The influence of parental separation and family resources on youngsters' school engagement

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Abstract

When studying youngsters at school, subjective school outcomes are equally important to consider as objective ones, such as academic achievement. The subjective educational indicator of school engagement is explained by family configurations and financial, human and social family resources. As youngsters' living conditions are becoming more complex and diverse nowadays, these may interfere with school engagement. This hypothesis is tested and separate analyses are conducted for youngsters in intact and non-intact families. Data from the *Leuvens Adolescenten en GezinnenOnderzoek* (LAGO) are used, examining youngsters in secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium (N = 5,778). Youngsters in non-intact families have lower levels of school engagement than youngsters in intact families. This difference is largely explained by the availability of social family resources.

Keywords

Family resources, youngsters, parental separation, school engagement

Education is becoming more and more one of the most important social cleavages within society, as it clearly divides the haves from the have-nots (Berlin, Furstenberg, & Waters, 2010, p. 4). Individuals with a higher educational degree have more chances at the labor market, whereas those with a lower educational degree struggle more to find a job and often have a lower occupational status and income (Pong, 1997; Amato, 2005). For youngsters, school forms one of the most important life spheres. Next to their home and family, youngsters spend most of their time at school. Because education forms a clear stratifying mechanism in society, school outcomes of youngsters are important to investigate. They signal the future position of youngsters within society. Whereas the objective school outcomes for youngsters have been studied abundantly (Astone & Mclanahan, 1994; Bean, 1985; Evans, Kelley, & Wanner, 2001), the more subjective school outcomes are equally important to investigate (Van Houtte, 2004). These latter types of school outcomes are in the same way part of their school experience that forms them and leads to several consequences within their current and later life (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). To illustrate, disengaged students will have lower academic and career aspirations, which can limit their career options (Finn & Rock, 1997; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003).

Youngsters' difficulties in school often originate outside the school environment. The focus of this article is therefore placed on parental separation and family resources, two factors that influence youngsters' school outcomes. We examine the subjective outcome of school engagement that considers whether youngsters are concerned with their study, if they are inquisitive and eager to learn, or if they dislike school and are averted to their study. We search for differences between youngsters in intact and non-intact families. Does growing up in a broken family influence the effects of family resources on school engagement? Are youngsters who experienced a parental separation differently affected by family contexts when school engagement is analyzed? In the conclusion, we consider the importance of monitoring school engagement, next to the more objective measurements of school outcomes, discuss the caveats within the present study and suggest directions for possible future research.

School Engagement as an Important Subjective School Outcome

The concept of school engagement has received attention since the mid-1980s in the United States as the internal organization within schools emerged as a problematic issue (Marks 2000: 155). Steadily, more and more attention has been given to these subjective school outcomes, as they showed to have similar effects on the present and future life of adolescents like the more objective school outcomes. As Nash phrased it: *"Academic failure and drop-out seldom occur in isolation."* (Nash, 2002: 73).

The terminology of subjective school outcomes is considered in many review articles (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003; Libbey, 2004). Definition and measurement varies greatly within and among the research traditions (O'Farrell & Morrison, 2003). Authors speak of among others academic engagement (Conchas, 2001; Lee & Smith, 1993, 1995; Valeski & Stipek, 2001), school attachment (Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; Hoppe, Wells, Haggerty, Simpson, Gainey, & Catalano, 1998; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001) and school bonding (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001). Still, school engagement stays the most popular term, reflecting several dimensions that are considered hereafter.

School engagement is a multifaceted concept, composed out of several elements (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). First of all, behavioral school engagement refers to the conduct and involvement of a student in school, such as regular attendance of classes, complying with the school rules, and making homework. It refers to positive conduct of youngsters, making the effort to complete tasks, participating in class and school activities, and being persistent and concentrated (Finn, 1993; Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010; Kelly, 2008). It forms an important aspect of student achievement and is self-directed; the motivation to do well is inherent in this kind of behavior (Murdock, Anerman, & Hodge, 2000). Next, emotional school engagement encompasses the positive and negative emotions that are linked to school and study, such as study values, student-teacher relationship and study orientation (Ladd & Dinella, 2009). To illustrate, youngsters may aspire to do well at school and therefore they will show interest, feel happy and be concentrated in class (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Finally, besides these

