



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

# Learning, Culture and Social Interaction

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/lcsi](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/lcsi)

Full length article

## Understanding school engagement: The role of contextual continuities and discontinuities in adolescents' learner identities

Monique Verhoeven<sup>\*</sup>, Bonne J.H. Zijlstra, Monique Volman

Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, PO Box 15780, 1001 NG Amsterdam, the Netherlands



### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Learner identity  
Learning notion  
Contextual continuity  
Contextual discontinuity  
School engagement  
Comparative case study

### ABSTRACT

Adolescents' school engagement is related to continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between various contexts (e.g., school, home, peer groups). Learning notions are the prevalent ideas in a context about appropriate learning goals, contents and means. It has remained unclear how adolescents' learner identities mediate the role that (dis-)continuities play in adolescents' school engagement. To advance insight into adolescents' school engagement, we examined what relations could be found between various contextual (dis-)continuities in learning notions adolescents with diverse levels of school engagement experience and their learner identities. Our comparative case study suggests that especially (dis-)continuities regarding notions of what it entails to be a good learner and the importance of being one between the school context on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other inform students' school-related learner identities. The present study implies that adolescents' school engagement can be fostered by building continuities between school and home in the appreciation of students' efforts and by making them resilient to unconstructive learning notions in home and peer group contexts.

### 1. Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that learning and learner identity development are intrinsically related (e.g., [Coll & Falsafi, 2010](#); [Holland et al., 1998](#); [Silseth & Arnseth, 2011](#)): by engaging in learning experiences, adolescents are found to develop new knowledge and skills *and* to come to understand themselves as learners in relation to the knowledge and skills that they try to master ([Calabrese Barton et al., 2013](#); [Mortimer et al., 2010](#)). To illustrate, by participating in a photography class, one may become familiar with certain techniques, but also come to know oneself as a photographer: the experience of participating in such a class, also informed by how one's participation is recognized by others, teaches one things about whether one is gifted as a photographer, what one's strengths and weaknesses as a photographer are, and whether one enjoys engaging in (particular types of) photography. Based on this, a person may to a larger or lesser extent come to identify with photography: it may or may not become of significance to who one is as a learner ([Black et al., 2010](#)).

Adolescents integrate the more specific learning-related self-understandings they have developed—concerning, for example, photography—into a more abstract sense of themselves as learners ([Akkerman & Van Eijck, 2013](#); [Coll & Falsafi, 2010](#)). The rather stable and coherent self-understandings as learners that adolescents thus develop are referred to as their learner identities ([Pollard & Filer, 2007](#); [Rubin, 2007](#)). It has been theorized that adolescents develop their learner identities not only over time, but also across contexts,

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: Department of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences – Education, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS Utrecht, the Netherlands.

E-mail addresses: [m.verhoeven1@uu.nl](mailto:m.verhoeven1@uu.nl) (M. Verhoeven), [b.j.h.zijlstra@uva.nl](mailto:b.j.h.zijlstra@uva.nl) (B.J.H. Zijlstra), [m.l.l.volman@uva.nl](mailto:m.l.l.volman@uva.nl) (M. Volman).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2020.100460>

Received 21 May 2020; Received in revised form 11 September 2020; Accepted 14 September 2020

Available online 28 September 2020

2210-6561/© 2020 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

such as the contexts of home, school and sports clubs (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011). However, limited empirical insights have been provided into the latter process (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Mortimer et al., 2010; Vetter et al., 2011). It is important to learn more about this process, though, as adolescents' learner identities inform their current and future learning engagements (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Rubin, 2007). Hence, it remains rather unclear what role the set of adolescents' life-wide contexts play in fostering their motivation to either engage in or disengage from school. This issue is further explored in the present paper.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this paper, a sociocultural perspective is adopted. From this perspective, what processes of learning and learner identity development adolescents engage in is informed by the affordances and constraints that are prevalent and available in the various contexts they participate in (Holland et al., 1998; Wortham, 2006). These context-specific affordances and constraints are considered to be socially and culturally constructed, and historically accumulated, and can take the form of norms, values and tools (e.g., Roth & Lee, 2007; Wertsch, 1998). Such norms, values and tools are (re-)produced through interactions of people with other people, and through interactions of people with the material means available to them (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Polman, 2010). Hence, people are thought to continuously shape and being shaped by the contexts they participate in (Hedegaard, 2012; Roth & Lee, 2007).

The set of norms, values and tools that are available in a particular context convey, among other things, the *learning notions* that are prevalent there. What we refer to by learning notions are the widely spread and generally valued ideas in a context about the learning goals (such as getting high grades, or learning as much as possible), learning contents (what type of knowledge and skills are deemed important to learn and why), learning means (with what tools and strategies these types of knowledge and skills should be acquired; also see Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011). For example, being a fast learner may be praiseworthy in one context, whereas meticulousness may be prioritized in another. Here, it should be noted that a context's learning notions are not deemed to *belong* to particular persons, but to be distributed among human and nonhuman actors. In principle, moreover, learning notions are negotiable among the participants in a particular context. Yet, due to their relatively stable nature, people, in daily life, tend to experience learning notions as fixed and given, rather than as flexible and negotiable (Hedegaard, 2012; Holland et al., 1998; Roth & Lee, 2007). It is in relation to the learning notions that are prevalent in the contexts adolescents participate in, and the extent to which they can and want to conform to these learning notions, that adolescents develop their learner identities (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Mortimer et al., 2010; Rubin, 2007).

### 2.1. Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions

It is important to acknowledge that adolescents do not only learn in school, but also in out-of-school contexts (e.g., Akkerman & Van Eijck, 2013). Each of these contexts interacts with the other contexts a particular adolescent participates in: It is together that they mediate this adolescent's learning and development, and form his or her social ecology (Barron, 2006; Hedegaard, 2012). The different contexts in someone's social ecology are characterized by possibly overlapping yet unique sets of affordances and constraints that each introduce the adolescent to particular ways of thinking, speaking and acting and, therefore, to particular learning notions (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). Hence, the learning notions that are prevalent in an adolescent's school context may to a larger or lesser extent overlap with those in his or her various out-of-school contexts giving rise to continuities and/or discontinuities.

Inspired by Bronkhorst and Akkerman (2016), we understand *continuities* to occur when adolescents can relate, translate or integrate learning notions of the school context (in) to those of out-of-school contexts and can make connections between them. In such instances, adolescents are allowed to continue and extend their processes of learning and development while moving across school and out-of-school contexts. Continuities in learning notions between school and out-of-school contexts have repeatedly been found to foster adolescents' school engagement (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Phelan et al., 1991; Valenzuela, 1999).

In other instances, adolescents may experience differences across school and out-of-school contexts in learning notions that cannot (easily) be related, translated or integrated (in) to each other. Here, we speak of *discontinuities* and distinguish two types. First, school and out-of-school contexts' learning notions can be *unrelatable* to each other. Learning in school is then experienced to be disconnected from learning in out-of-school contexts. This may for example happen when adolescents are engaged in an extensive arts program in school while being creative does not have a prominent place in the context of home (also see Nasir & Hand, 2008; Phelan et al., 1991). The learning notions implied by these practices may coexist independently and unproblematically in an adolescent's social ecology, although research does suggest that opportunities to extend and foster processes of learning and development may be missed out on (e.g., Verhoeven et al., 2019). However, it has also been found that when students struggle to relate their experiences from home to their experiences in school, this may foster school disengagement too as this may cause students to have trouble seeing how the subject matter is of concern to them (Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Moll et al., 1992).

Second, contexts' learning notions may *contradict* each other, for example when one's parents teach one to be quiet and obedient in school, while one's teachers encourage one to express one's own opinions and think critically (Cone et al., 2014). Such discontinuities are generally found to impede adolescents' school engagement (Mortimer et al., 2010; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Moreover, discontinuities are disproportionately often identified for adolescents with backgrounds that tend to be underrepresented in higher education (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Phelan et al., 1991).

