

Mitchell, Ann; Del Monte, Pablo; Deneulin, Séverine

**Working Paper**

## Young people's voices: Insights to reduce inequality in education in urban Latin America

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### **Young People's Voices: Insights to reduce inequality in education in urban Latin America**

**Ann Mitchell, Pablo Del Monte and Séverine  
Deneulin**

Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath

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**Young People's Voices: Insights to reduce inequality  
in education in urban Latin America**

**Ann Mitchell, Pablo Del Monte and Séverine Deneulin,  
Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath\***

**Abstract:**

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how gaining a greater understanding of young people's values can contribute to the design of more effective educational policies in urban marginal neighbourhoods using the capability approach as a normative framework of analysis. It is based on fieldwork carried out in one of the City of Buenos Aires' largest and oldest informal settlements (or villas): the villa 1-11-14 of Bajo Flores. The research is motivated by the markedly inferior educational and employment outcomes of young people who live in the villas in relation to the rest of the city, the country's expanding problem of drugs, and the generalized perception in society of young people as perpetrators of violence. In order to have a better understanding of the factors behind inferior schooling outcomes in urban peripheral communities, and so design more appropriate policies, the paper draws on qualitative data collected through individual semi-structured interviews with young men and women to analyse what they value most in their lives, and how they value secondary education.. The research underlines both the negative influence of contextual factors and the critical role of significant others, including family members and teachers, in providing emotional support and giving young people a sense of purpose in life and a reason to value secondary education. These findings suggest the need for more integral educational policies that transcend the provision of access to secondary school.

**Keywords:**

Youth, capability approach, secondary education, urban marginality, Latin America

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## 1 Introduction

During the past twenty five years Latin America has made notable progress in educational attainment. Between 1990 and 2010 rates of school enrollment and graduation increased at all levels throughout the region (Bassi, Busso and Muñoz, 2013). At the primary and secondary school levels the inequality of access to education, measured by the gap in the rate of enrollment between the first and the fifth income quintiles, also narrowed in almost all countries (Cruces, García Domench and Gasparini, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, since 2000 there has been a four-fold increase in average real public sector education spending per child in Latin American, fostered by a decade of strong economic growth, demographic trends and an increased commitment to education (Cruces et al., 2011).

The region, however, is far from achieving equality of opportunity in education for all. The socioeconomic circumstances of the household in which a child grows up continues to be a strong determinant of the likelihood of completing school at the expected age and having acquired the needed skills. Numerous studies have documented the increase in social segregation between public and private schools in Latin America (Arcidiácono et al., 2014; Kessler, 2002; Pereyra, 1999). The fragmentation in education opportunities has also been associated with increasing spatial concentration of poverty in Latin America (Katzman and Retamoso, 2007).

The City of Buenos Aires (CBA) is a relevant case for studying the relationship between spatial segregation and educational equality. Between 1990 and 2010 the city experienced a threefold rise in the share of the population living in informal settlements, known locally as *villas*<sup>2</sup> (Macció and Léporé, 2012).<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that the informal settlements of the CBA face sharply inferior access to public services, problems of accessibility and environmental degradation that place constraints on the ability of residents to achieve those things that they have reason to value in health, education, work and other dimensions of life (Suarez, Mitchell and Léporé, 2014).<sup>4</sup>

There is a large gap between the schooling outcomes of young people from inside and outside of the settlements (Mitchell and Peregalli, 2014). In 2012 64% of adolescents ages 13 to 17 living in the *villas* attended secondary school, 19% were still in primary school and 17% had dropped out. Outside of the *villas* 85% of adolescents were in secondary school, 11% were in primary and only 4% had dropped out. In the case of those aged 18 to 24 the differences are even larger: by age 18 only one out of four young people from the *villas* has graduated from secondary school, compared with three out of four from the rest of the city. Also there was no improvement in secondary school completion rates in the *villas* between 2004 and 2012.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how gaining a greater understanding of young people's values can contribute to the design of effective educational policies in urban marginal

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<sup>1</sup> At the primary level the first to fifth quintile enrolment gap narrowed in the 17 Latin American countries included in the study and at the secondary level the gap narrowed in all countries except Bolivia and Brazil (where the gap was virtually unchanged) and the Central American countries. In contrast, at the tertiary level the gap widened (Cruces et al., 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Villas* can be defined as informal urbanizations that have an irregular layout, accessed through narrow passageways with a high population density and self-made structures often several stories high (TECHO, 2013). The term has both negative and positive connotations, depending on the context and speaker. We use the term here because that is the way in which young people we interviewed referred to their neighbourhood.

