

How Do **Disruptive Innovators**

Prepare Today's Students
to be Tomorrow's Workforce?

**SCHOLAS' APPROACH
TO ENGAGE YOUTH**

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About Scholas

Scholas is an international educational non-profit organization established by Pope Francis. It promotes projects around the world, by proposing different educational programs, linking technology, art, play, and sport. It pursues the Culture of the Encounter through social and cultural integration, aiming at fostering peace at a global level. Today, twenty years after its first experience in Argentina, Scholas has offices around the world. Its network is present in 190 countries, integrating more than 400.000 educational centers and reaching more than one million children and young people worldwide.

Abstract

The lack of motivation and sense of community within schools have proven to be the two most relevant factors behind the decision to drop out. Despite the notable progress made in school access in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, dropping out of school has still been a problem. This paper explores Scholas Occurrentes' pedagogical approach to address these dropouts. Scholas focuses on the voice of students. It seeks to act positively on their motivation by listening to them, creating spaces for discussion, and strengthening soft skills and civic engagement. Scholas aims to enhance the sense of community within schools by gathering students from different social and economic backgrounds and involving teachers, families, and societal actors. This will break down the walls between schools and the whole community. This paper presents Scholas' work with three examples from Paraguay, Haiti, and Argentina. It analyzes the positive impacts that Scholas' intervention had on the participants. Then, it focuses on future challenges regarding the scalability and involvement of the institutions in the formulation of new public policies. The approach highlights the participatory nature of education and the importance of all actors' engagement.

1. Introduction

In the last decades, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have made a lot of progress in education and school systems to comply with the international standards, agreements, and goals settled over the years, such as the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) or the Sustainable Development Goals. As we will see, the results in the achievement of some objectives are mixed. Even if the governments have generally tried to widen the possibilities to make schools more accessible, this has not always resulted in the improved quality of education or the development of educational models that could match the current changes and challenges of an increasingly globalized world.

1.1 The Educational Systems of LAC Countries in the Current Global Context

According to UNESCO, in the first decades of the 2000s, the region generally successfully achieved education for all, even with noted differences among countries and regions within the same country.

In 2018, the region showed a net enrolment rate in primary education of about **93.7%** in primary education. (World Bank, 2020)

Over the years, the concept of education has evolved, and the rights to learn have widened. Guaranteeing education does not only mean assuring school accessibility to the most significant number of children or establishing certain years of compulsory schooling. Nowadays, the right to education means the right to quality education, resulting in a more multidimensional concept. For example, the Convention of the Rights of the Child points out that quality education “equips students with the capacity and knowledge needed to become a socially competent person.”

Despite the attempts to reform the scholastic and education systems, LAC countries are experiencing difficulties ensuring quality and relevant education. For example, UNESCO has recognized the problems causing low-quality education, such as the number of teachers, the quality of teacher training, low levels of learning achievements (compared with more developed countries with substantial differences within the region), and various learning gaps.



Moreover, it is also essential to renew curricula and the capacity to develop soft and cross-cutting skills. Updating curricular and educational capabilities is deemed indispensable to help students meet the labor market's requests and become citizens in increasingly globalized and complex contexts. Unlike hard skills, soft skills, such as communication, critical thinking, empathy, creativity, and teamwork, are not taught, since they are linked more to personal attributes. Soft skills are applicable and useful in all the aspects of life, in workplaces, schools, and within the most straightforward interpersonal relations. Cross-cutting skills *"not only bring benefits in learning how to self-regulate, in being more empathic, resilient, in persevering, in better adapting to changes or in trusting more in themselves and developing high expectations for the future."* (Mateo-Berganza Diaz & Rucci, 2019, p. 22).

Nonetheless, it seems that LAC schools are still stuck with simply delivering knowledge and helping students complete didactic programs. Yet, cultivating such skills in schools requires a revolutionary shift of mindset, from recognizing the importance of keeping students' motivation high while preparing them for today's world.

1.2 Scholas Response: Educating for Generating a Meaning

Scholas Occurrentes (Scholas from here on) is an organization that has attempted to deconstruct all the existing educational methods and their rigidities since its very foundation. Specifically, it proposes different pedagogic approaches that consider the cultivation of skills, like listening, communication, empathy, solidarity, and teamwork, as central and fundamental in the educational process. Scholas' mission is to answer the call to create a Culture of the Encounter, by bringing all the youngsters of the world together in education that generates meaning.