In sum, various studies identify a relation between (dis-)continuities in learning notions and adolescents' school engagement. What has often remained underexposed, though, is *how* continuities and discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts play a role in adolescents' school engagement. A learner identity approach may help to understand this relation, as it connects adolescents' learning experiences to their learning engagements by means of their self-understandings as learners. The present study therefore

explores what patterns can be found in the relations between the learner identities of students who differ in terms of their school engagement, and the types of continuities and discontinuities in learning notions that they experience.

## 2.2. Learner identity development

Next to studies on continuities and discontinuities in learning notions, a research field on adolescents' learner identities has emerged more recently. Learner identity research thus far demonstrates that when adolescents experience a discrepancy between their own ideas of how and what they can and want to learn on the one hand, and their school's ideas about learning on the other, this may cause them to disengage from their education (e.g., Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Olitsky et al., 2010; Rubin, 2007; Smagorinsky et al., 2005). Mortimer et al. (2010) for example demonstrate how adolescents' disengagement from a college-preparation program is partly driven by the fact that they cannot make sense of the program's message that they should engage in voluntary rather than paid work to get access to college. What, in learner identity research, is often unexplored, though, is how such discrepancies emerge. This research field has thus far mainly been concerned with how learning notions are conveyed *in schools*, and only a few studies demonstrate that students develop and maintain their learner identities in relation to the contextual (dis-)continuities between school and out-of-school contexts (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Mortimer et al., 2010; Vetter et al., 2011).

It can be expected that adolescents try to maintain coherent self-understandings as learners while moving across contexts (Erikson, 1968; H. Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Marcia, 1993). In connecting research on continuities and discontinuities in learning notions on the one hand with learner identity research on the other, it can be theorized, also based on extant research, that adolescents may employ three strategies to warrant this coherence when experiencing discontinuities. First, adolescents may shift in position and perspective when experiencing discontinuities, and their position or perspective from one context may expand and coexist with their positions and perspectives as learners in another context (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Phelan et al., 1991; Vetter et al., 2011). Additionally, adolescents may try to negotiate discontinuities across contexts to maintain their existing learner identities and engage in the learning practices of both contexts. In doing so, they would try to change the prevalent learning notions in one or more contexts so as to create continuities (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; H.J. Hermans, 2001). Third, especially when experiencing contradictory learning notions that they cannot make sense of, adolescents may come to identify with one context's learning notions while distancing themselves from another context's learning notions, as has been suggested repeatedly by studies on discontinuities in learning notions (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Noyes, 2006; Phelan et al., 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011).

## 3. The present study's contribution

This study aims to contribute to the research field in various ways. First, it is explored how a learner identity approach can help to better understand the relations between adolescents' experienced continuities and discontinuities in learning notions on the one hand, and their school engagement on the other. In doing so, we simultaneously aim to further expand learner identity research by taking adolescents' participation in various contexts into account.

Second, while it is increasingly acknowledged that continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between school and out-of-school contexts play a role in adolescents' school engagement, the focus has mainly been on (dis-)continuities between school on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mortimer et al., 2010; Noyes, 2006; Phelan et al., 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; Vetter et al., 2011). Little is still known about the role that (dis-)continuities between school on the one hand, and three other contexts in which many adolescents participate and learn—namely work, sports clubs and music classes—on the other, play in their school engagement. Therefore, we take continuities and discontinuities that may arise from these contexts into account as well in studying adolescents' school engagement.

Third, rather than focusing on how one or two students (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Noyes, 2006; Vetter et al., 2011; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2010), or rather homogenous groups of students in terms of school engagement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mortimer et al., 2010) navigate through different contexts with different learning notions, we focus on fifteen students who differ in their levels of school engagement. This allows for a comparative perspective through which patterns can be explored in the relations between students' learner identities and the types of continuities and discontinuities in learning notions that they experience (e.g., Merriam, 1998). This, in turn, will enable us to gain knowledge about the different types of continuities and discontinuities that may or may not play a role in adolescents' school engagement, and how this relation is possibly mediated by adolescents' learner identities. In this way, we hope to provide schools and teachers with further insights into how adolescents' school engagement can be fostered.

The following two research questions are addressed in the present paper: 'What continuities and discontinuities in learning notions are experienced by adolescents with diverse levels of school engagement?' and 'What relations can be found between the continuities and discontinuities in learning notions these adolescents experience and their learner identities?'. In studying these questions, we mainly explore how adolescents' self-understandings as learners *in school* are informed by (that is, constructed partly in relation to) these continuities and discontinuities.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Research context

The study was situated in the Netherlands. In Dutch education, students are allocated to separate tracks in either the first or second year of high school (grade seven or eight, respectively), by the age of twelve to thirteen. This allocation is based on teacher

**Table 1**  
Distinguished levels of demonstrated school engagement and their characteristics.

Hardly engaged	Moderately engaged	Highly engaged
Hardly ever	Quite often:	Almost always
Having done homework	Having done homework	Having done homework
Bringing schoolbooks to class	Bringing schoolbooks to class	Bringing schoolbooks to class
Following teacher's instructions, such as	Following teacher's instructions, such as	Following teacher's instructions, such as
Being quiet	Being quiet	Being quiet
Doing schoolwork	Doing schoolwork	Doing schoolwork
Taking notes	Taking notes	Taking notes
Complying with a request to take of coats/remove backpacks from tables when requested to		
But instead	Instead, they are sometimes	
Talking to each other about other things than school	Talking to each other about other things than school	
Throwing stuff around the classroom	Daydreaming	
Listening to music	Secretly writing notes to each other	
Overtly being on phones	Covertly being on phones	

recommendations, students' standardized test scores at the end of primary school, and/or on the students' test results and work attitude during the first or first two years of high school. Whereas three sub-tracks of a four year long prevocational track (also known as the "preparatory secondary vocational education track", ranging from more hands-on to more theoretically oriented education) prepare students for subsequent vocational programs, the five year long intermediate track (also known as the "senior general secondary education track") provides students with access to higher professional education. Additionally, there are two six year long pre-university tracks, of which one (the Gymnasium) includes Latin and ancient Greek. Completing one of the six-year tracks is the most common way to enroll in university. Exit qualifications for each of these tracks are formally established on a national level.

#### 4.2. Research design

This study concerns a comparative case study that is explorative in nature. Adolescents who differed from each other in their school engagement and the educational track they were in were recruited to participate in the study. In this way, variety in the continuities and discontinuities that the participating students experienced was aimed for, so as to allow for a comparative perspective. Such a perspective is helpful in the development of knowledge and enhances validity of the research findings (e.g., Merriam, 1998). The design for the present study consisted of two stages. First, classroom observation data and informal teacher interviews with the students' mentors were collected to establish the students' behavioral engagement based on their observed and teacher-reported focus and work attitude in class. This procedure enabled us to recruit students with diverse levels of school engagement for our research, which is further elaborated upon in Section 4.3. In the second stage of the research design, the students were interviewed. The student interviews served as the primary data for our study and allowed us to answer the research questions. We opted for student interviews as a primary data source because we consider people to develop and maintain their learner identities in relation to their experiences of continuities and discontinuities in learning notions (Coll & Falsafi, 2010). Furthermore, the student interviews provided us with access to students' self-understandings as learners, which is in line with our understanding that people tell others and themselves who they are as learners through narratives and that these narratives inform the way they participate in different learning practices (Holland et al., 1998; Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

#### 4.3. Respondent selection, data and procedure

After our project was granted permission from our Institutional Ethics Review Board, respondents were recruited from six classes of three Dutch schools (two classes per school) that we already had access to. Two of these schools (referred to as School A and B) were located in the same average-sized city in the Netherlands with approximately 500.000 residents, and one school (referred to as School C) in a smaller city with approximately 170.000 residents. Whereas the first two schools' student populations reflected the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in the Netherlands reasonably well, native Dutch students from middle- to upper-class families were over-represented in the other school's student population.