<sup>3</sup> The share rose from 1.8% in 1990 to 5.7% in 2010 (DGEyC, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The CBA has the highest rate of primary and secondary school completion in the country, but it is also one of the jurisdictions with the greatest dispersion in the socioeconomic conditions of students and in educational outcomes (Kessler, 2002; Montoya and Volman, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The data presented here are based on the Government of the CBA's Annual Household Survey (DGEyC, 2012).

neighbourhoods using the capability approach as a normative framework of analysis.<sup>6</sup> We use data collected through individual semi-structured interviews with young men and women who live in the *villas* to gain insight into the processes that lead to inferior schooling outcomes in marginalized communities. Through the interviews, we have sought to elicit information on what young people value most in their lives, their perception of the value of school and how they imagine their lives in the future. In order to give voice to young people with different schooling experiences, we interviewed three different subgroups: those who currently attend school, those who had dropped out of school but later returned and those who abandoned school without finishing. Interviews were conducted between April and June 2015 in the *villa* 1-11-14 of Bajo Flores, one of the city's largest and oldest settlements.

The paper is structured as follows. The second section discusses the relevance of analysing educational outcomes in marginal urban areas from the perspective of the capability approach and describes the research methodology. Section three presents the qualitative analysis. We conclude with a discussion of the contribution of using the capability approach lens to inform policies to reduce urban inequality. The research underlines both the negative influence of contextual factors and the critical role of significant others, including family members and teachers, in providing emotional support and giving young people a sense of purpose in life and a reason to value secondary education. These findings suggest the need for more integral educational policies which go beyond the provision of access to secondary education and take these factors into account.

## **2     Analysing secondary education at the urban margins from a capability perspective**

The capability approach makes the normative assumption that states of affairs are best assessed not in the utility or income space but in the freedom or capability space—whether people are able to be or do what they have reason to value. From this perspective a young person's life is not considered only for its productive potential, and his or her education as human capital which will increase economic productivity and output, but also, and foremost, for his or her own sake (Sen, 1997; Robeyns, 2006; Unterhalter, 2009; Walker and Unterhalter, 2007).<sup>7</sup>

The capability approach makes a clear distinction between resources on the one hand and wellbeing outcomes ('functionings' or 'beings and doings') on the other. The context, institutions and relationships are critical for determining how resources are converted into wellbeing opportunities (capabilities) and wellbeing achievements (functionings) (Sen, 1992, 1999). It is not because a resource has been made available that people will necessarily translate this resource into a valuable capability or functioning. A secondary school may be built walking distance from an informal settlement, but the presence of the school will not necessarily translate into the functioning 'being educated at the secondary level'. Walking on foot to the school might be dangerous and pupils may suffer criminal assaults and robbery and decide as a consequence not to attend school. Or poor living conditions may make education a low priority when basic needs, such as housing and nutrition, have to be satisfied. Young people may also need access to intermediate 'value-objects' (Sen, 1993)—for example, timetable keeping skills—in order to make use of schooling resources.

Another insight of the capability approach for the purpose of this paper is the interconnectedness between capabilities. Not achieving the doing 'completing secondary

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<sup>6</sup> See Binstock and Cerruti (2005) for a previous study of educational attainments in informal settlements of Buenos Aires.

<sup>7</sup> For how the capability approach is used to frame innovative policies for disadvantaged young people in Europe, see the EU project SocIEtY at <http://www.society-youth.eu>.

education' is linked to how young people fare in achieving other beings or doings. Education not only provides the skills needed to get a job, but also enables people to become active agents in their lives, to learn about their own rights and express their points of view. In their study on disadvantage from a capability perspective, Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) introduced the terminology 'corrosive disadvantages' and 'fertile capabilities' to capture how disadvantages in one area are likely to impact on disadvantage in another, or seized opportunity in one area is likely to lead to the opening of further opportunities.

Finally, and a fundamental insight of the approach, capabilities are not the only matters of concern for assessing states of affairs; agency also is, what Sen calls one of the two fundamental aspects of freedom (Sen 1992). Agency is here understood as allowing young people to be the author of their own lives. What do young people themselves have to say about the value or importance of secondary education in their lives? The paper therefore takes as a starting point the perspective of young people themselves and seeks to identify what they value being and doing and why. Because educational outcomes are the result of circumstances and decisions taken throughout young people's lives, collecting stories about their life experiences in their homes, schools and neighbourhoods can be an integral part of gaining understanding of how young people value education today, and therefore a starting point for designing more effective policies to reduce educational inequality in an urban context.

Individuals make sense of their lives and establish their priorities and what they hold as important (i.e. what they value) through the stories they tell about themselves and the world. Storytelling is regarded as an 'essential human act' (Phelps, 2006, p. 107). Paul Ricoeur (2006) views 'the capability to narrate' as the most fundamental human capability. In this sense, the act of telling one's own story operates effectively on the storyteller's subjectivity by giving coherence to their experience of education and how it fits into their overall lives. Moreover, storytelling affects communities by contributing to the construction of identities. Stories both represent and are constitutive of the subjects and of their relationships with each other.

In order to respect young people's agency and make them the subject and not the object of our research, we have sought to elicit authentic narratives by placing the least possible constraints on the participants. The interviews were conducted in the *villa* of Bajo Flores by the Buenos Aires-based authors of the paper. We interviewed a total of 20 young people, ranging in age from 14 to 24 years. Ten had never left school, 5 had left school but later returned and 5 had dropped out without finishing. A total of 7 of the interviews were conducted with students who attend a newly opened secondary school created by the local Catholic Church. The school was built inside of the neighbourhood to address the specific needs of young people in the *villa* and also to reincorporate those who had dropped out of school.