Generating a sense in education means untying from the classical concept of closed classrooms, where students are filled with notions and tested with exams that do not consider individual differences. It means putting students at the very center of education, leaving them free to express themselves, meeting and sharing their experiences with peers, and being aware of their educational paths. Scholas believes that schools can keep engagement and motivation high by allowing students to voice, to be listened to, and to express themselves. At the same time, students can be prepared to actively contribute to their communities.



1.3 Proposing a Paradigm Shift in Education

Scholas starts from the observation of what education is about nowadays in schools and communities. Currently, education leads young people through a path in which having is more important than being. Having things, such as knowledge, tools, skills, and degrees is considered a fundamental condition to produce and become someone useful for society.

However, Scholas aims to break this rule. Scholas sees education as a call to listen to life, create a new culture, and then celebrate it. Being, rather than having, is at the core of this approach. Education means teaching to listen to oneself and others and to grab the intrinsic sense throughout the process.

Under this perspective, doing does not mean producing or working. Still, it means creating, expressing oneself to the point that one can celebrate having, intended to match who they are, without needing something more or less.

This paper will analyze how Scholas' pedagogical approach and mindset help cope with LAC educational systems' chronic problems concerning the dropout phenomenon and its causes.

First, we will describe the trends regarding dropouts in LAC, attempting to understand root causes and major patterns through demographic, performance, psychological, and social factors. After providing an overview of Scholas' programs and projects, we will describe how Scholas addresses some of these factors by strengthening communities in and outside of schools. Three experiences on the field will be described, namely in Paraguay, Argentina, and Haiti.

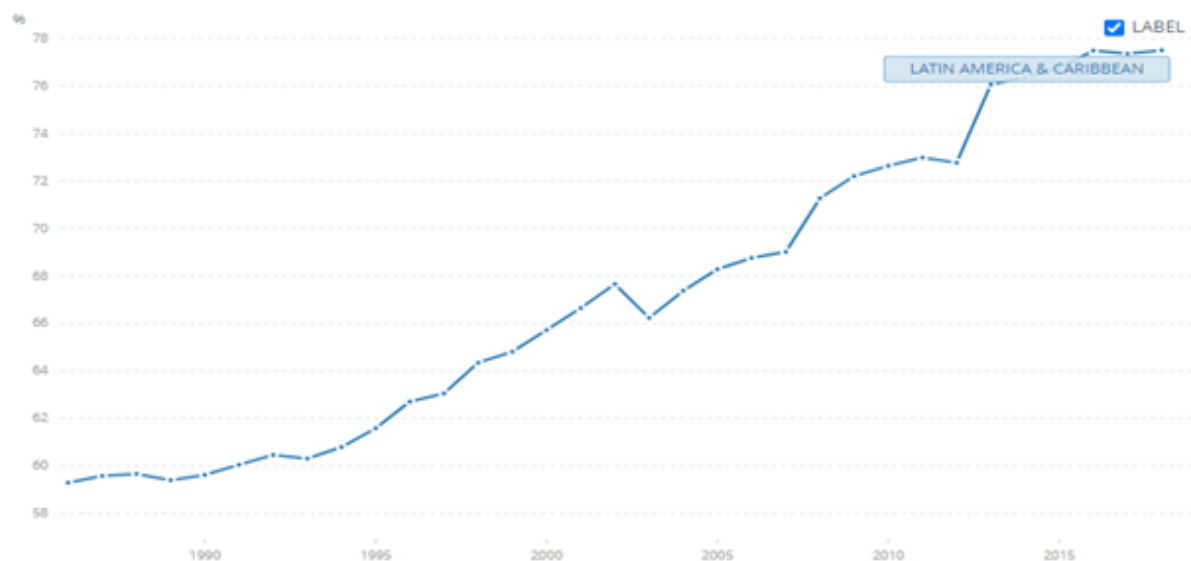


2. Educational System in LAC: The Problem is Dropout, not Access

Some Latin American countries have considered mass literacy a prominent and significant issue since the end of the 19th century to fill the gap with some European countries and the United States. The starting conditions of LAC in those times were influenced by its colonial history, the economic status, and the several different ethnicities present on the territory.