In the Netherlands, students in the prevocational track are generally perceived, by themselves and others, as 'less successful' in school (Van den Bulk, 2011). Van den Bulk (2011) demonstrated that such collective ideas are often integrated in adolescents' status positioning and prospects of both themselves and others. From this it follows that the track students are in may inform their learner identity and hence their school engagement. To take this factor into consideration we recruited, per school, one class on the most theoretically-oriented pre-vocational level (often the only prevocational level offered by schools also providing pre-university education) and one class on the pre-university level. Classes from the ninth grade were recruited, consisting of students of fourteen to fifteen years old.

To select students for the study, we made a theoretical distinction between three levels of behavioral engagement, based on extant

research on school engagement (Finn & Rock, 1997): highly, moderately and hardly engaged. In Table 1, an overview of these engagement levels and the behavior that is generally considered to characterize each of these engagement levels can be found in Table 1. During classroom observations (in different domains and during at least three classes per classroom in the first six weeks of the schoolyear), it was reported how often the various students in the selected classrooms demonstrated the kinds of behavior that are listed in Table 1. Additionally, we assessed their preparation for school at home by how often they, according to their mentors, did their homework. Based on these combined sources of information, the students were allocated to 1) the 'hardly engaged' group when they not necessarily never, but almost never, had done their homework, brought their schoolbooks, and followed their teachers' instructions while relatively often engaging in overt disturbing behavior; 2) the 'moderately engaged' when they approximately equally often had and had not done their homework, brought their schoolbooks, and followed their teachers' instructions. Dependent on the class they were in, these students tended to engage in covert non-compliant behavior; 3) the 'highly engaged' group when they not necessarily always, but almost always had done their homework, brought their schoolbooks, and followed their teachers' instructions, generally without showing any kind of disturbing or non-compliant behavior. This allocation was performed by the first author in collaboration with the students' mentors (no discrepancies in judgment occurred) and, based on the classroom observation data, was critically monitored by the second and third author.

It was found that about ten to 20% of the students per class could be identified as highly engaged students. The majority of the students in each class demonstrated to be moderately engaged. Another ten to 20% of the students was considered to demonstrate hardly engaged behavior. Whereas many students whom we identified as highly engaged were glad to participate in our research, most moderately engaged and especially hardly engaged students declined our request to participate in our research project. Consequently, ten highly engaged, four moderately engaged and one hardly engaged student could be interviewed. An overview of the interviewed students, and of the schools and educational tracks they were in, their ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds as reported by them in the interviews (provided that they were comfortable with sharing this information) and of the out-of-school contexts they participated in can be found in Table 2.

To study adolescents' learner identities and the continuities and discontinuities in learning notions they experienced between school on the one hand, and various out-of-school contexts on the other, semi-structured in-depth interviews were performed. Such interviews allow space for adolescents' authentic narratives and experiences, while warranting the discussion of key themes in each interview (Rapley, 2007). The recruited respondents were interviewed in two sessions over the course of the schoolyear 2016–2017. The first session concerned the respondents' educational trajectory thus far, their experiences thereof, their current experiences of

**Table 2**  
Information on the interviewed students.

Students	School	School track	Level of behavioral engagement	Ethnic background <sup>a</sup>	Socioeconomic background <sup>b</sup>	Sports	Music	Work
Richie	Traditional	Prevocational	Moderately engaged	Native Dutch	Medium	Soccer	None	Runner
Amanda	Traditional	Prevocational	Moderately engaged	Native Dutch	High	Soccer	None	Supermarket
Tammy	Traditional	Pre-university	Highly engaged	Native Dutch	Unreported	Volleyball	None	Babysitter
Fay	Traditional	Pre-university	Highly engaged	Native Dutch	High	Hockey/horse-backriding/krav maga	None	Babysitter
Jade	Traditional	Pre-university	Highly engaged	Native Dutch	Low	Table tennis	None	None
Kay	Montessori	Prevocational	Less engaged	Native Dutch	Medium	None	None	None
Miriam	Montessori	Prevocational	Highly engaged	Egyptian	High	Korfball	None	None
Ludwig	Montessori	Pre-university	Moderately engaged	Native Dutch	High	None	None	None
Andrew	Waldorf	Prevocational	Highly engaged	Native Dutch	High	None	Percussion	None
Ayden	Waldorf	Prevocational	Highly engaged	Azerbaijani	High	Judo	Guitar	None
Nessa	Waldorf	Prevocational	Highly engaged	Native Dutch	Medium	None	Piano	None
Caleb	Waldorf	Pre-university	Moderately engaged	Native Dutch	High	Volleyball	None	None
Rebecca	Waldorf	Pre-university	Highly engaged	German/ Native Dutch	High	Judo	Bass guitar	None
Lilly	Waldorf	Pre-university	Highly engaged	Native Dutch	Low	None	Piano	None
Ethan	Waldorf	Pre-university	Highly engaged	Native Dutch	Low	Krav maga	Drums	None

<sup>a</sup> Students' ethnic background was assessed by the country or countries their parents were born in.

<sup>b</sup> Students' socioeconomic background was assessed by means of the highest attained education level of either parent: students of whom the parents' highest education level was high school or lower were considered to have a low socioeconomic background; students of whom the parents' highest education level was a vocational degree were considered to have a medium socioeconomic background; students of whom the parents' highest education level was a higher professional education or university degree were considered to have a high socioeconomic background. In case students were doubting what the highest attained education level of their parents was, the two levels they were in doubt of were reported in the table.



going to school, and their self-understandings as a learner within the context of school. The full topic list is presented in Appendix A (Online Supplement). The second session addressed the respondents' perceived learning notions in the various contexts they moved across. Also, the respondents were asked to compare the out-of-school learning notions they experienced to the learning notions in school. While discussing these issues, the respondents' self-understandings as a learner within the context of school were also touched upon again. The topic list for the second interview session can also be found in Appendix A (Online Supplement).

Depending on the respondents' preferences, the interviews were held in an empty classroom or in a lunch café nearby the respondents' schools. All interviews were performed in Dutch. After we received the respondents' permission, the interviews were audiotaped. On average, the interviews in the first round lasted forty minutes. The interviews in the second round approximately lasted fifty minutes. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were assigned to the respondents to protect their privacy.

#### 4.4. Analysis

We systematically coded and classified fragments of the interview transcripts for theory-driven themes by means of content analysis, (see, e.g., Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Weber, 1990). To start, the first author coded the interview transcripts for *adolescents' perceived learning notions in school/in sport clubs/in music classes/at work/at home/in peer groups*. Representative fragments of each of these codes can be found in Table 3.

Next, the data was coded for *continuities and discontinuities in learning notions* between school and each of the other contexts they participated in. Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions were coded for when the learning notions that were discussed by the student in talking about one context were, respectively, explicitly similar to or different from those discussed in talking about another context. The other authors critically observed this coding process.

To answer our first research question, 'what continuities and discontinuities in learning notions are experienced by adolescents with diverse levels of demonstrated school engagement?', various tables were created. In Table 4 we included student-specific information on how many continuities and discontinuities in learning notions we identified between school on the one hand and each of the out-of-school contexts they participated in on the other. In Tables 5 through 8, we included information on the nature of the experienced continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between school and out-of-school contexts. Examples concern a continuity between home and school with respect to the notion that a good learner in school is characterized by putting an effort into his or her education, or a discontinuity between work and school when it comes to the skills that are taught and valued in these contexts.