two basic elements, recently, a third element is sometimes considered that deals with the cognitive perspective on school engagement. This element can be conceptualized as the psychological investment in learning. For instance, it may refer to the learning strategy that a student follows (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oolt, 2011). Cognitive school engagement is less observable, as it considers a more internal aspect of school engagement and deals with a certain educational identity of youngsters, as their education can be observed as a way to view themselves in their relationships with school and education. When students show this genuinely involvement and reflection on school, their behavior will consequently show persistence, planning and study management.

The Relationship between Parental Separation, Family Resources and School Engagement

A considerable amount of research has recognized the importance of social contexts in determining engaging school behavior of adolescents. In general, the emphasis has been placed on three different socialization agents, namely family, teachers and peers (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Stewart, 2007). In this article, we will focus on the family as it is often considered as the most important socialization agent for youngsters (Grusec & Davidov, 2007; Hillaker, Brophy-Herb, Villarruel, & Haas, 2008). Driven by the sharp increase in family instability, the question is raised whether this would have lasting negative consequences on school outcomes of youngsters, as education is considered the key factor in determining the long-term economic success of adolescents (Astone & McLanahan 1991, p. 309). Living in a non-intact family makes youngsters more likely to be less engaged and detached from school and work (Brown, 2004, 2010).

This difference between youngsters growing up in an intact or non-intact family with regard to school outcomes is often explained by family resources, proposed by sociologists such as Bourdieu (1977) and James Coleman (1988). Especially Coleman's theoretical framework has been well-used for identifying differences in resources

between intact and non-intact families. He distinguished between three types of family resources: financial, human and social resources.

Financial resources refer to the more economical prosperity of a family and are mostly made operational via family income. Youngsters, growing up in high-income families, display higher levels of school engagement (Brown, 2004). Their financially secured family provides them with resources to perform well in school. In addition, family economic hardship causes stress for youngsters that in its turn decreases school engagement (Mistry, Benner, Tan, & Kim, 2009). Intact families' financial resources are often higher than financial resources at the disposal of youngsters within non-intact families (Brown, 2004). The absence of a parent causes a decrease in the total family income. Single-parent families have therefore less financial resources. The transition to a stepfamily on the other hand, is mostly related to an increase in the financial resources within the household (Manning & Brown, 2006; Sweeney, 2010).

Human resources refer to the intellectual capital in the family that can help motivate youngsters to do well at school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). In non-intact families and especially in single parent families, the absence of a parent causes a decrease in the total human capital available to youngsters. However, although the presence of stepparents may counter this decrease in human resources, the involvement of stepparents is often less, as they are less willing to invest their resources in non-biological children (Sweeney, 2010).

Social resources are the third form of capital that can affect youngsters' school engagement. It refers to the relationships amongst parents and youngsters (Coleman, 1988, p. 110). The strength of the relationship between parent and youngsters, the amount of contact between them and the involvement of the parent with the child are all crucial sources of a youngster's academic success and engagement in school (Bartle-Haring, Younkin, & Day, 2012; Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2008; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Perdue, Manzeske & Estel, 2009; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). In non-intact families, youngsters will have less contact with one or both of the parents leading to a decrease in social resources in the family. This decrease in contact can be counteracted by post-separation custody arrangements, as it has been

demonstrated that youngsters in joint physical custody are more adjusted in school than children in sole custody arrangements (Bauserman, 2002). Social resources within stepfamilies are not always higher than in single-parent families, as stepparents are not always as involved with their non-biological children.

All these family resources are thus strongly connected to family configuration. An intact family provides youngsters with more resources to be successful at and involved within school. Youngsters in non-intact families often have fewer resources at their disposal that may jeopardize their school outcomes (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2004). The differences in school outcomes between youngsters in intact families and in non-intact families can be explained by the diminishment in family resources following a family dissolution. However, after a parental separation, two factors play a role. First of all, the configuration of non-intact families varies relating to the presence or absence of stepparents. Second, the contact with both parents may be still intact when parents chose for a joint physical custody arrangement instead of becoming a single parent or parent with only visiting rights.