Mostly in Spanish America, governments have a strong tendency to centralize the educational systems' management and financing. These governments supported the process of school massification. Over the years, in conjunction with the economic turns, LAC countries have generally made their schooling systems more inclusive and accessible. With increased public spending on education, the region could provide education to many more children. Over the past decade, the number of children entering and completing primary and secondary education has increased faster in Latin America than any other developing world (PREAL, 2006).

Figure 1. School enrollment, secondary (% net) Latin America and Caribbean [(1986-2018)].



Source: World Bank.

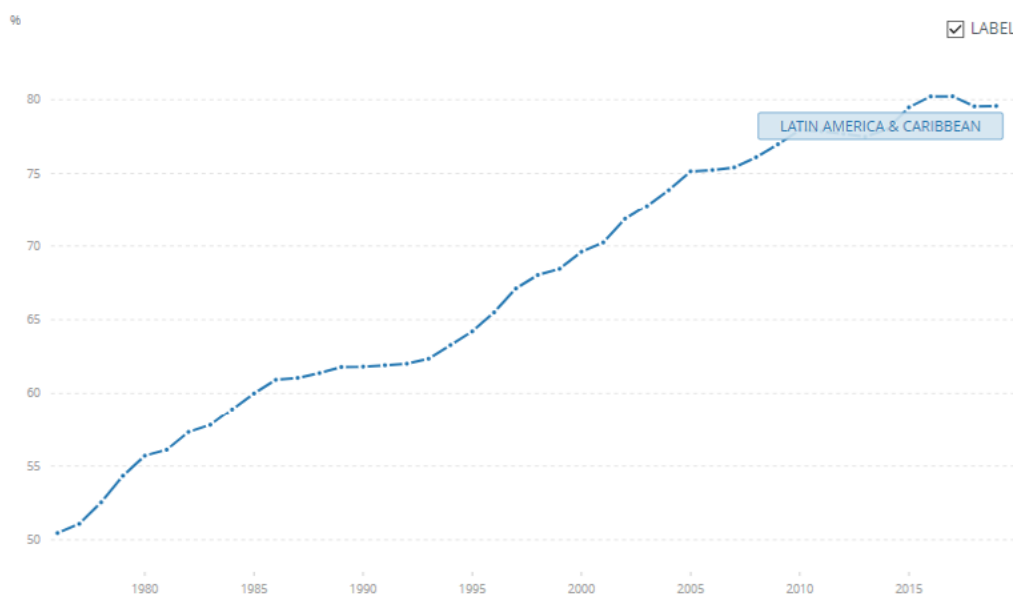
However, school enrollment is a poor indicator of progress in educational systems. Even after achieving high primary school enrollment, governments continued to struggle with grade repetition and high dropout rates, indicating low-quality education (Balán, 2013).

High dropout rates represent a considerable problem and challenge for LAC countries. According to UNESCO (2013), despite some progress, dropping out in primary school remains a relevant issue with a decrease from 13% to 8.3% between 2000 and 2010. According to UNESCO, the transition from primary to secondary education is also smooth, with a regional average of 93.5% of students completing this process. However, the situation is uneven at secondary schools. Grade repetition and failure are still high with little improvement over the years (from 5.93% in 2000 to 5.90% in 2010). Persistently, high failure rates combine with high dropout rates.

In 2015,
15.5% of students enrolled in
 secondary education
 decided to abandon school.

The transition from low-secondary to upper-secondary school (which is not compulsory) is another problem. Upper-secondary schools offer pre-university education and vocational training. The transition between these two stages is deemed critical with high dropout rates.

Figure 2. Lower secondary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group)
 - Latin America & Caribbean



Source: World Bank.

LAC's lower secondary completion rate has increased (See Figure 2). Still, the completion rate was 80.7% in 2018. There are also significant differences among countries.

2.1. What lies behind dropout?

Prior literature analyzed the possible causes and risk factors behind the dropout. Some factors are more related to the school environment, while others are less related to school but others, such as students' socioeconomic backgrounds. These risk factors are not mutually exclusive and can influence one another. For example, Burrus and Roberts (2012) distinguish demographic characteristics, performance characteristics, self-identified factors about oneself, and self-identified factors about others. Yet, I do not intend to be exhaustive, since this paper will not explore many other determinants. Instead, the purpose of examining these factors is to give a general overview focusing on the social, psychological, and emotional elements, which are at the core of Scholas' interventions. Additionally, there are other specific aspects related to indigenous groups and people from rural areas in LAC countries.