As a first step to answer our second research question, 'what relations can be found between the continuities and discontinuities in learning notions that adolescents with diverse levels of demonstrated school engagement experience and their learner identities?', the first author coded interview fragments for 'learner identities' when they reflected how respondents recognized themselves as learners (see Table 3). Again, the other authors critically observed the coding process. Subsequently, learner identity portraits were created for each of the research participants. Next, we examined the relations between the encountered contextual continuities and discontinuities in learning notions and the respondents' learner identities, while taking into account their demonstrated level of school engagement.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Experienced continuities and discontinuities

We first made a general overview of experienced continuities and discontinuities we identified for each of the students between the school context on the one hand and each of the out-of-school contexts they participated in on the other. This overview can be found in Table 4. This table shows that no experienced continuities and only one discontinuity could be identified for Kay, the hardly engaged

**Table 3**  
Exemplary fragments per code.

Code	Exemplary fragment
Perceived learning notion in/at:	
School	"[A teacher] recently said 'school is very important, but there are other important things next to school too, of course' (Tammy, interview #1)
Sports clubs	"[At the soccer club] it is about having fun, and if you lose, ah well, it is really about having fun and being part of a team" (Amanda, interview #2)
Music class	"In piano class, a good learner is someone who is just doing his best" (Lilly, interview #2)
Work	"[In the supermarket] it is about speed, about working fast and tidy" (Richie, interview #2)
Home	"My mom finds school very important, but she also thinks it is important that I get some work experience" (Amanda, interview #2)
Peer groups	"We [my friends and I] thought 'fuck the system', we are not going to do anything in class, throwing stuff around, literal chaos, like you see in cartoons" (Kay, interview #1)
Perceived continuity	Interviewer: when do your parents entail someone to be a good learner? Jade: Same as my teachers in school. When someone really makes an effort and gets high grades (interview #2)
Perceived discontinuity	"At school, you just get a list of something you have to learn by heart, whereas at volleyball you have to repeat exercises over and over and over again to improve your game" (Caleb, interview #2)
Learner identity	"I like [learning things in school]. I think learning ... well ... the more you learn, the more experiences you have had and, yes, I really kind of dig learning" (Miriam, interview #1)

**Table 4**

Amount of identified continuities and discontinuities between the school context and out-of-school contexts.

Students	Continuities				Discontinuities			
	School & Home	School & Peers	School & Leisure	School & Work	School & Home	School & Peers	School & Leisure	School & Work
Hardly engaged								
Kay	0	0			0	1		
Moderately engaged								
Ludwig	1	1			1	1		
Richie	0	2	2	0	2	2	0	2
Caleb	2	1	0		0	1	2	
Amanda	1	1	2	1	1	1	3	0
Highly engaged								
Miriam	2	2	0		0	0	1	
Jade	2	2	0		0	0	1	
Tammy	1	3	1	0	0	0	3	1
Andrew	2	1	2		0	0	0	
Ethan	1	2	0		1	1	3	
Rebecca	2	2	3		1	0	4	
Fay	2	2	1	0	0	0	2	1
Ayden	1	1	0		1	0	1	
Nessa	1	1	1		1	0	1	
Lilly	1	1	1		0	0	2	

student. Among the students whom we identified as moderately engaged, discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of school and home, and especially between the contexts of school and peer groups were relatively common. In contrast, most of the highly engaged students in our sample did not experience discontinuities between these contexts. Furthermore, the moderately and highly engaged students experienced at least one contextual continuity in learning notions between school on the one hand and the contexts of home and/or peer groups on the other. Additionally, Table 4 shows that for three of the four students who had an after-school job (also see Table 2) we exclusively found experienced discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of school and work.

Below, we explore and zoom in on the nature of the experienced continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between school and out-of-school contexts. Yet, as we were looking for patterns, only continuities and discontinuities are discussed that were identified for various students, or that appeared to be characteristic for students with similar demonstrated engagement levels. An overview of all the continuities and discontinuities that were identified can be found in Tables 5 through 8.

### 5.1.1. School and home

For Kay, a hardly engaged student, no experienced continuities or discontinuities between learning notions at home and in school could be identified (also see Table 5). Even when Kay was explicitly asked about his perception of the learning notions in the contexts of home and school, he stated that he did not know how his parents or teachers thought about various learning-related themes. For example, when Kay was asked what he thought his parents understood a good learner to be, he replied, "I have no clue what their image of a good student is" (interview #2). It should be noted that, as Kay was rather talkative during the interview, we have no reason to believe he merely responded this way to be able to leave the interview as soon as possible. We also contend that Kay is able to identify and reflect upon learning notions, as he did extensively discuss the learning notions in his peer group. Perhaps Kay's school disengagement caused him to be truly unaware of the learning notions at school and the (school-related) learning notions at home. Another option is that he was so disengaged that he strongly disliked to talk about his parents' and teachers' ideas about school-related learning norms and values.

For three other students, experienced unrelatable discontinuities were found between the contexts of school and home when it comes to what it entails to be a good learner in school (learning goals). Amanda, whom we identified as a moderately engaged student, thought that both her teachers and parents were concerned with the grades she obtained in school. Yet, she felt that her parents, unlike her teachers, were proud of her as a learner just for working hard for school. In contrast, Richie, a moderately engaged student as well, perceived his teachers but not his parents to be proud of students who put in an effort for school, irrespective of their performance. Ludwig, another moderately engaged student, in turn, thought that even though his parents and most of his teachers considered it important to be a good learner who works hard for and performs well in school, some of his teachers were merely concerned with whether the students eventually got promoted to the next grade, irrespective of their school attitude and achievements.

For most other students, among whom one was identified as a moderately engaged student and the rest as highly engaged students, a consistent pattern of experienced continuity was found between the contexts of school and home when it comes to the notion of what characterizes a good learner in school: these students perceived both their parents and their teachers to think that investing time and energy in school was a characteristic of a good learner. Three of these students (Miriam, Jade and Caleb) had the idea that their teachers *as well as* their parents thought that obtaining high grades were characteristics of a good learner in school too. Only some students whom we identified as highly engaged (Andrew, Ayden, Nessa and Lilly) thought that neither their teachers nor parents considered school achievements a characteristic of a good learner. These students thought that their teachers and parents were

**Table 5**  
Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of school and home.

Learning notions	Hardly engaged	Moderately engaged				Highly engaged									
	Kay	Ludwig	Richie	Caleb	Amanda	Miriam	Jade	Tammy	Andrew	Ethan	Rebecca	Fay	Ayden	Nessa	Lilly
Continuities															
• A good learner in school is characterized by putting an effort into their education									x	x	x		x	x	x
• A good learner in school is characterized by both putting an effort into their education and obtaining high grades		x		x		x	x					x			
• It is important to behave politely in class				x		x		x				x			
• A good learner in school is characterized by obtaining high grades					x										
• Artistic development is important									x						
Discontinuities															
• School only: a good learner in school is characterized by obtaining high grades										x	x				
• Home only: a good learner in school is characterized by putting an effort into their education					x										
• Home only: a good learner in school is characterized by obtaining high grades			x												
• School only: making an effort is more important than obtaining high grades			x												
• Some teachers: it is not important for students to behave like a good learner, as long as they get promoted		x													
• Home only: learning things does not have to be fun													x		
• Home only: school is responsible for the flourishing of students with learning disorders too														x	