Data and Method

Data are used from the *Leuvens Adolescenten en GezinnenOnderzoek,* LAGO survey 2008-2010, which is conducted on a yearly basis in Flanders (the Northern region of Belgium), by FaPOS (Family and Population Studies) of the University of Leuven. Including 5.778 pupils within 35 secondary schools, this dataset covers about one percent of the total school population in Flanders. The distribution of gender, year and educational track strongly resembles the total school population in Flanders (Vanassche, Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2011). Within LAGO, 24.6 per cent of the respondents have experienced a parental separation. The LAGO survey is built around family and child characteristics and includes information on among others family configurations, family relations and school outcomes. The descriptive values of school engagement and the independent variables are reported in Table 1 for all respondents and in Table 2 for those respondents whose parents are separated.

Table 1.

*Descriptive values of variables for all respondents (*N = *5,778)*

	Mean / Proportion	*SD*	*Range*	*n of items*	*α*
Dependent variable					
School engagement	23.01	7.98	0-48	12	0.86
Control variables					
Gender[a]	0.54	0.50	0 – 1		
Age	15.20	1.94	11 – 25		
School difficulties[b]	0.28	0.45	0 – 1		
Educational track					
general	0.55	0.50	0 – 1		
technical	0.24	0.43	0 – 1		
vocational	0.20	0.40	0 – 1		
Family configuration[c]	0.26	0.44	0 – 1		
Financial family resources					
Financial problems					
no problems	0.70	0.46	0 – 1		
problems	0.18	0.39	0 – 1		
missing	0.11	0.11	0 – 1		
Human family resources					
Education parents					
low	0.30	0.46	0 – 1		
high	0.57	0.46	0 – 1		
missing	0.13	0.34	0 – 1		
Social family resources					
Parental conflict	3.23	2.52	0 – 12	3	0.79
Relationship with mother	21.96	6.85	0 – 36	8	0.89
Relationship with father	19.63	7.56	0 – 36	8	0.91

[a]Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female. [b]School difficulties: 0 = no, yes = 1. [c]Family configuration: 0 = intact family, 1 = non-intact family.

Table 2.

*Descriptive values of variables for respondents with separated parents (*n = *1,422)*

	Mean/Proportion	*SD*	*Range*
Separation specific variables			
Custody arrangement			
residential mother	0.67	0.47	0 – 1
co-custody	0.23	0.42	0 – 1
residential father	0.10	0.30	0 – 1
Presence of stepparents[a]	0.56	0.50	0 – 1
Time since separation (in years)	8.09	4.43	0 – 20

[a]Presence of stepparents: 0 = no, 1 = yes.

The dependent variable 'school engagement' is measured via a twelve items scale that incorporates the three elements of emotional, cognitive and behavioral school engagement. Items measured youngsters' attitudes and behavior relating to their curiosity to learn, the feeling that school is useful, the understanding of the importance of classes and school for later life, and so on. The principal component analysis in Appendix 1 revealed that the three elements of behavioral, emotional and cognitive school engagement formed a single component of school engagement with an eigenvalue of 4.720 and a total variance explained of 39.3 percent. The internal validity was also high, when looking at the high cronbach's alpha of 0.858. Therefore, we opt to include the component scores scale in our model as dependent variable, combining the different aspects of school engagement (see e.g., Connell, Halpem-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Lee & Smith, 1995; Marks, 2000). This scale was computed by multiplying the component loadings with the standardized values of the scores on the item for each subject in the sample. The exact question wording and the results of the principal component analysis can be found in Appendix 1.

Our main independent variables relate to parental separation and the family resources. First of all, youngsters that grow up in non-intact families are more likely to exhibit signs of early disengagement from school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991, p. 318). A parental separation is included as a dummy variable. One quarter or 26 percent of the youngsters live in a non-intact family after a parental separation. As noticed in the theory, after a parental separation, there are two factors that should be considered. First, the presence of stepparents is considered via a dummy variable. Of those who live in non-intact families, more than half of them (56 percent) live together with at least one stepparent. Second, the custody arrangement operationalizes the contact between youngsters and their father and mother. Studies show that the contact with both parents is important for several child outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; McLanahan, 1999). We distinguish between living with a residential mother (more than 66 percent of the time), living with a residential father (more than 66 percent of the time) and living in a joint or co-custody arrangement. Co-custody is seen as the most preferable custody arrangement, as both parents keep a residential relationship with their child. Therefore, the group of youngsters living with both their parents will be taken as the reference category.

