, counselors are often left with the task of punishing students that teachers can no longer endure because of their behavior problems, low performance or erratic attendance (see Meuly Ruiz, 2000). Thus, students learn to see the counselor as someone who punishes, and not as a person who can be trusted. The counselor at La Colina confirmed that students rarely visited her voluntarily, and almost always only if sent by a teacher. Thus, the counselor’s potential role as confidant is undermined. Teachers expect the counselor to “transform” problem students overnight:

> Sometimes the director, the assistant director, the teachers think that by sending a student to the office he will change, as if we had a magic wand. They say, “I sent him to counseling, he has to change!” But he doesn’t change and then they tell us, “You don’t do anything. I sent him to you and he’s just the same as always!”

For the same reason, the counselors interviewed felt they seldom got to see the students with the most serious problems, since such students tended to be quiet and reserved; i.e. they didn’t “cause problems” in the classroom.

Third, like other teachers, counselors work in very different ways. No common policy exists to guide their treatment of students. Some of the counselors interviewed saw their function as fundamentally punitive, while others seemed not to respect their students’ privacy, and made students’ concerns known to other teachers. One student stated:

> Sometimes we have problems at home that we don’t want to talk about with our parents. So I think it’s necessary to have someone to trust, someone to talk to […] The problem is that sometimes I tell the counselor something and then she goes and tells the director, and the director tells the secretary…

Fourth, counselors do not have sufficient time to attend to all students, and can usually therefore only offer a minimum of help to the most problematic (see Meuly Ruiz 2000). From
the point of view of other teachers, their function is not to help students feel better, but to "sort them out" as soon as possible so that they no longer cause problems in the class, and so that their grades improve. Similarly, students are not free to visit the counselor when they need to, even in the most serious cases. As one counselor from a secondary school near La Colina put it:

There have been times that girls have come to tell me, "I've come to say goodbye." And I say, "That's nice, so you're moving house?" And they say, "No, I'm going to commit suicide tonight." And the prefects are out there saying, "Let's go, hurry up, you're taking too long, go back to your classroom", pressuring them.

Thus school organization and the demands of academic performance allow little space for affectivity or for students to get things off their chests, although it is highly improbable that a student with serious problems or concerns will be able to concentrate on his schoolwork.

**Conclusions: The Pros and Cons of “Affective Schools”**

This article proposes that the school's affective climate can influence school attendance in deprived sociocultural settings, where students often make their own school-related decisions. Affectivity is no substitute for competent teaching, for a more democratic and flexible organization of the educational system, or for a pleasant, well-equipped school infrastructure; yet it is an important complementary factor which has received little attention to date, and which risks being further neglected owing to the increasingly zealous pursuit of school "efficiency".

Analyses that call for a more “affectionate” climate in schools have been criticized for confusing short- and long-term educational objectives, for converting the school into a place of immediate escapism for students, and for causing students to forget that only education will help them to improve themselves in the long run (Hargreaves, 2000). It has also been suggested that a more “affective” school would be nothing but a more subtle and ingenious way of exercising ideological hegemony over students (Thompson, 1997; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994). As Bourdieu and Passeron put it (p. 17), “Overwhelming students with affection [...] means taking possession of that subtle instrument of repression, the withdrawal of affection, which is a no less arbitrary pedagogical technique [...] than physical punishment or shame.” The assumption is that affectivity is the family’s prerogative and must not be included in the functions of the school (see, for example, Stigler, 1991).³⁴

This paper, however, considers that in a context where completing a basic education represents one of the only ways for students to improve their life opportunities, all possible measures must be taken to keep them in school, including greater attention to their affective needs. The interpretive focus adopted in this study revealed how students perceived the school and prioritized their school experiences, unexpectedly emphasizing the importance they attach to affectivity. In addition, the study shows how the school, an institution of secondary socialization, can represent an attractive alternative to the family setting, especially when the family is characterized by poverty and at times quite severe treatment of adolescents.
Various mechanisms are suggested below to make the affective climate more pleasant in schools while promoting a more effective school system in terms of academic persistence:

- Due to teachers' administrative pressures and time constraints, it would be hard for them to take special measures to promote affectivity. The proposal is, rather, that teachers integrate a gentler disciplinary style and more understanding treatment into their daily teaching, something that would require no additional resources or time. Greater awareness of the importance of affective treatment for academic persistence could also be promoted at the teacher training colleges (Escuelas Normales) and at individual school level through pedagogic policies explicitly aimed at this. Initiatives undertaken at school level to adapt the disciplinary and affective climate to the students' sociocultural context should similarly be supported and disseminated more broadly among the educational community.