∞



**Table 6**  
Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of school and peer groups.

Learning notions	Hardly engaged	Moderately engaged				Highly engaged									
	Kay	Ludwig	Richie	Caleb	Amanda	Miriam	Jade	Tammy	Andrew	Ethan	Rebecca	Fay	Ayden	Nessa	Lilly
Continuities															
• Most friends and classmates: a good learner in school is characterized by both putting an effort into their education and obtaining high grades						x			x		x				
• Befriended classmates: a good learner in school is characterized by both putting an effort into their education and obtaining high grades			x	x	x		x	x		x		x	x	x	x
• Most friends and classmates: learning can be fun						x	x	x			x				
• School/a degree is important		x	x							x		x			
Discontinuities															
• Most classmates: it is not important to put an effort into school and to obtain high grades			x												
• Befriended classmates: it is not important to put an effort into school and to obtain high grades	x	x	x <sup>a</sup>	x	x										
• Friends from out-of-school: it is not important to put an effort into school and to obtain high grades			x												
• School only: values “suck-ups”										x					

<sup>a</sup> In Table 3 we count this as one discontinuity together with “Most classmates: It is not important to put an effort into school and to obtain high grades” as these two groups overlap.

o

**Table 7**  
Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of school and leisure institutes.

Learning notions	Hardly engaged	Moderately engaged				Highly engaged									
	Kay	Ludwig	Richie	Caleb	Amanda	Miriam	Jade	Tammy	Andrew	Ethan	Rebecca	Fay	Ayden	Nessa	Lilly
Continuities															
• A good learner is characterized by putting in an effort, irrespective of performances			x						x					x	x
• A good learner behaves politely in class					x			x			x				
• Important skill: collaboration			x									x			
• Important skill: being persistent										x					
• Being organized is an important precondition to learn new things									x						
• Learning cannot always be enjoyable (sometimes you have to learn something that is boring first)												x			
• Getting an education is very important, but other things (e.g., friends, family) are important too					x										
Discontinuities															
• School only: preparing for full participation in society, not to relax and have fun					x			x		x	x	x			
• School only: learning with your head instead of your body				x											x
• The skills that are taught in leisure institutes do not correspond to the skills that are taught and valued in school				x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
• School only: a good learner is characterized by performing well					x						x				
• School only: achievements are more important than the effort that is made					x										
• Leisure institutes only: variation in employed learning activities								x							
• School only: learning cannot always be enjoyable (sometimes you have to learn something that is boring first)												x			
• School only: it is important to do your homework													x		

**Table 8**  
 Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of school and work.

Learning notions	Hardly engaged	Moderately engaged				Highly engaged									
	Kay	Ludwig	Richie	Caleb	Amanda	Miriam	Jade	Tammy	Andrew	Ethan	Rebecca	Fay	Ayden	Nessa	Lilly
Continuities															
• A good learner is characterized by performing well					x										
• The skills that are taught and valued at work correspond to the skills that are taught and valued in school					x										
Discontinuities															
• The skills that are taught and valued at work do not correspond to the skills that are taught and valued in school			x					x				x			
• Work only: a good learner is characterized by performing well			x												

exclusively concerned with the effort that students made. Finally, various students with diverse levels of demonstrated school engagement reported that their parents and teachers considered behaving politely in class as another aspect of being a good learner in school.

### 5.1.2. School and peer groups

Almost all students reported that their peers deemed a good learner to be someone who both makes an effort for and performs well in school (see Table 6). Table 6 also shows, though, that this did not necessarily imply that their peers also found it important to behave in accordance with their own learning notions of a good learner. To illustrate, two students (Kay and Ludwig, whom we identified as a hardly engaged student and a moderately engaged student, respectively), only had friends in class who did not put an effort into their schoolwork and who did not seem to care about test results. They did not find it important to be a good learner, which, definitely in Ludwig's case and most likely in Kay's case formed a contradictory discontinuity between school and peers. Kay and Ludwig mentioned that they and their friends usually did little and mainly chatted with each other in class. Three other students, whom we all identified as moderately engaged students, had rather equal amounts of friends who were dedicated to school and friends who were not, experiencing continuities and/or contradictory discontinuities between school and peers, depending on the friends they interacted with at a particular moment in time. The remaining students, who all demonstrated high levels of school engagement, had exclusively befriended classmates who found it important to invest time and energy in their education and to perform well in school. Some of these students (Miriam, Andrew and Rebecca) even mentioned that most of their other classmates, next to their befriended ones, as well as their out-of-school friends found it important to work hard for and obtain high grades in school too. Additionally, and unlike the other students we interviewed, various students who exclusively befriended classmates with high levels of school engagement mentioned that they and their classmates as well as their teachers, thought that learning could be fun.

### 5.1.3. School and leisure institutes

The experienced contextual continuities and discontinuities in learning notions that were identified between sports clubs and music classes on the one hand, and school on the other, were very similar. Therefore, these contexts are jointly referred to as 'leisure institutes' from this point onwards. As can be derived from Table 7, we did not find clear differences between students when it comes to the experienced continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of leisure institutes and school. Yet, we did find four general patterns of experienced continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between these contexts.

First, a continuity was found for various students regarding what they thought their teachers at school and at their leisure institutes understood a good learner to be (learning goals): someone who puts in an effort, irrespective of their achievements (Andrew, Nessa, Lilly, Richie), and someone who is polite (Tammy, Rebecca, Amanda).

Second, we identified an experienced unrelatable discontinuity concerning learning-related goals for Tammy, Ethan, Rebecca, Fay and Amanda: whereas they reported to attend school in preparation of their further participation in society, they engaged in leisure activities for fun and relaxation.

Third, an unrelatable discontinuity was identified for most students in the skills that were taught and valued between leisure institutes and the school context (learning contents). The students did not feel that the skills that were taught in their leisure institutes were useful in school, except perhaps in physical education and music classes. Often, the skills that were mentioned to clarify this statement were quite technical in nature, such as learning how to defend yourself in krav maga (Ethan), learning how to play piano chords and read notes (Lilly), or learning how to smash a ball in volleyball (Tammy).

Finally and relatedly, for two students (Lilly and Caleb) an unrelatable discontinuity was found when it comes to learning means: ideas on how things are learned. Where they considered learning in school to be more about learning with your brain and by sitting behind a desk, they understood making music and doing sports as something you learn by means of one's hands or entire body.

### 5.1.4. School and work

Table 8 shows that no patterns of continuity could be identified between the contexts of work and school. Additionally, we found an experienced unrelatable discontinuity for three of the four employed students that concerned the skills (learning contents) that were taught and valued in each of these contexts. For example, Tammy, who was a babysitter, felt that she learned and had to learn as a babysitter how to set and stick to boundaries for the kids, which were not skills she considered to be useful in school. It should be noted, though, that Amanda (whom we identified as a moderately engaged student) did feel able to transfer some of the skills that she had developed at work to the context of school and vice versa, namely participating in a debate and standing her ground while doing so.

In sum, we found only two learning notions with respect to which various students experienced a contextual continuity whereas others experienced a discontinuity: these concern the learning notions of what it entails to be a good learner, and the importance of being one. The experienced discontinuities in these learning notions between the contexts of school and home were unrelatable: whereas some teachers or parents stressed the importance of high grades, others stressed the importance of invested effort into school. Working hard and getting good grades do not mutually exclude each other, though. The experienced discontinuities between the contexts of school and peers, on the other hand, were contradictory: whereas school praised good grades and/or the effort students put into school, some respondents' peers made a point of not conforming to these learning notions.

As the students experiencing continuities in these learning notions, like we expected, differed in their levels of demonstrated school engagement from the ones who experienced discontinuities, we will next zoom in on what relations can be found between their experience of contextual continuities and discontinuities in these learning notions on the one hand, and their learner identities on the other. In doing so, we exclusively focus on comparing the school context to the contexts of home and peer groups, as we did not find differences between students in the continuities and discontinuities they experienced between school on the one hand, and their work

and leisure contexts on the other; the presence of continuities and discontinuities between the latter contexts did not appear to be related to students' demonstrated school engagement.