2.1.1. Demographic and Performance Factors

Demographics factors are external, related to students' socioeconomic backgrounds, such as families' economic status, gender, and ethnic/minority. Age can also play a crucial factor for dropouts, particularly for those who have failed a school year. These factors can be impactful, when combined. For example, being a male coming from a low-income family could mean being forced to leave school to enter the job market early and help the family.

Performance factors are linked directly to schools' and students' perceptions about their career and their commitment, such as class attendance, the number of credits earned, and grades. These factors prove even more relevant in the transition between school years, especially at the beginning of secondary education. They can also influence the students' motivation, since there is often a vicious cycle between low grades and little motivation, especially if they feel their teachers do not value them.

These factors can interact with the other factors, such as the interest in the arguments proposed during classes, the frustration that what is taught in school is not relevant, teachers' low motivation, and parents' low involvement in education.

2.1.2. Psychological and Social Factors

Other psychological and social factors, such as personality and motivation, can account for the increasing dropout risks. In this paper, we will particularly focus on motivation and its multidimensional aspects.

Burrus and Roberts found that the Theory of Planned Behavior can help predict dropout probability by focusing on students' attitudes. This theory makes a distinction between attitudes (how a person evaluates his/her own and others' behavior), subjective norms (how the person feels the social pressure to perform a behavior), and perceived control (to what extent the person feels able to perform a particular action) (Burrus et al., 2012). These factors can influence the chances of school retention and are useful for predicting students' possible future choices.

In particular, motivation plays a fundamental role in shaping students' behaviors, and many factors can impact motivation. On one hand, the pupils' perceived school competence influences motivation and the choice to leave or stay in school (Fan et al., 2012). On the other hand, educational expectations can influence students' gradual disengagement from schools. Also, motivation depends on how students find their schools and instructors challenging and inspiring. Families and parents' roles cannot be neglected either, since the chances of dropout increase if parents are poorly engaged in their children's education and do not nurture their educational expectations.



2.2. Are the Educational Systems Well Equipped to Cope with Dropout Risks?

Dropout is a phenomenon that should not concern only schools, but also families, institutions, and the community. Yet, several factors can result in dropout. First, it is not easy to tackle the problem with different roots. It requires concerted actions. Despite the significant differences among educational systems within the region, they struggle with quite similar issues. The commitment and resources are needed to create social, legal, and political conditions enhancing secondary education. It is also important to enhance smooth and less rigid mechanisms in the transition between school years, especially for vulnerable students (TERCE, 2016).

Motivation has been recognized as a critical factor in explaining dropouts. It can be intrinsic or extrinsic (Tohidi et al., 2011). Intrinsic motivation refers to situations people are internally motivated to do something because they like it or find it significant. Extrinsic motivation depends on how the students perceive the utility of what they are learning and matching their educational expectations (Tohidi et al., 2011). Still, “because students are not always internally motivated, they sometimes need situated motivation, which is found in environmental conditions that the teacher creates” (Tohidi et al., 2011, p. 823). School systems need to raise students’ motivation by proposing programs that meet the current necessities and demands from society and the job market. A recent study conducted by the IADB, explains how the focus should be moved from passive, standardized education focusing on memorization to active learning based on projects and discussions, where students learn by solving real-world challenges, while working as a team. Studies found that active learning is extremely helpful in increasing students’ motivation and interests.

Yet, the same research underlines how active learning is not sufficiently applied and implemented in LAC’s educational systems. There are several reasons, such as the difficulties in creating personalized materials, limited time and resources, along with other obstacles from the attempt to change teachers’ traditional methods.



2.2.1. The Difficulties Schools Face to Build Themselves as Communities

Scholas considers education a fundamental process that cannot be limited to schools but involves different societal actors, including the entire community. Thus, Scholas believes that solutions to education problems require a comprehensive and cooperative approach. Students' motivation depends on a series of factors inside and outside of school.

To create a stimulating environment that can boost youngsters' interest and motivation, schools should build communities, while blurring the lines with the outside community. Creating a sense of community in schools, together with updating academic programs and pedagogical approaches, is pivotal for raising students' motivation. Schaps (2003) confirmed the benefits connected with building communities in schools. This means creating an environment of listening, sharing, connections, and reciprocity, which in turn would increase the students' sense of belonging. Creating a sense of community in schools also means caring about students' socio-emotional health, with benefits that can also impact their outside environment.