- Measures could be designed to take advantage of the companionship and mutual support that already exists among students. For instance, informal student groups could be organized to discuss school or family affairs, and 'early-warning' systems could be established among students to alert teachers if a fellow student is suspected of being in danger of dropping out.

- The school counselor's office could be utilized more effectively by raising awareness of its importance and ensuring that it functions as a space of respite for students, rather than a space of punishment resorted to by teachers.

**Notes**

1 See Schmelkes, 1999:3; Vaughan, 1982:4; Morales-Gómez y Torres, 1990:31, who offer quite negative evaluations of schools' ability to lessen inequality or give poor students the opportunity to improve their lives.

2 Examples are the program to combat educational disadvantage (Programa para Abatir el Rezago Educativo—PARE), the educational dimension of the Programa Nacional de Solidaridad (Pronasol) and the education, health and nutrition program (Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación—Progressa), as well as other programs of an educational nature for communities in extreme poverty (Martin 1999; Martin 2000; Ornelas 2001).

3 In other words, for students to stay in school until finishing basic education—primary and secondary school.

4 See, for example, Martin (1990 a y b, 1992, 1993 a y b, 1994, 1996 a y b, 1998 a y b).

5 Translated into Spanish by author.

6 Although it should be noted that during the transition from primary to secondary school, the family's decision tends to prevail.

7 See the official gazette (Diario Oficial de la Federación), SEP Acuerdo 269, which omits the pedagogical and psychological specialties from the Escuela Normal Superior (subjects it had offered since 1959) (Cambrón et al., 2002).

8 Compiled data were based on one year of fieldwork in a secondary school, with the use of ethnographic methods: in-depth individual interviews with students, parents and teachers; group
discussions with students and interviews with 84 of them; as well as interviews with counselors from three secondary schools near La Colina.

9 The city of Guadalajara has an official population of approximately 3.5 million and is currently the most important industrial center in Mexico’s western region, with a growing economy (Escobar y De la Peña, 1990; Ramirez, 1990; Durán y Partida, 1990; Pro Habitat, 2000:3).

10 This breakdown corresponds to figures on the zone compiled by INEGI, which indicate that in La Colina, 71% of the economically active population is employed, 40% work in the services sector and 56% in the secondary sector. Approximately 75% of the workers earn less than the equivalent of two times the minimum wage (SCINCE, 1995).

11 49% of the mothers worked exclusively as housewives, 13% were domestic employees in other houses, and 5% took in washing and ironing; 8% worked in factories; 6% were teachers or nurses, and 12% were in sales (selling Tupperward products or arts and crafts, for example). In total, only 14% of the mothers whose data were obtained through the survey had a regular income with social security benefits and economic security that would permit planning for the future.

12 From 1999 to 2000, the graduation rates of secondary schools decreased from 76.2% to 73.4%, and dropout rates increased from 8.2% to 9.3% (SEP/IMJ, 2000). An estimated 78% of the population from age 13 to 15 attends secondary school. The graduation rate for primary school is approximately 93%, but this figure occults differences of more than 30% between states with the best and worst records. Approximately 87% of the students who graduate from primary school enroll in secondary school (www.sep.gob.mx).

13 Other researchers have also indicated the difficulties of locating dropouts (see, for example, Calatayud, 1993). On one hand, detailed documentation has not been compiled on the reasons for student attrition in secondary school nor is a distinction made between students who have changed schools or moved, and those who have dropped out permanently. Statistics become even more complicated by the fact that some students “drop out” temporarily, and return to school at a more opportune time.

14 Known in English as mismatch theories.

15 For example, Paul Willis, whose study on the links among education, class and culture, Learning to Labour (1977), is key in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).

16 Translated into Spanish by author.

17 Martin defines the principal problems of this relationship, on one hand, as the decline in school financing and ever worsening conditions for teachers, and on the other, as the “insecurity of the domestic reproduction of clients” (1998b:167). Martin analyzes how pressures on both sides of this relationship are reflected in the associations between parents and teachers, which are normally made concrete in the school’s demands on the parents and students, such as homework and periodical expenses connected with school activities.