## 5.2. Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions and adolescents' learner identities

In this section, the second research question 'what relations can be found between the continuities and discontinuities in learning notions that adolescents with diverse levels of demonstrated school engagement experience and their learner identities?' is answered. We found that especially the *absence or presence of feasible expectations*, the *(non-)recognition of effort put into school*, and *pro- and/or anti-school peer norms*, were related to students' learner identities.

### 5.2.1. The absence or presence of feasible expectations

As can be derived from the previous section, one student in our sample, Kay, mentioned that it was unclear to him what his teachers, parents and peers considered a good learner to be, or he refused to think or talk about it. Our analysis indicated that Kay's seeming lack of interest with respect to or distancing from the learning notions his teachers and parents communicated may be related to his learner identity. Kay reported to not find it important to work hard for or perform well in school. He mentioned to think "Whatever" (Interview #1) when it came to school and explained that this had two reasons. First, he felt that, because of his diagnosed adhd and dyslexia, doing schoolwork costed him a disproportionate amount of time, compared to his classmates. Second and relatedly, school mainly required him to sit still, read and write: activities in which he felt particularly hindered by his learning disorders. According to Kay, this is why he stopped putting an effort into his education. This suggests that Kay perceived the expectations his teachers and parents had of him with respect to school to be unfeasible. We contend that this appeared to be an important factor in his learner identity and his seemingly indifference to his parents' and teachers' learning notions. This claim is supported by the fact that none of the other students mentioned the complete absence of feasible expectations regarding skills that should be mastered. These students were all found to identify with learning in school more strongly *and* they were able or willing to discuss their teachers' and parents' learning notions. The interviews suggested that also these students struggled to identify with learning in school when they did not deem the school's expectations to be accomplishable. Yet, for them this only applied to one or two classes, rather than to almost all of them such as in Kay's case.

### 5.2.2. The (non-)recognition of effort put into school

Amanda, Richie and Ludwig did not define themselves as learners who put in a lot of effort into school. They reported to only care about engaging in classes that they enjoyed. It was for these classes that they wanted to get high grades as rewards for their invested effort (Amanda), wanted to make sure they mastered their curriculum (Ludwig), or wanted to make their teachers proud (Ludwig; Richie). However, they put less effort into classes that they did not enjoy. The reasons for disliking certain subjects differed per person. However, all three reported to disengage from class when they did not see the purpose of familiarizing themselves with the subject matter. That Amanda, Richie and Ludwig did not feel the need to understand themselves as hardworking learners for all classes in school appeared to be related to the discontinuity they experienced between home and school when it came to what characterizes a good learner. In the interviews with Richie and Ludwig, this came to the fore explicitly. Richie's disengagement when he found his classes too easy was reinforced by his parents' conviction that he did not deserve any compliments for his renewed devotion to and consequently improved performance in school at the beginning of the schoolyear as he had moved from the intermediate to the prevocational track:

*Researcher: How did your parents feel about you moving from the intermediate to prevocational track?*

Richie: When I tell them I got an 8/10 they think, ok. They say 'yes, but that is at the prevocational level, Richie. This is beneath your abilities'. They really do not like it.

*Researcher: Do you agree with them?*

Richie: Yes. Right now I am not doing my best and I still exclusively get sufficient grades. If I would work harder, I could get all 8/10s.

*Researcher: Why do you not work harder?*

Richie: I don't know, I'm not motivated to do so. (Interview #1).

In the second interview, this topic was touched upon again and, when asked how important he found it to go to school, Richie replied: "I've started to find that less important, because it is too easy". Furthermore, over the course of the schoolyear, we observed (and were told by Richie himself) that Richie's level of school engagement had further decreased: he had stopped to work hard for most of his classes, while starting to occasionally skip ones. Our analysis suggests that the impossibility to make his parents proud did not foster Richie's desire to understand himself as a hardworking learner, thereby impeding his school engagement.

Ludwig, in turn, seemed to legitimize his moderate level of school engagement by seizing the opportunity he was offered by his mentor and several of his other teachers to understand himself as a good enough learner without having to put a lot of effort into his education. As Ludwig stated in the first interview:

Well, in general I am quite sloppy. I postpone things until they cannot be postponed anymore [...] and then, the day before the deadline, I do my homework, hand it in and all is well. Except that I do it quick and sloppy. And some teachers do not mind it as

long as they can tell that you understand the assignment and that you are able to make the assignment, but others [...] do. But finally I have a mentor who understands how I study [...] And who understands that if this is how I want to do it, he can't do anything to change it [...] I explained to him how I do it and he was like 'well, if you think you can pass your exams this way, I'm fine with you trying it this way'.

Hence, by strongly holding onto his mentor's and some other teachers' learning notions, Ludwig seemed to negotiate space to defend his current learner identity and level of school engagement, thereby enabling himself to neglect the learning notions of his parents and his other teachers.

It seems that the nonrecognition of effort of authoritative adults in Amanda's, Richie's and Ludwig's surroundings either prevented them from trying to engage more in school due to the impossibility of making these adults proud, or allowed them to "be lazy" (Ludwig, interview #1). This finding is further underscored by the fact that all the students who were identified as highly engaged and wanted to understand themselves as learners who put a lot of effort into school, did exclusively experience continuities between home and school in terms of the recognition and appreciation of working hard for school. Hence, the messages the highly engaged students received from their parents and teachers concerning what it entails to be a good learner were rather univocal *and* seemed to stimulate them to define themselves as learners who engage in school.

### 5.2.3. Pro- and anti-school peer norms

For all students in our sample, we found that they were often surrounded by peers whose learning notions appeared to reinforce their learner identities. When it comes to Kay's friends, he could tell from their behavior in class that they did not find it important to work hard for or perform well in school, which was part of his own learner identity too. Also, Kay reported that both he and his friends would mock people who, for example, would cancel a movie night because of a test that still needed to be studied for. Even though this was not identified as such by Kay, this suggests the presence of a contradictory discontinuity in goal-related learning notions between the context of school and his peer group involving his peers' anti-school norms, that probably further reinforced his then already present learner identity. A similar finding emerged from the analysis of Ludwig's case, as Ludwig's friends would, whenever felt treated unfairly or approached rudely by a teacher, make a statement by provoking the teacher and disengaging from class even though this meant putting their opportunities to learn in jeopardy.

Amanda, Caleb and Richie, whom (next to Ludwig) were all identified as moderately engaged students, had both friends and classmates who were dedicated to school and friends and classmates who were not. Consequently, various notions on the importance of being a good learner were available among their peers, of which some formed a continuity and others a contradictory discontinuity with the context of school. As these continuities and discontinuities had to be negotiated and related to in understanding themselves as learners, this may explain why these students neither fully engaged with nor disengaged from their education so as to maintain their popularity among both the peers who did and who did not fully engage in school.

Among the students whom we identified as highly engaged, we found an interesting pattern. Some of these students thought that only their befriended classmates, but not their other classmates, were concerned with working hard for and performing well in school. These students understood themselves as hard-working learners who were driven by curiosity in some classes, but merely by the desire to obtain high grades (Fay; Ayden; Lilly) or a degree that allowed them to enroll in a particular education program after high school (Nessa) in other classes. What additionally characterized these students was that they all enjoyed learning less in the latter classes as soon as they did not understand the subject matter or an assignment. They explained that this was the case as this put them at risk of obtaining relatively low test scores, which could interfere with the goals they pursued.