Schaps (2003) recognizes four approaches that can create a sense of community in schools:



1. Cultivating respectful and supportive relations among students, teachers, and families;



2. Emphasizing shared beliefs and ideas, which also means the transmission of values such as empathy, solidarity, and civic engagement;



3. Creating opportunities within classes for boosting students' autonomy and influence within the society;



4. Offering opportunities for cooperation and service, pushing students to care for others and to help each other.

Moreover, boosting the sense of community in schools can help address needs for autonomy and belonging, which are most prominent during adolescence and determine school engagement (Schaps et al., 2003). It can also trigger a virtuous cycle since students will become more attached to their schools and strengthen their moral, social, and emotional values if students' needs are met (Schaps et al., 2003, p. 7). Schaps (2003) noted that students developing commitments to these values tend to behave in ways consistent with them, which in turn help further develop their capacities and reinforce the school conditions that constitute a caring community of learners. This way, schools can reinforce motivation and reduce dropout risks.

Some programs aim to develop different approaches to support building communities within schools (Schaps, 2003). However, it is still difficult to find schools that have managed to achieve a strong sense of community. Different economic and social background, together with the scarcity of time and resources, limit schools. Scholas' work attempts to support schools, educational institutions, and societal actors in this sense. More than a complementary program, Scholas develops projects that pursue a shift in the mindset of teachers, students, families, and institutions, and proposes best practices that can be applied in schools and communities. Scholas' activities assume a catalyst role in this process, which will then be supported during its development.



3. Scholas' Innovative Educational Approach: Taking People Back to Their Origins

Since its origins, Scholas has been used to work in contexts where communities look weak and fragmented. The organization's work aims to support healing such communities, starting from education and youngsters. Scholas' story begins with a crisis. About 20 years ago, Pope Francis, who was Archbishop of Buenos Aires at that time, observed and felt the deep crisis his country was going through. Argentina was immersed in a deep social, economic, and political crisis, resulting in death, poverty, and violence. Pope Francis sensed that only by listening to the pains and the hearts of people, especially youngsters, a new culture and new world could be created.

Scholas was born when a group of students with different social and religious backgrounds and from different schools came together to talk about the roots of their pains and discouragement. They addressed the educational system as one of the most significant sources of dissatisfaction because they found it detached from their real lives. Their collaboration and ideas brought to the drafting of a law proposal, which was then submitted for the legislature and unanimously approved as Law 2.169 "Buenos Aires Educational City." This first small group of 70 youngsters was destined to be joined by 7,000 of them by the end of that year. Scholas had already started its path, making diversity one of its greatest assets, bearer of trust and beauty. In other words, Scholas was conceived as a possible response to the call by promoting *the Culture of the Encounter*.

3.1. The Educational and Pedagogic Intuition

The world has become more interconnected and complex. Yet, education does not always reflect and integrate such transformational challenges. Scholas continuously reflects on educators' roles, changing educational policies, and the necessity to achieve new social contracts.



In pursuing an education that does not leave anyone behind, Scholas has developed its Pedagogy of the Encounter to achieve an education that promotes social integration and aims for peace, cooperation, respect for diversity, responsible civic participation, and environmental awareness. Scholas' pedagogic approach considers dialogue and encounter not only as mere activities, but as contents to share during classes. While studying their subjects, students should also learn how to practice those attitudes related to dialogue and encounter. This practice is considered as the first, fundamental step.

The Pedagogy of the Encounter is based on the following characteristics (Stigliano, 2018):



Supporting growth based on creativity and teamwork. Education should rediscover the value of two critical dimensions: play and sport. These two activities have a fundamental role because they teach teamwork and how to share, while providing creative and playful learning environments.



Educating through art. Scholas encourages and facilitates the encounter between youth and art in all its expressions. Students can learn to recognize and appreciate the beauty surrounding them to re-establish harmony in their communities.



Reaching youngsters by speaking their language. Education needs to consider how youngsters express themselves rather than having biases towards them. Thus, one of these pedagogy's fundamental pillars is a conscious use of technology for youngsters without undermining its importance and utility.

Furthermore, Scholas has created a network of schools, people, universities, and communities to share different educational experiences and promote education beyond classrooms and borders. It is firmly believed that schools should be welcoming toward everyone and embrace their diverse values. All schools are different yet with their same nature, and all the students are different from each other. Everyone needs to feel valued in his/her diversity, and the educational methodologies should be developed under this perspective. However, some schools take targeted approaches only for those considered most vulnerable or at risk, treating them as special students in a negative sense.