18 Data from the World Bank (1999:48) make the same assumption, also in the case of secondary school: “It is typically the parents who make decisions about education (especially at the primary and secondary levels), not the students.”

19 Student attrition in Mexico is not always definitive: students often leave school for periods due to family situations, such as the birth of a sibling or severe economic difficulties. The SEP does not compile detailed information on reasons for student attrition.

20 Translated into Spanish by author.
Known in English as mismatch theories.

According to Bernstein (1977a y b; 1982), for example, dissonant class “codes” in terms of styles of authority are an important obstacle for students’ adaptation to school; according to Bourdieu (1994), such dissonance is linguistic; while according to the structuralists, Bowles and Gintis (1976), differences are based on sex and ethnicity.

Other studies have proven that global flows of commodities and images have penetrated the self-image and aspirations of Mexican youth (for example, Levinson, 1993; Guttman, 1996:134).

Both girls and boys wrote on the survey that they often helped with domestic chores and the care of younger siblings. Their free time (especially for the girls) was often used at home: reading, watching TV or listening to music or the radio; at times they also participated in extracurricular school activities like dances or singing, or taught catechism classes to smaller children. The boys in general were less restricted to home: most played soccer or participated in another sport, and more boys than girls worked for wages (42% of the boys and 21% of the girls).

The indirect costs of school are higher at the secondary level than at any other level. The SEP provides the school building and teachers, but all the rest is paid for with “voluntary” contributions from the heads of household. Other expenses include uniforms, transportation, fees for extracurricular activities, and school excursions. Although important progress has been made in the distribution of free textbooks in secondary schools by the SEP (19.7 million books during the 2002-2003 school year and more than 9.3 million books in the tèsecundaria schools (www.conaliteg.gob.mx; www.sep.gob.mx), coverage is not yet complete in some states.

Rosas (2000), who has studied social networks in poor urban zones in Mexico, suspects that neighbors and the fear of neighborhood problems like drug addiction and delinquency, have encouraged a “climate of distrust” and the increasingly accented withdrawal of families in their houses. Also see Martin (1990a:127), who makes the same suggestion about poverty-stricken neighborhoods in Guadalajara.

In this sense, Freire’s concept of bank education (1994:72) is a powerful criticism of the “strict focus on the transfer of information at the expense of other student aspects that affect his ability to learn.” Freire recommends companionship between teachers and students, in addition to the need to “interact, sympathize... communicate.”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary.

The SEP has disciplinary regulations with information on the demands and obligations of students and parents, along with detailed infractions and their respective sanctions. Each secondary school has its own system of sanctions based on the regulations of the SEP.

The areas of study, such as the natural sciences, for example, were divided into separate subjects: physics, chemistry and biology, with a resulting increase in the number of classes given by each teacher, and a multiplication of the hours used for class preparation, evaluation and administration. Emphasis on the “rendering of accounts” also became more marked with the reform of 1993, and translated into the teachers’ obligation to prepare a daily lesson plan and to be evaluated in part based on their students’ achievement (see Calvo, 1998).

Other studies show that physical and verbal abuse and alcoholism can undermine students’ attendance at school (see, for example, González de la Rocha et al., 1990; Martin, 1994). Out of the 84 students interviewed, 85% lived with their biological parents, 96% with their biological mothers and 81% with both biological parents. Both the literature (for example, CEPAL, 1994:24) and teachers believe that broken families are important causes of scholastic failure and student attrition. The assumption, however, that “disintegrated” families are problematic in themselves can lead us to underestimate the type and severity of problems that can exist in supposedly “conventional”
arrangements, and their impact on school life. Unhappy couples do not always separate or divorce, but this fact does not prevent their difficulties from reflecting on their children.

32 Counseling offices, however, are absent from many secondary schools in rural zones and in the 15,485 telsecundarias of Mexico.

33 In theory, the service consists of a social worker, a psychologist and a doctor, but in practice, normally only one or two of them is present, due to insufficient resources.

34 Who states that “school should attempt to replace the family’s functions, due to the risks implied by assuming that family and school functions are similar and that the functions assumed by one institution are no longer the responsibility of the other” (translated into Spanish by author).

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