Our interviewees were first asked to give basic demographic information on their family situation. Then a rough time line of their lives was drawn, registering important moments with regard to their place of residence, family situation, school and work. We then asked questions about what young people saw as important in their lives, such as, What do you value most in your life? Why? Which persons are important in your life? Which places are important? If you could change something in your life, what would it be? How do you see your life in 5 years? Another set of questions was related to young people's experience in secondary school and the meaning of school in their lives, such as, Do you like going to school? Why do you go to school? What do you like least and most about school? Why did you stop going to school?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The research was conducted under the University of Bath Research Ethics guidelines. Before interviews took place, participants were briefed about the aims, purposes and use of the findings involved in the research. Interviewees gave their informed consent before participating in the research, and participants had the right to

Although the stories collected through the interviews do not allow us to fully understand factual events in young people's lives, they can help us to capture their perspectives and the meaning they give to events and how they make choices and act in relation to secondary education (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013). The study also looks at the contextual elements that are relevant to young people's educational trajectories.

### 3 Young people's voices

The qualitative analysis is divided into three parts. We begin by considering how the specific context of the neighbourhood can influence how young people form their own values and schooling decisions. Then, through the interpretation of young people's stories we aim to identify what beings and doings they value most in their lives. Finally we analyse specifically what young people value the most about secondary education.

#### 3.1 Contextual factors

Contextual factors can affect schooling either indirectly by influencing what young people value most and their perception of the value of school or directly through concrete events or constraints that lead them to drop out of school or impede learning in school.<sup>9</sup>

The topic of the neighbourhood itself—the *villa*—came up frequently in the interviews. The neighbourhood effects literature provides evidence that growing up in a poor neighbourhood negatively affects schooling outcomes, even after controlling for family characteristics (cf. also Lépure and Simpson's article in this special section).<sup>10</sup> Our conversations with young people who live in the *villas* provide insight into how neighbourhoods can influence schooling outcomes.

Many participants alluded to the problems of violence, drug use and poor living conditions in the neighbourhood and some spoke of how they hoped to one day leave the neighbourhood. This came out in the following conversation with Maria.

R<sup>11</sup>: How would you like your life to be in ten years?

P: Out of here.

R: Where then?

P: I don't know, but somewhere else more tranquil, in the province, I don't know, but outside of the *villa*, because here it is pure violence. Violence you find everywhere, but here it is more crazy. Here there is shooting every day. You go out to the corner, there is a guy smoking, you go around and there is another one taking drugs, another who is fighting, another is stealing and no, I don't like it because I grew up around that and I don't want to continue like this. (Maria, age 15, in school)

Franco, on the other hand, whose family had immigrated to Argentina from Paraguay when he was 8, defended the *villas* and explained that the poor perceptions of the neighbourhood were due to ignorance.

P: Now I have gotten more used to the neighbourhood than anywhere else (...) Also, I don't like the way people from outside of the neighbourhood behave. They are influenced by other people's comments. They say, because the *villa*, but if they have never been in the *villa* they don't have the right to say anything if they have never been there. They are just influenced by

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withdraw from the interview at any time. The names of the young people who participated in the interviews have been changed to protect their anonymity.

<sup>9</sup>For evidence on the importance of structural constraints to capabilities expansion among economically marginalised women in South Africa, see Conradie (2013).

<sup>10</sup> The evidence is mixed but generally points to these effects, see Sampson et al. (2002) and Kling et al. (2007).

<sup>11</sup> 'R' refers to the researcher's statements and 'P' to the participants' statements.



opinions. Like the people that do what are they called interviews, no like documentaries about the *villas*, see, there is always shooting. And it is not like that. Inside the *villa*, in my opinion, there are better things than outside. I like the *villa* and I am used to it. My father now wants to move. And I will soon be 18. I am going to work. I am going to look for work. I will study in the morning and work in the afternoon and at night. I will pay for a room because I don't want to leave. (Franco, age 17, in school).

Later in the conversation, however, Franco spoke of violence, not inside the neighbourhood, but on the neighbourhood's edge. He explained that the violence had made it dangerous for him to come home late when he used to go to the evening shift at school and that as a precaution now he walked to school with a group of young people from his section of the neighbourhood. He drew a clear distinction between the neighbourhood's periphery which was unsafe, full of thieves and addicts, and inside the *villa* itself. He explained, 'That is why I feel safe inside, because inside they know me.'

Franco's defence of the neighbourhood, however, also seems to be motivated by the discrimination he experienced for living in the *villa*. He told the following story of his relationship with a young woman from outside of the villa two years earlier. The relationship had ended because the young woman's mother had not approved of her daughter going out with someone from the *villa*.