Nonetheless, most youngsters still live with their mother after a parental separation (67 percent).

Next, we analyze the effects of family resources on youngsters' school engagement. It is argued that a more financially healthy situation at home will lead to more prosperous school outcomes in general (Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008; Nash, 2002; Ono & Sanders, 2010). The financial resources in the family will be measured via the presence of financial problems within the family. Given that the youngsters were questioned and not the parents, it was not possible to include a measure of family income. Financial problems are made operational by asking youngsters if they felt that their parents had a hard time getting by financially. Financial problems present in the household are included as a dummy variable, with '1' indicating financial problems and '0' indicating no financial problems. Furthermore, a non-response dummy variable is included that controls for missing values. If parents were separated, the financial situation of the residential parent was considered and in case of co-custody, the most problematic financial situation was considered.

We considered the human resources in the family by including a measure of the educational level of the parents. The highest educational level of both parents was taken into consideration if the parents were still together or if they were co-parents. In case of a parental separation, we looked at the educational level of the residential parent. The educational level is measured via a dummy variable, with 'high education' indicating that the parent had a higher education degree, and 'low education' indicating that the parent had a degree of secondary school at most. An additional dummy variable was included to control for non-response. A higher educational level often coincides with more importance placed on youngsters' academic achievement (Li & Lerner, 2011).

Social family resources, the third type of resources in a household, were measured by the quality of the relationship between the parents and the youngster and by the parental conflict. The relationship quality of youngsters with their parents was made operational by a network resource identifier or NRI-scale of nine items with respect to the relationship with the mother and nine items with respect to the relationship with the father. Factor analyses show that the nine items relating to the relationship with the

mother formed an internally valid factor with an eigenvalue of 4.968, an explained variance of 55.2 percent and a cronbach alpha of 0.893; the nine items relating to the relationship with the father formed an internally valid factor with an eigenvalue of 5.307, an explained variance of 59.0 percent and a cronbach alpha of 0.912. A good relationship between youngsters and their parents is said to have a positive effect on the school engagement of youngsters, as they feel more appreciated and will not hesitate to discuss possible school problems or issues (Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddle, 2006). The internal conflict between parents was taken into consideration as a second measure of social family resources, as conflict leads to stress for youngsters and interferes their relationship with their school. Youngsters with parents in a conflicting situation more often feel disengaged from home and school (Brown, 2010).

The availability of family resources differs strongly between intact and non-intact families. In Table 3, the significance is presented of the χ^2-tests for financial and human family resources and of the t-tests for social family resources. In non-intact families, youngsters have less access to financial, human and social family resources. They experience more financial problems at home, have lower educated parents and worse relationships with both their mother and father. Further, there is more parental conflict in non-intact families, despite the fact that the parents are separated.

Table 3.

*The relation between school engagement and family resources by family status (*N = *5,778)*

Variables	Categories	Intact family	Non intact family	Significance
Financial family resources	No financial problems	0.80	0.52	***
	Financial problems	0.13	0.35	
	Missings	0.08	0.12	
Human family resources	Low educational level	0.28	0.38	***
	High education level	0.63	0.44	
	Missings	0.08	0.18	
Social family resources	Relationship with mother	22.23	21.26	***
	Relationship with father	20.72	16.64	***
	Parental conflict	3.01	3.97	***