However, the other students who demonstrated high levels of school engagement reported that their befriended classmates *and* most of their other classmates and friends in and out of school found it important to invest time and energy in their education and to perform well in school. These students mentioned to be driven by curiosity for all their subjects. They hoped that school would help them to increase their knowledge and improve their skills, no matter in what classes. They made remarks such as, "I always want to know everything. I want to know how everything works [...] I have a broad interest" (Andrew, interview #1). Moreover, these students explained that they found most of their classes meaningful, irrespective of the learning activities they were introduced to (Jade; Tammy; Andrew; Ethan; Rebecca) their test results (Miriam; Jade; Andrew; Ethan; Rebecca), or their relation with the teachers (Miriam; Jade; Tammy).

Hence, it seems that also among students demonstrating high levels of school engagement, the presence or absence of diverse peer notions on the importance of being a good learner is related to their learner identities. The presence of diverse peer notions, of which some form a continuity and others a discontinuity with the contexts of school and home, appear to be negotiated by these students to, perhaps, safeguard their social status among all peers by positioning themselves as certain types of learners with certain learning goals. The absence of diverse peer notions, in contrast, seemed to allow the highly engaged students in our sample to fully engage in school on both a behavioral and affective level.

## 6. Discussion

The present paper aimed to gain a better understanding of how various types of continuities and discontinuities in learning notions inform adolescents' school engagement through their learner identities. First, we examined what contextual continuities and discontinuities in learning notions adolescents with diverse levels of demonstrated school engagement experienced. In doing so, we explored the thus far underexposed role of contextual continuities and discontinuities between school and the contexts of leisure institutes and jobs in adolescents' school engagement (see [Nasir & Hand, 2008](#) for an exception). Continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the contexts of school on the one hand, and worksites and leisure institutes on the other did not appear to be



related to adolescents' school engagement, though. Our analysis suggests that this can be explained by the intrinsically different learning contents (customer care versus, for example, history), means (learning by thinking versus learning by doing) and, in the case of leisure institutes, goals (preparing for further participation in society at school versus having fun at leisure institutes), that adolescents appear to associate with these contexts. Hence, in moving from one context to the other, the adolescents seemed to shift in position and perspective, and the contexts appeared to coexist as rather parallel universes. Probably present continuities in learning notions between these contexts regarding, for example, the importance of taking responsibility or the need for discipline were either not recognized by students or deemed irrelevant.

Additionally and in line with earlier studies (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Noyes, 2006; Phelan et al., 1991; Pollard & Filer, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999; Vetter et al., 2011), we did find that particularly continuities and discontinuities in learning goals-related notions about *what it entails to be a good learner in school* and *the importance of being one* between the school context on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other, were related to the interviewed students' levels of demonstrated school engagement. We found that one student, whom we identified as hardly engaged, could not or really did not want to tell when his parents and teachers would consider someone to be a good learner. Students whom we identified as moderately engaged generally thought that either their parents or (some of their) teachers considered school performances to be more relevant, whereas students whom we identified as highly engaged thought that both their teachers and parents deemed investing a lot of time and energy into school was a key characteristic of a good learner. Additionally, all the interviewed students thought that their peers considered both putting in an effort for and performing well in school were characteristics of a good learner. However, only the students demonstrating high levels of school engagement and one moderately engaged student reported to have friends who, like their teachers and parents, found it important to be a good learner in school.

Next, we studied the question 'what relations can be found between the contextual continuities and discontinuities in learning notions that are experienced by adolescents with diverse levels of demonstrated school engagement and their learner identities?'. In further exploring the continuities and discontinuities regarding notions of a good learner between the school context on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other, we found that especially the *absence or presence of feasible expectations*, the *(non-)recognition of effort put into school*, and *pro- and/or anti-school peer norms*, were related to students' self-understandings as learners in school.

With respect to the *absence or presence of feasible expectations*, our analysis indicated that a continuity in terms of the presence of unfeasible expectations in school and at home may prevent adolescents from trying to understand themselves as good learners. This is in line with extant research on adolescents' learner identity development within the context of school, documenting that when adolescents experience a discrepancy between their own ideas of how and what they can learn on the one hand, and their school's ideas about learning on the other, this may cause them to disengage from their education (e.g., Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Mortimer et al., 2010; Rubin, 2007). When students feel unable to meet, and perhaps change, the expectations that are imposed on them, they may come to define themselves as people who do not care about school, and to *distance* themselves from the context of school.

Second, our analysis showed that parents' and teachers' *(non-)recognition of effort* that students put into school may inform adolescents' learner identities. We found that parents' and/or teachers' mere focus on school achievement rather than on effort could prevent students from wanting to understand themselves as learners who invest a lot of time and energy into school. This either seemed to rob students of a chance to make certain authoritative adults in their surroundings proud or allow them to be lazy. In addition, when adolescents' parents *and* all of their teachers were concerned with the effort students put into school, this appeared to stimulate these students to understand themselves as people who find learning in school important and who are willing to work hard for school.

Third, we found relations between the interviewed students' learner identities and the *pro- and/or anti-school peer norms* their friends and classmates conveyed towards school. For some students, we exclusively identified a contradictory discontinuity between their teachers and their befriended classmates when it comes to how important it was considered to be a good learner. These students were characterized by learner identities that, at least at times, motivated them to put their opportunities to learn in school into jeopardy. Other students had friends and classmates who conveyed pro-school peer norms regarding the importance of being a good learner *and* friends and classmates who did not. These students all understood themselves as students who engaged in school as long as they enjoyed the classes they were in. Students who perceived to have friends that had adopted pro-school peer norms, but a fair share of classmates who had not, reported to be driven by curiosity in some classes, and merely by the desire to obtain high grades or a certain degree in other classes. Only students with exclusively friends and classmates who had adopted pro-school peer norms when it comes to the importance of being a good learner, understood themselves as learners who were driven by curiosity in all their classes. Here, in agreement with previous studies, (e.g., Noyes, 2006; Phelan et al., 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; Vetter et al., 2011), indications were found that adolescents *negotiated* conflicting school and peer norms in their development and maintenance of their learner identities in ways that impacted their school engagement.

More in general, the explorative study presented in this paper provides insights into what role adolescents' learner identities play in how contextual continuities and discontinuities in learning notions inform adolescents' school engagement. Our study indicates that continuities in learning notions regarding the characteristics of a good learner and the importance of being one between the contexts of school on the one hand, and home and peer groups on the other, *reinforce* adolescents' identification with these learning notions as well as their demonstrated levels of school engagement. However, contextual discontinuities in these learning notions appear to either require *negotiation* that may cause adolescents to adopt suboptimal learner identities, at least from the schools' perspectives, and impede their school engagement, or may alienate students from school altogether (*distancing*). Hence, our research underscores the importance of studying learner identity development to better understand adolescents' school engagement. It also stresses the need to study learner identity development as a process that occurs in several sociocultural contexts at the same time.

Moreover, it can be derived from the present study that teachers may help to foster adolescents' school engagement by trying to

build constructive continuities for them between their homes and school in terms of the appreciation of their demonstrated efforts rather than their achievement. This could for example be done by discussing the importance of this learning notion for adolescents' development with their parents. Building constructive continuities between the contexts of school and peer groups may be especially difficult. Our research suggests, though, that supporting adolescents in relating to contextual discontinuities in learning notions regarding the characteristics and importance of being a good learner may benefit the development of learner identities that stimulate school engagement: it is important to try to make students resilient to peer pressure or unconstructive learning notions at home in negotiating these discontinuities in the process of their learner identity development. Thus far, previous research has identified and suggested the provision of meaningful learning experiences in supportive classroom climates to be an important precondition to achieve this goal (Verhoeven et al., 2019).