P: Two years ago I was with a girl named Flor who was not from the *villa*. Her mother did not like me because she said I was just another '*villero*'. And that girl, I really liked her and she still likes me now. But it was always the same with her. We were together and she would never stop with the mama. The mother did not let her and I felt very used because every time she would look for me I would say yes because I really liked her. And the mother told her to leave me and she left (...) The mother said all of the *villeros* are the same. She said I was a drug addict, that I was a thief. She thought that of me, but I am not that way. I don't steal. I don't take drugs. Drinking, I drink when I go out with friends, a typical guy thing. And she started to go out with another guy named Andrés who was from an 'outside' neighbourhood. And everything she [the mother] had said about me was this guy. He is a rat, a thief. He doesn't work. He doesn't study. The only time I went to see her, that she took me to her house to meet her mother, she told me I was a *villero*. That is what she told me, that I was a shitty *villero*, a drug addict, just another *villero*. All of that. And that hurt me a lot. And she said she knew what guys from the *villa* are like. It [the relationship] all ended in nothing.

Franco had learned from this experience that people's perception about young men his age was based primarily on where they lived. He knew that these perceptions were wrong, but seemed helpless to change them.

Marcos alluded to 'the *villa*' when telling about how he had been expelled from a school located in another part of the city and had switched to a school on the edge of the neighbourhood. In the following passage he speaks of what it was like growing up in the *villa* and how he needed to prove himself among his peers.

P: What happened was that I had a problem, a behaviour problem... I always went around with the bad group and those things sometimes kept me from progressing in my studies, at school. To concentrate at school and do the things that I needed to do, but my experiences at school were good.....What happened was that when I was young, I grew up in an environment in which I had to show that I was strong. I felt that I needed to be more than anyone. That is, if I showed that I was good, they would step on your head, so it was something that I could not show....it is like to be ok, to live well in the *villa*...because of that incorrect idea I had, a lot of things happened to me. But today I am here, as I said.

R: And what was that world like?

P: The truth is....it was based on a lie that was how to gain respect, how to impose respect on people and to try to be the worst. Understand? To be well thought of, you had to be the worst. It was that way, because well the truth is that the people that did the worst were the ones that

were most respected in the *villa*. I had the misfortune of taking that path and be the only one in my family that did things wrong but...it was like to live well, you had to be like that, like I sometimes lied to myself, that I needed to have those attitudes so that my brothers, my little brothers could be well, so they could walk tranquilly knowing that no one was going to tell them anything since they were my brothers. And it was a bad experience, a bad experience and at the time I felt....I felt good at that time. I felt like I was doing things well. I felt like I was progressing, but as I said it was all a lie that one makes up, that in the end ends up bad, because I ended up bad and none of that helped me. They were lost years of my life and now I don't want to go through the same thing. That is why I am here trying to change my attitudes and a ton of things that I need to change so that I won't go back to consuming drug, nor go back to what I was before. (Marcos, age 24, dropped out of school).

In contrast to Franco who had felt he had been a victim of discrimination but that his own perceptions and actions had not been influenced by the neighbourhood context, recognized the negative influences of his surroundings and his peers on his perceptions and Marcos actions. He had felt a need to prove himself, to be tough in order to gain respect, thereby protecting himself and his brothers.

Finally some of the young people spoke more directly of the practical limitations the neighbourhood imposed on their lives, due to the insecurity and problems of accessibility. Victoria, a 14 year teenager who had recently immigrated to Argentina from Paraguay, described the challenges she faced adapting to her new school. She was having problems academically, but her teacher could only help her in the evening and she explained, 'I cannot go out much at night because they rob you there in the neighbourhood and it is also far from my house. I don't have the possibility of going to the school at night and then returning to the neighbourhood.' The illegality and lack of legal tenancy in the *villa* also seemed to weigh heavily on some of the adolescents. Fernanda spoke of her desire to have a 'house with my mother's name on it' so that they could be within the law.

These testimonies provide some insight into how the neighbourhood can influence schooling outcomes. Franco experienced discrimination, Marcos the influence of peers and Victoria the problem of accessibility. But for each of them the dividing line between living inside and outside of the *villa* is starkly marked.

### 3.2 What young people value

We asked participants what was most important to them in their current and everyday lives. Although it may seem to be an unclear question, the answers were precise and often stated with confidence. The most repeated answer was 'family', although, as we will see later, family relationships had positive as well as negative meanings attached to them.

#### *Being a son, being a daughter*

Within family relationships there were at least two 'beings' available to young people, being sons and daughters and being parents. Within the functioning of being a son or a daughter, having a proper house was one of the most valued intermediate 'value-objects' mentioned, along with the care given by the mother. Being a son or a daughter can be conceived as a functioning since it is not reduced to having a biological mother or father, neither is it a passive position of receiving care or shelter. It is an active role in a relationship that is reciprocal, albeit uneven. Being a son or daughter involves sustaining a set of relationships and often having domestic responsibilities, such as taking care of siblings. In some cases relationships with parents were presented as conflictive and violent; they were experienced as conditions of oppression that constituted 'corrosive disadvantages' rather than 'fertile capabilities'. There is also a choice involved in being a son or a daughter, as some had chosen to leave their home and others to become sons and daughters of adults other than their biological parents, such

as a grandmother, an uncle or a priest.