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

The control variables that are included are gender, age, educational track and objective school difficulties. It is often concluded that boys are less engaged in school life than girls (Mo & Singh, 2008); therefore, the gender dummy 'girl' is included. Age is included, as it is observed that school outcomes such as school engagement start to decline in early adolescence (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). Youngsters were between 11 and 25 years old. Educational track is further taken into consideration, as it is expected that youngsters within the general track will be engaged more easily than youngsters within the tracks that focus on technical or vocational education. General education is aimed at the academically oriented students. Youngsters that do not perform well at school are directed to the more technical and vocational tracks. This may cause their detachment to school and school work (Demanet & Van Houtte, in press). Lastly, the variable school difficulties is included as a dummy variable in the model, which measures whether youngsters have repeated a year. It is often assumed that the level of school engagement is correlated with other more objective school outcomes, such as school performance and persistence (Bowen, Hopson, Rose, & Glennie, 2012; Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senécal, 2004). Yet, the causality between subjective and objective school outcomes has not been established fully. Most research is based on cross-sectional data; therefore, it is difficult to specify the causality between these two types of school outcomes (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Results

In what follows, we present the results of the multiple linear regression analyses in which the independent variables are gradually included. We investigate whether predictor variables of school engagement differ for youngsters within intact and non-intact families. To account for possible different relations between family resources and school engagement, separate regression analyses will be conducted for the group of youngsters with separated parents and the group whose parents are still together.

The first model in Table 4 includes the control variables and the parental separation variable. One can observe that girls are more involved with their school than boys, whereas youngsters in a technical or vocational track are less involved than youngsters

in a general track. The level of school engagement is not affected by age or school difficulties. A parental separation is related to lower school involvement of youngsters. Youngsters in non-intact families feel significantly less engaged in school than youngsters in intact families.

In the second model, the family resources are taken into account and we notice that the negative effect of parental separation becomes less important, as the strength of the effect and significance diminishes strongly. Problems regarding family resources that are often related to a parental separation have an additional effect on school engagement that reduce, yet, do not alter the effect of parental separation. More precisely, the social resources are the most significant indicators of school engagement. If youngsters live in families with a high level of social resources, meaning in a family with good relations between youngsters and parents, youngsters are less likely to feel disengaged at school. In contrast, conflicts within the family foster disengagement, yet, this effect is very weak and not significant. The social resources explain more than separation itself, as the explained variance increases strongly (The R squared in Model 2 increases with 7.7% in comparison to the R squared in Model 1). Contrary to what was expected, human and financial family resources do not yield significant results.

Table 4.

*Regression of individual and family characteristics on school engagement (*N = 5,778*)*

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Intercept	0.21	0.12		-0.90	0.14	
Gender (boy=ref.)	0.24	0.03	.12***	0.20	0.03	.10***
Age	-0.01	0.01	-.03	0.00	0.01	.01
School difficulties	0.03	0.04	.01	0.03	0.04	.01
Track (general=ref.)						
Technical	-0.26	0.04	-.11***	-0.24	0.04	-.10***
Vocational	-0.25	0.04	-.10***	-0.24	0.04	-.09***
Parental separation	-0.15	0.03	.07***	-0.07	0.04	-.03*
Financial family resources						
Financial problems (no problems=ref.)						
Financial problems				-0.01	0.04	-.00
Missings				0.00	0.09	.00
Human family resources						
Education parents (high=ref.)						
Low				0.04	0.03	.02
Missings				-0.03	0.06	-.01
Social family resources						
Parental conflict				-0.01	0.01	-.03*
Good relation with mother				0.03	0.00	.20***
Good relation with father				0.01	0.00	.09***
R^2		0.04		0.11		

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Next, differential relations between family resources and school engagement for youngsters in intact and non-intact families are considered. We conduct separate analyses for these two groups of youngsters. The results of the analyses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5.

Regression of individual and family characteristics on school engagement by family status (intact families n = 4,138; non-intact families n = 1,422)