Future research could further contribute to the research field in at least two ways. First, what struck us is that, unlike in previous research findings on funds of knowledge, funds of identity and third space (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mortimer et al., 2010; Noyes, 2006; Phelan et al., 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; Vetter et al., 2011), continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the school context on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other regarding, for example, notions regarding learning contents and means were not found. Despite the fact that we asked students what a good learner is capable of according to their teachers, parents and peers, the knowledge and skills that were valued by the people in their surroundings often remained implicit in the interviews. The students did not elaborate on the extent to which all subjects were deemed equally important by their schools, parents, or peers, or on the type of thinking skills that were appreciated most. Hence, future studies could further explore how certain continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between school and out-of-school contexts when it comes to the valued skills and knowledge we may have overlooked can be identified and how these may be related to adolescents' learner identities too.

Second, the present study is explorative and qualitative in nature, and due to recruitment issues, more highly engaged than moderately engaged and especially hardly engaged students participated in our research. The reasons why the moderately and hardly engaged students often declined the first author's request to participate in the research project (after she thought she had established rapport with these students) remains unclear. Perhaps, students who are less engaged in school may also enjoy discussing school related matters less. Another option is that these students blamed their own levels of school engagement on themselves, which might have made it too painful for them to share their school experiences with us, as is also indicated by Kay's case. More one-on-one chats may have been needed to make clear to them that we could be trusted and had good intentions. We acknowledge that, based on our sample, no empirical generalizations can be made. Nevertheless, our research does contribute to conceptualizations of how various types of continuities and discontinuities in learning notions inform adolescents' school engagement through their learner identities. However, future research would benefit from recruiting a larger and more diverse research group, probably by means of a more extensive establishment of rapport, to explore the empirical generalizability of our findings: to, where necessary, expand or adjust these conceptualizations. Additionally, the role that unrelatable and contradictory discontinuities play in adolescents' learner identity development, and the extent to which these roles are different, could be further explored so as to understand adolescents' school engagement even better.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2020.100460>.

### References

- Akkerman, S. F., & Van Eijck, M. (2013). Re-theorising the student dialogically across and between boundaries of multiple communities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(1), 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2011.613454>.
- Barron, B. (2006). Interest and self-sustained learning as catalysts of development: A learning ecology perspective. *Human Development*, 49(4), 193–224. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000094368>.
- Black, L., Williams, J., Hernandez-Martinez, P., Davis, P., Pampaka, M., & Wake, G. (2010). Developing a "leading identity": The relationship between students' mathematical identities and their career and higher education aspirations. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 73(1), 55–72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-009-9217-x>.
- Bronkhorst, L. H., & Akkerman, S. F. (2016). At the boundary of school: Continuity and discontinuity in learning across contexts. *Educational Research Review*, 19, 18–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2016.04.001>.
- Calabrese Barton, A., Kang, H., Tan, E., O'Neill, T. B., Bautista-Guerra, J., & Brecklin, C. (2013). Crafting a future in science: Tracing middle school girls' identity work over time and space. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50, 37–75. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212458142>.
- Coll, C., & Falsafi, L. (2010). Learner identity. An educational and analytical tool. *Revista de Educación*, 353, 211–233.
- Cone, N., Buxton, C., Lee, O., & Mahotiere, M. (2014). Negotiating a sense of identity in a foreign land: Navigating public school structures and practices that often conflict with Haitian culture and values. *Urban Education*, 49(3), 263–296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085913478619>.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Fields, D., & Enyedy, N. (2013). Picking up the mantle of "expert": Assigned roles, assertion of identity, and peer recognition within a programming class. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 20, 113–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2012.691199>.

- Finn, J. D., & Rock, D. A. (1997). Academic success among students at risk for school failure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 221–234. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.82.2.221>.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting White'". *The Urban Review*, 18, 176–206. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01112192>.
- Gutiérrez, K. D., Baquedano-López, P., & Tejada, C. (1999). Rethinking diversity: Hybridity and hybrid language practices in the third space. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 6, 286–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039909524733>.
- Hedegaard, M. (2012). Analyzing children's learning and development in everyday settings from a cultural-historical wholeness approach. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 19(2), 127–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2012.665560>.
- Hermans, H., & Hermans-Konopka, A. (2010). *Dialogical self theory: Positioning and counter-positioning in a globalizing society*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hermans, H. J. (2001). The dialogical self: Toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Culture & Psychology*, 7(3), 243–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X0173001>.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Jr., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15, 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.
- Marcia, J. E. (1993). The ego identity status approach to ego identity. In J. E. Marcia, D. R. Matteson, J. L. Orlofsky, A. S. Waterman, & S. L. Archer (Eds.), *Ego identity: A handbook for psychosocial research* (pp. 3–21). New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moll, L. C., Amantí, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31, 132–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534>.
- Mortimer, K. S., Wortham, S., & Allard, E. (2010). Helping immigrants identify as "university-bound students": Unexpected difficulties in teaching the hidden curriculum. *Revista de Educación*, 353, 107–128.
- Nasir, N. S., & Hand, V. (2008). From the court to the classroom: Opportunities foregone, learning, and identity in basketball and classroom mathematics. *Journal of Learning Sciences*, 17, 143–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508400801986108>.
- Noyes, A. (2006). School transfer and the diffraction of learning trajectories. *Research Papers in Education*, 21, 43–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520500445441>.
- Olitsky, S., Flohr, L. L., Gardner, J., & Billups, M. (2010). Coherence, contradiction, and the development of school science identities. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 47(10), 1209–1228. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20389>.
- Phelan, P., Davidson, A. L., & Cao, H. T. (1991). Students' multiple worlds: Negotiating the boundaries of family, peer, and school cultures. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 22, 224–250. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1991.22.3.05x1051k>.
- Pollard, A., & Filer, A. (2007). Learning, differentiation and strategic action in secondary education: Analyses from the *Identity and Learning Programme*. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28, 441–458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701369400>.
- Polman, J. L. (2010). The zone of proximal identity development in apprenticeship learning. *Revista de Educación*, 353, 129–155.
- Rapley, T. (2007). Interviews. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 15–33). London: Sage Publications.
- Roth, W. M., & Lee, Y. J. (2007). "Vygotsky's neglected legacy": Cultural-historical activity theory. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(2), 186–232. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654306298273>.
- Rubin, B. C. (2007). Learner identity amid figured worlds: Constructing (in)competence at an urban high school. *The Urban Review*, 39, 217–249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-007-0044-z>.
- Sfard, A., & Prusak, A. (2005). Telling identities: In search of an analytic tool for investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity. *Educational Researcher*, 34, 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X034004014>.
- Silseth, K., & Arnseth, H. (2011). Learning and identity construction across sites: A dialogical approach to analysing the construction of learning selves. *Culture & Psychology*, 17, 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X10388842>.
- Smagorinsky, P., Cook, L. S., & Reed, P. M. (2005). The construction of meaning and identity in the composition and reading of an architectural text. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 40(1), 70–88. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.40.1.4>.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling. U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Van den Bulk, L. (2011). *Later kan ik altijd nog worden wat ik wil: statusbeleving, eigenwaarde en toekomstbeeld van leerlingen in het voortgezet onderwijs, met de nadruk op de relatieve positie van vmbo-leerlingen. [Later I can still be what I want to be. Self-respect and perceived social status in different types of secondary education]*. Antwerpen/Apeldoorn, Belgium/the Netherlands: Garant Uitgevers.
- Verhoeven, M., Poorthuis, A. M. G., & Volman, M. (2019). The role of school in adolescents' identity development: A literature review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 31, 35–63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-018-9457-3>.
- Vetter, A. M., Fairbanks, C., & Ariail, M. (2011). "Crazyghettosmart": A case study in Latina identities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24, 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518391003641890>.
- Vianna, E., & Stetsenko, A. (2011). Connecting learning and identity development through a transformative activist stance: Application in adolescent development in a child welfare program. *Human Development*, 54(5), 313–338. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000331484>.
- Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic content analysis*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Mind as action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wortham, S. (2006). *Learning identity: The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.