In the following passage Maria explains how her mother's addiction to drugs had kept her from fulfilling her role as a mother.

R: What changed in your life after she [her mother] stopped consuming drugs?

P: What changed a lot was that I used to see my mother really bad and now she's well. She wasn't a mother for me before, she only wanted to get drugged and nothing else. Now she pays attention to what I do. We do fight a lot, but she cares for what I need and is best for me. (Maria, age 15, at school)

The care given by parents was often described as having reached unimaginable limits, such as when the parents had taken them in when they had been living on the streets, addicted to drugs. The following transcript illustrates this further.

P: My mother is one of the most important persons in my life because she is someone that I have always counted on. She never left me lying in the streets. Even though I was consuming drugs, stealing, dirty, drunk, she never left me in the street. She always received me with her open arms, gave me a meal, a bed, clean clothes. That's something that I realize now, I didn't value it when I was consuming drugs...I didn't want to see it. (Julia, age 20, dropped out of school at age 16)

In cases in which the adolescents were responsible for taking care of their brothers and sisters, the functioning of being a son or daughter had become ambiguous, as they had assumed the role of a mother or father. In the following passage Alma describes her experience.

P: She [her mother] began to drink and go out a lot and I had to stay at home with my sisters because my brother also went out dancing. And then one day I got tired and told her: 'I'm fed up, if you keep going out dancing and drinking I'm leaving the house'. And then she started to come to church more often...I don't know what happened, she started to listen to me, about what she should do, what I shouldn't do, and everything changed. (Alma, 14 years old, at school)

By threatening to leave home Alma reclaimed her functioning of being a daughter and her mother's functioning of being a mother. She made explicit that she had chosen to be in the family and that she could choose not to remain there. She had exercised agency.

In the stories in which adolescents had family care responsibilities, it was evident that these responsibilities had put huge strains on them. Being a son or a daughter, in this sense, demanded effort and imposed limitations on the lives of the participants. These duties and responsibilities demanded the active will, or agency, of participants to sustain their being a son or a daughter.

### *Being on the street*

Some of the stories told by participants described periods in their lives that had taken place outside of the family, outside of school, in a place that is both diverse and blurred in its limits: the street. In the interviews, the streets were often associated with a sense of freedom, in opposition to the situation of being within the family or within school. However, looking more closely at the diversity of relationships that take place on the streets, it becomes clear that the feeling of freedom does not necessarily mean the absence of obligations. The streets provide a means for obtaining the resources young people, especially men, need in order to achieve a goal they value, such as becoming self-sufficient or looking after siblings. The following story illustrates this idea:

P: [our house] was a little shack, we were so poor that I had to sell stuff in the streets. One day I got more money than what I had to give to my mother, I was thirteen, and I kept working until eleven thirty at night to buy a fan. (...) When I returned home [with the fan] my mother

was waiting in front of my house, and when she saw that I had brought a fan she laughed and cried, she cried and laughed. I was very sleepy, exhausted, I fell asleep in her arms. She bathed me and put me to sleep. The next day I didn't go to work and spent the day with my siblings, we were together, very happy. That was an achievement I had forgotten. I hadn't spoken about it in a long time. Because, the truth is that it hurts all the things that I lost [working in the streets]. I was the eldest, I had to work, I learned more from the street than from education. (Pedro, age 22, dropped out of school at age 17).

So, by the age of thirteen Pedro was used to the streets and he had learned to transit and profit from this environment. In order to sustain the home that constituted him as a son and brother, he had to go to work in the streets. He then described how the feeling of being self-sufficient through his work and the relationships he had made on the streets had given him a feeling of freedom:

P: I'm the only one of my siblings that had freedom at such a young age. I was thirteen. I had freedom because I worked.

R: Did you like freedom?

P: I loved freedom, but...

R: What did you enjoy the most?

P: going from bus to bus, selling things, making my own money. I also had many friends. Even today I have many friends.

So, although the young people often talked about freedom on the streets, what they emphasized the most was economic freedom and the possibility to buy goods that they could not acquire with their family's resources.

Some of the male participants explained that in order to improve their position on the streets they had to develop relationships and gain access to weapons. In the following testimony one participant explained that he did favours for older 'friends' who paid him to buy drugs and taught him how to gain power on the streets through violence by giving him access to weapons. The stories we heard about life on the streets were tragic, since the freedom that was gained was in every case eventually lost when they became addicted to drugs, making them dependent on others. The following extract from another participant's story tells how he had improved his position on the streets by gaining 'respect':

R: So by the age of six you lived alone with your siblings.