	Intact families			Non-intact families		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Intercept	-0.80	0.16		-1.46	0.34	
Gender (boy=ref.)	0.22	0.03	.11***	0.12	0.07	.06
Age	0.00	0.01	.01	0.02	0.02	.03
School difficulties	0.03	0.04	.01	0.06	0.08	.03
Track (general=ref.)						
Technical	-0.26	0.04	-.11***	-0.20	0.08	-.09*
Vocational	-0.27	0.05	-.10***	-0.23	0.09	-.10*
Financial family resources						
Financial problems (no problems=ref.)						
Problems	0.03	0.05	.01	-0.01	0.07	-.01
Missings	-0.03	0.11	.00	-0.35	0.31	-.04
Human family resources						
Education parents (high=ref.)						
Low	0.04	0.04	.02	-0.02	0.07	-.01
Missings	-0.10	0.07	-.02	0.06	0.13	.02
Social family resources						
Parental conflict	-0.03	0.01	-.06**	0.01	0.01	.03
Good relation with mother	0.03	0.00	.18***	0.04	0.01	.27***
Good relation with father	0.01	0.00	.09***	0.01	0.00	.12**
Separation specific variables						
Custody arrangements (Co-custody=ref.)						
Residential mother	n.a.		n.a.	0.10	0.08	-.05
Residential father	n.a.		n.a.	-0.31	0.13	-.09*
Presence of stepparents				-0.00	0.07	-.00
Time since separation				0.00	0.01	.01
R^2		0.12		0.11		

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

The predictors of school engagement are largely identical for youngsters in intact and non-intact families, albeit a smaller significance level for youngsters in non-intact families is found, because of the smaller sample size of youngsters in non-intact families. The only difference between the two groups can be found for the effect of parental conflict on school engagement. Parental conflict is significantly related to lower levels of school engagement for youngsters whose parents are still together. The relation is yet not significant for youngsters with separated parents. Human and financial family

resources do not yield significant results for youngsters in intact nor in non-intact families.

In addition to the variables that were already presented in Table 4, some separation specific variables were included. These variables are only weakly related to school engagement. For custody arrangements, we find that youngsters who live with a residential father are significantly less engaged in school than youngsters in co-custody. No differences are found between youngsters with a residential mother and youngsters in co-custody. Time since separation and the presence of a stepparent are additionally not related to school engagement.

Discussion

Instead of the usual emphasis on objective school outcomes, such as academic attainment or test scores, we considered the more subjective indicator of school engagement. The aim of this article was to disentangle the effects of family characteristics on youngsters' school engagement. More precisely, the focus was on the effect of family configurations and family resources on school engagement, taking into account the differences between youngsters living in intact and non-intact families.

With regard to family configurations, the results show that youngsters in non-intact families have lower levels of school engagement than youngsters in intact families. This confirms the findings of previous research. Inquiring additional differences within the group living in non-intact families, we found a relation between the custody arrangement and level of school engagement. Those who did not have a residential relationship with their mother had a significantly lower level of school engagement than those living in co-custody. This is a very specific group, as it seldom occurs that a judge prohibits a mother her residential rights. Only in cases of extreme neglect or mental problems, the mother is denied the right to live with her children. Dominant cultural norms state that mothers should be co-resident at least. This would make the experience of non-resident motherhood a difficult psychosocial experience, influencing the children involved negatively (Cookston, 1999; Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007).

The different levels of school engagement between youngsters in intact and non-intact families can largely be explained by the availability of social family resources. Youngsters in families with low parental conflict and who have good relationships with both their parents are more engaged in school than youngsters in families with lower social resources. Social family resources do, however, not fully explain the effects of family configurations on school engagement: despite including them in the analysis, significant differences between youngsters in intact and non-intact families persisted.

As youngsters in non-intact families face a different day-to-day family life than peers in intact families, their behavior and attitudes may be related to different family characteristics. In this study, we compared both groups and observed an interesting difference in the relation between parental conflict and the level of school engagement. Although higher levels of parental conflict are found within non-intact families, youngsters in intact families are more affected by a strained relationship between parents than those in non-intact families. In other words, parents that are still together harm their children's' level of school engagement in case of a high level of conflict between them. Parents that live separated do not lower the school engagement of their children when there is still a high level of tension and conflict between the parents.

This study shows that one should be careful in blaming only the parental separation for negative school outcomes. Next to family configurations, social family resources appear to be important for the level of engagement in school. Both in intact and non-intact families, relationships with father and mother are the strongest predictors of school engagement. This was already mentioned by Coleman (1988). He claimed that social resources, or social capital, are a necessary prerequisite for youngsters to benefit from the human and financial resources in the family. Contrary to common beliefs, financial means and the educational level of parents were not significantly related to school engagement in the analyses. These non-findings may be related to the specific case of Flanders in Belgium. It has to be acknowledged that Flanders has no strong patterns of inequality or exclusion. Hence, it would be worthwhile to repeat this kind of endeavor in other regions (United Nations Development Programme, 2004).