P: Alone with my siblings, and we went through many difficult things. They wanted to take us to a school. They wanted to separate us. As I grew up I realized that everyone progressed and that my house was still a wooden shack, and I made the decision to start to rob, and that's how everything began. Before I started stealing I had to meet people that did that, I had to become one of them, and so I had to be mean, to impose respect. Once I had that I gained the confidence I needed to go out to rob with the rest. That's how I began, and once my house was fine and we didn't need anything else I kept doing it because I had gained a taste for it, I liked it, I liked easy money. I liked to have everything in the moment, and that was the easiest way to get money. Throughout those years I had bad times. I went to prison. I still have a suspended sentence. I am now trying to put things in order with the law. I don't want to have judicial problems. I want to fix everything. I also want to finish school. But it's hard because many years of my life were bad and I am used to something else. Changing things all of a sudden is really hard. It's hard to quit drugs. It's hard to leave all the bad habits and attitudes. It's hard to keep out of your head the thought when you see the opportunity to steal. You have to handle that situation. (Marcos, age 24, dropped out of school at age 16)

It can be seen how the streets offered an effective solution to what Marcos's family lacked—economic security—even though this solution was not without effort, risk and time

investment. Stealing also brought him the adrenaline and excitement of getting a lot of money at once (what he called 'easy money'), making the activity hard to quit. As being on the street, is mostly valued for its instrumental benefits, over time some of the participants seem to come to realise that 'being on the street' was not the best means to achieve the goal of freedom and self-sufficiency in the long term.

### *Working*

Although child labour is illegal in Argentina—according to Law 26.390 children under the age of 16 cannot sign work contracts—many of the participants mentioned having worked informally or in their homes. One young woman had worked in an illegal textile factory; a young man an informal job in a restaurant. Daniel described his family job working as an informal garbage collector (or '*cartonero*'). He told the story of when he had quit his job collecting garbage and began to steal as he found it to be more profitable, less exhausting and entailed less risk of injury.

P: My mom used to go out with the cart, but then I told her not to go out any more.

R: Your mom used to go out with the cart?

P: Yes, I often would pull the cart too...but...many years I pulled the cart, but I did not like it....I preferred to get the easy money instead of breaking my back pulling that shitty cart...I said I am going to steal. I left the cart and went out to steal. (Daniel, age 18, dropped out of school at age 16)

Making a living out of stealing was at first valued as a better means to fulfil the valuable goal of helping his family than an informal job or going to school. However, given the high likelihood of ending up in prison, when given the opportunity to work in a formal job with his brother who worked as an electrician, he re-evaluated his chosen means to his valued end and decided to quit stealing.

R: Do you earn more working or stealing?

P: Working, because money that comes easy goes easy. As it comes it goes. You end up buying drugs and that's it. [Now that] I break my back working I don't want to spend my money on drugs. I invest it. The day before yesterday I bought a fridge.

It is relevant here to look at the perception of time in the two moments he describes in his life. When he was stealing he was not investing in his future, he was consuming in the present. When he earns money working there is a certain sequence. He is paid monthly a stable salary through daily efforts and he does not wish to spend the money quickly. When he got a stable job, he began saving to buy durable goods such as a refrigerator, instead of spending his money on drugs which are consumed quickly. While stealing he had time to go to school, although he was not a good student and his interest in school was not related to becoming educated but rather to the fun he had there (meeting girls, getting respect from other students). When he began working he had no time for school, as the working hours did not permit it and he quit school. He went on to explain what he values the most in his life:

P: What I care about now is my family, taking care of my family. And the most important thing is my job, because if I don't work I don't get an income. I have a good income now, I have a formal job.

It is the same ambiguity in the position he had in his family which sustained his situation as a bad student that was interested in gaining money through stealing, and which finally was resolved by his decision to quit school and earn 'proper' money for his family.

### **3.3. The value of secondary education**

When we asked what is for them the value of a secondary education, the responses included: to be listened to, to develop practical knowledge, to get a high school degree, to fulfil parents'

expectations, to fulfil an obligation, to relate to peers, to get a job, to earn a good living later on, to 'be someone'. The young people we interviewed emphasized the instrumental value of education—being able to find a job, earn money and form a family—over the intrinsic value. The types of jobs that they aspire to range from being a cook, a nurse, a salesperson or a butcher to a policeman, a pharmacist, a veterinarian or a forensics specialist. In order to attain all of these different types of jobs in the future, they recognized the need to finish secondary school.

It should be emphasized that the capability of getting a job was frequently described as an intermediate goal to 'being someone'. This is a relevant point since the condition of being a student, to the extent that it is instrumentally valuable to 'being someone', is always incomplete as an experience, always intermediate and unfulfilling. Fulfilment will be accomplished when the individual finally becomes someone by obtaining a good job.

Success in school was also motivated by the desire to fulfil parents' expectations. This motivation was relevant for those students who seemed to value their parents' advice, a situation that was associated with the functioning of being a son or daughter. In some cases in which the adolescent did not have a strong relationship with their parents, another family member, an uncle or a grandmother, had taught them the value of school and encouraged them to finish their education. Although most parents living in the *villas* have a low level of education,<sup>12</sup> there is evidence that parents encourage their children to finish their schooling and aspire to a better life. For example, Raul explained in the following way how his family encouraged him to remain in school.

P: Most people encourage me to study, to finish high school. And others who haven't finished also tell me: 'study, study, be someone in life'. They also give themselves as an example 'don't be like me, working in this place, we want you to be sitting in an office, so do finish high school'. They more or less say 'don't be like me'. (Raul, 16 years old, at school)

Victoria said that she was motivated to finish school because she did not want her own life to turn out as her mother's had. When asked what she would like to change in her life she said:

P: If I could change something I would change that my mother could have studied before and not be like she is now.

R: Why? How is she now?

P: She never had the opportunity to study and now she is having a difficult time. If she had studied and gotten a degree she would not be working as a maid now, she would have more time and she would not be so tired when she gets home. (Victoria, age 17, in school)

In a few cases, however, the participants mentioned the rewards of gaining knowledge and putting it into practice. A young man spoke of how he valued the practical computer skills he had learned in his Information Technology class. In the following passage Maria explains how she had learned to express herself through writing.

P: In language we write a lot and I like to write, I wrote many times for the [school's] newspaper. They told me that I write very well. I'm not very good at expressing myself speaking, but I can do it writing. Sometimes when I'm feeling sad I write. (Maria, 15 years old, at school)

The experience of learning in this case had an immediate effect of providing her with skills that she can use in her everyday life. The cases in which students expressed the value of knowledge or skills learned at school, however, were the exception.

School is also valued as a place for bonding, making friends, establishing loving relationships and as a place for socialization. Although friendship was not what young people most valued

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<sup>12</sup> In 2012 only 27% of adults over age 24 living in the *villas* had completed secondary school (DGEyC, 2012).

in their lives, at least in comparison with the family, spending time with peers was presented as a valuable dimension of going to school.

Finally, school is valued for the different forms of support it provides, including being listened to or having a place (a physical place) that they can go to get away from a conflictive relationship with their family or inadequate housing. What stands out as an important positive characteristic of the Catholic school located in the *villa* is the emotional support provided by teachers and counsellors and the fact that they take the time to listen and get to know each family. Maria describes in the following way the support she receives from this school.

P: When we feel bad, or aren't well, or fight with our mother or with anyone, or a relative passes away, they take time away from the things that they have to do to listen to us, to give us advice. They worry about how we feel and what happens to us. They have their own personal lives, their families and in spite of everything they still care about us. It's not like in the other school, where you tell them what is going on and they say 'well, you'll work it out'. Here they support you, they help, talk with your family, find time to talk to you. This school doesn't compare to any other, this school is special....This school is like a second home for me because all of my classmates, my teachers, the administrators always are there for me when I need them. They have always been there the times that I left my house they also were with me. And they have taught tons of things. They taught me to believe in myself, to get ahead, to respect my classmates, to concentrate on studying. (Maria, 15 years old, at school)

Emilia also described the difference between this school and her previous secondary school.

P: There is a big difference between the other school and this one. The technical school where I went was very different, because here they help a lot. In the other one they just gave us the assignment and said 'Do it'. But here they give you the assignment and it is like this, this and this. It is like they are there for you. Understand?

R: And do you feel like you learn more like this now.

P: Yes, because if you don't understand something, they explain it to you again, until you understand it (...) Last year when a classmate did not want to come to school, I don't know why, they went and brought him back and were there helping him every day. They stayed by his side. And he even told us: ay these teachers are such a pain or something like that. But in truth it was to help him and in the end he passed second year. And now he is with us too, but he is fine now. (Emilia, age 16, in school)

The young people, however, spoke of the support and encouragement provided by mentors not only within the school, but also civil society leaders in the neighbourhood. Several participants spoke of their relationship with the priests who work and live in the *villa*. Emilia, who had dropped out of school but later returned, spoke of her active participation in the youth movement at the neighbourhood's Catholic Church. She not only participated in religious services but also the youth group, sports activities and she helped take care of young children at the church. Emilia described how one of the priests had encouraged her to return to school.

P: When he found out that [I was dropping out of school] he got mad at me. And he came and talked to me and I don't know he kept after me. It was like he was beside me and he would say, 'No, you have to study.' He was a bit of pain, but in the end he convinced me [to go to the Catholic school]. I came, and I don't know, I liked it and I stayed. And I am going to stay until I finish, for as long as I can.

For Lucas, a young man whose father had an ongoing problem of drug addiction, the person that had made a difference in his perception about school was a woman he had met through the community radio station.

R: How did you meet her?

P: The radio. There was a time in my life where that was the only place that I disconnected

from the reality of my father, and it connected me to the reality of the radio. The radio always taught me that there was something better. In the radio I learned many things that today help me. The truth is that I am not angry with life. I am not angry with my father. Suffering helped me to mature, so behind my entire story, the radio was always there. It was in the radio that I met Natalia and she taught to write, to read, for example, on the days that my father was killing himself in one of the alleys of Bajo Flores, taking drugs...with freebase. (Lucas, 15 years, in school)

In summary, being part of a school (as an institution and as a community) involves diverse experiences, rewards and resources, which are all part of the functioning of being a student. While some participants valued specific skills they had learned at school, the primary motivations for attending school are related either to obtaining emotional support, spending time with friends or securing the means for obtaining a formal job and providing for the family. The stories also provide evidence of the critical role that family, teachers or community leaders can sometimes play in encouraging young people to remain in school.