Two caveats need to be noted regarding the present study. Firstly, cross sectional data were used and as a consequence, no causal relations can be inferred and henceforth, the direction of the relations may be reversed. Secondly, human and financial family resources were measured via a single indicator of financial problems and educational level of parents. Data was unavailable regarding other socio-economic indicators such as family income or occupational status of both parents.

This research has thrown up several questions in need of further investigation. A first possible direction is a more detailed exploration into the group of residential fathers and nonresidential mothers. The small number in this study impedes a more in depth study of this group. A second possible direction is the search for more specific indicators of family resources in the group of non-intact families. It should be recognized that there is not only a difference between intact and non-intact families, but also a large diversity within the group of non-intact families. In this study, already some separation specific variables were controlled for, yet, still other variables, such as family life instability and number of family changes, remain understudied (Amato, 2010). A third possible direction is to include resources of several socialization agents when studying school engagement. In this study, focus was placed on the family resources, whereas peers, school and neighborhood resources may come into play as well.

The research results can be used to develop targeted interventions aimed at remedying school disengagement. One policy approach is to tackle school disengagement by emphasizing relational family resources, as a supplement to the more tangible family resources that indicate socio-economic inequalities between families. Projects at school that are directed at students with problematic family relations should be encouraged. For instance, the Dutch *Kinderen In Echtscheiding Situatie, KIES* (Snels-Doron & de Kort, 2004) organizes self-help groups at school for children who experience difficult family relations. Also the *Children Of Divorce Intervention Program, CODIP* (Pedro-Carroll, 2005) aims at sharing and interchanging experiences related to problematic family situations. These interactions may form an emotional entourage for children with strained relations at home. Research has demonstrated that avoidance behavior is negatively related to school outcomes, whereas group sessions may increase their coping skills and subsequently produce positive outcomes (Pedro-Carroll, 2005;

Armistead, McCombs, Forehand, Wierson, Long, & Fauber 1990). However, one should not disregard the fact that parents should also shoulder the responsibility for their children's issues. Therefore, more attention should additionally be given to marriage counseling, as parental conflict interferes with positive child outcomes. Both the relationship between parents as the general well-being of children can be enhanced by means of marriage and relationship education (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008).

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Appendix 1. Principal Component Analysis of School Engagement

The exact question wording for the different school engagement items was: *please give your own opinion on the following positions regarding your study. Do you totally disagree, disagree, are you uncertain, do you agree, do you totally agree?*

The following twelve items were considered:

1. The more I learn, the more eager I get to learn even more (curiosity)
2. When I get home, I mostly feel like I have learned something (knowledge improvement)
3. Studying mostly looks like a waste of time (loss of time)
4. There are many things in life, which I feel are more important than studying (not that important)
5. It seems to me that studying is important, because I feel it helps my development (development)
6. I don't understand why studying is of any importance for the things I will do later in my life (not important for future)
7. Studying in itself is a waste of time (useless)
8. I do not like to study (don't like to study)
9. When I don't immediately find a solution for a problem relating to my study, I keep on searching until I find a solution (persistent looking for solution)
10. I like to search for additional information on study topics (extra documentation)
11. I often daydream in class (daydreaming)
12. If I would know in advance that a subject would not be examined, I would not study for it (study if necessary for test)

Principal component analysis of 12 school engagement items

	Factor school engagement
Curiosity	0.626
No knowledge improvement	0.629
Loss of time	-0.739
Not that important	-0.635
Development	0.687
Not important for future	-0.534
Useless	-0.669
Don't like to study	-0.718
Persistent looking for solution	0.544
Extra documentation	0.528
Daydreaming	-0.595
Study if necessary for test	-0.576
Eigenvalue	4.720
Explained variance	0.393
Cronbach alpha	0.858

Entries are factor loadings of an exploratory factor analysis.