## 4 Conclusions

This paper has sought to shed light on some of the factors which account for secondary school outcomes in the *villas* of the City of Buenos Aires, using the capability approach as an analytical lens. This led us to endeavour to understand young people's own perspectives on education by eliciting stories that help us to make sense of the things they have 'reasons to value' and to produce an exploratory mapping of their 'evaluative spaces'. While family was what young people most frequently responded that they valued most in their lives, a number of participants expressed the value of the freedom they gained on the streets and through formal work.

We find a clear distinction between the purpose of education as an intermediate value-object and as an end in itself. The instrumental value of education was what came out most frequently in the interviews. Secondary education was valued because it would allow them to 'be somebody', get a job, provide them with income, form a family, obtain a house, etc. At the same time, drop-out occurred when schooling was in conflict with the obligation to satisfy immediate needs of the family, by working or caring for siblings.

Two policy recommendations can be derived from this conclusion. First, gearing curricula toward the teaching of skills useful in the labour market could not only make young people more employable in the future, but also motivate them to remain in school. Second, improvements in access to day-care and kindergarten in marginal neighbourhoods can make it school attendance easier for young people who have children of their own or who must care for younger siblings (see also Fundación SES & UNICEF 2005).

In some cases, although not most, education was valued for the knowledge acquired. Some young people valued, for example, having developed skills in the use of information technology or improved their aptitude in communication (which not only meant better social skills but also enabled them to manage personal emotions by communicating them). So, while the 20 young women and men we interviewed emphasized the instrumental value of education, some also recognized that it constitutes an end in itself in matters related to technology, communication and critical thinking.

Schools also have an intermediate value as institutions rooted within a community. Schools and teachers provide emotional support, social assistance, aid in resolution of family conflicts and spaces for socialization. These aspects of schools were mentioned as important in the lives of young people and instrumental in defining schooling trajectories. In some cases this aspect of school provides a safety net, preventing students from dropping out. In that sense the capacity of schools to respond to non-educational needs can significantly determine whether



or not they can sustain their role in the provision of education. While the plurality of functions that schools must take on can potentially create tensions within educational institutions (regarding schools' ethos and the work responsibilities of teachers, for example), it may be an effective way to contribute to reducing educational inequality in an urban context.

The analysis of the context of the *villa* showed how the problems of accessibility, peer influence and discrimination can influence young people's perceptions and schooling outcomes. These findings point to the importance of integrating educational policies with broader social policies in informal settlements, such as policies to fight crime, improve accessibility or provide assistance to families in order to guarantee the necessary 'fertile capabilities' that will enable young people to be students. This article therefore contributes to the literature arguing for the need for public policies aimed at improving students' living conditions as a means for sustaining schooling trajectories (Rivas 2015, Poggi et al. 2014).

Programs may also need to be introduced to address the specific needs of marginal communities, such as the problems of insecurity and inaccessibility that were emphasized in the interviews. The city government's recent program titled '*Senderos seguros*' (safe paths), which has fostered cooperation among neighbours to look out for the safety of students on their way to school has shown initial signs of effectiveness.

Moreover, while there is an ongoing debate over whether or not schools should be located outside of marginal neighbourhoods in order to promote integration, the interviews shed light on some of the potential benefits of creating schools that address specific local needs. Some of the young people we interviewed described both the academic and emotional support provided by teachers at the Catholic school located within the *villa* of Bajo Flores. These results suggest that the benefits of proximity to the community may in some cases outweigh the importance of fostering integration.

From a capability approach perspective, we conclude that gaining greater understanding of how young people value secondary education is fundamental to designing policies that promote the completion of secondary education. The processes of school drop-out cannot be reduced to being the result of contextual conditions or the drive of individual students. However, from a capability approach perspective, we argue that individuals' 'evaluative spaces' and 'reasons of value' are relevant dimensions of agency which intervene in schooling trajectories. The stories elicited for this study show that the young women and men in the *villa* of Bajo Flores gave a high value to secondary education while, at the same time, for some the capability of being educated at the secondary school level was out of reach due to contextual circumstances. Agency can be particularly observed in the stories of success or recovery in which young people had overcome difficult and complex social conditions (absent parents, parents with drug addictions, lack of guaranteed and adequate housing, family and work responsibilities) to successfully complete secondary school. We argue that narrative research provides a powerful tool to access and interpret the perspectives, decisions and limitations of agents and thereby to contribute to the design of more effective public policies.

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Author(s): Graham K. Brown, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath

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Author(s): Susan Johnson, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath; and Max Niño-Zarazua, Independent Consultant, Mexico City