However, integration can start in school and go beyond. It is useless to leave students to face discriminatory and burdensome social contexts after their school hours. Thus, Scholas works with schools and communities and collaborates with organizations, teachers, institutions, families, artists, entrepreneurs, companies, and athletes.

Scholas refuses the idea of schools as places of a mere transmission of knowledge. Beyond that, Scholas sees schools as a vehicle for humanism, based on *hope* (since education can change reality), *dialogue* (based on the importance of listening and accepting others as fundamental parts of our lives), and *service* (committing to others for the common good).

As a starting point of diversity, we let everyone freely express him/herself without any constriction. The pedagogic approach finds then the expression in three languages that permeate Scholas' activities: play, art, and thought. These languages intend to express reality and to cultivate soft skills whose importance is often neglected.

3.2 Scholas' Programs toward the Culture of the Encounter

In this section, we provide a brief overview of Scholas' leading programs that Scholas has been developing over the years. Then, we further describe some projects in detail. The central target populations of these programs are youngsters enrolled in secondary schools, usually ages 15 to 17.

Scholas has built an educational program by developing a set of articulated and connected projects. These projects aim at revolutionizing pedagogical approaches while maximizing the social benefits and the number of beneficiaries. At the core of Scholas' programs, there is Scholas Citizenship, a program that promotes and boosts youngsters' civic engagement and participation by involving them in a dynamic process of proposing concrete solutions for issues and problems in their social contexts.

Since this is Scholas' founding experience, it deserves a more in-depth description. The target population is 15 to 17-year-old students, attending schools in the same city (both public and private) and from various social, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Schools are involved in the preparation phase and in selecting students who will join the experience (a group from 10 to 15 youngsters from each school). It is essential to represent the multiple schools where the experience takes place. It aims to bring students closer to their realities by enhancing participation in social, civic, and political engagement. It is an eight-day program, gathering all the participating students in one space with the following four phases:



- 1.** Debate and selections of problems and issues by the students, from their context



- 2.** Formulation of solutions to the problem they have identified



- 3.** Drafting of project proposals



- 4.** Project presentation to the whole group of students and public authorities

Scholas staff and volunteers accompany each step, applying Scholas' methodology. The activity benefits are several and go beyond the participants. From the youngsters' perspective, the program stimulates their sense of collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural sensitivity. The students are called to act as active citizens, practice citizenship, agree on the problems that genuinely concern them, and build a common response to address them. They feel they have a voice that their teachers, schools, and institutions will hear, and that can impact the whole community through the solution they propose.

In the meantime, schools and teachers contribute to the implementation of a completely different pedagogical approach, which can also show different ways to work with youngsters. The teachers are involved throughout the whole experience. They give feedback, exchange opinions, build networks, and develop proposals to be implemented in the follow-up. The public institutions get the chance to listen directly to the youngsters and truly understand their concerns, showing a collaborative approach that could thoughtfully contribute to policies that address youth problems.

The experience is usually followed by the Schools of Art, Game, and Thought (Escuelas de Arte, Juego y Pensamiento), an immersive journey where youngsters learn about Scholas' pedagogic approach and methodologies. It is a call to empower them and to start a path as educators, thus impacting more youngsters in their communities.

Since they are educational languages, art, game, and thought are transversal to most of Scholas' activities and projects. They are to bring people back to their origins. To fully express themselves, each moment is dedicated to communicating through artistic expressions, and sharing of experiences, thoughts, reflections without any judgment, but through mutual listening and respect.

Scholas also has another follow-up to the Citizenship Program. Scholas Jam gathers students and professionals to develop models to cope with the main problems and needs in their communities. In the labs, they are guided through a process to stimulate their creative thinking and propose useful and concrete ideas by using the Service Design tools and techniques. The students learn to apply new methodologies in several fields - both for their job and study - while working with peers and searching for practical solutions.

The organization's integral approach to education has brought the creation of another program related to sport, highlighting its importance and values in education. Through the program SportVal (sports with values), sport is celebrated as a powerful social vehicle and a way to manage victory, defeat, and competitiveness, while also promoting team spirit. Trainers are transversal figures that do not use a schematic and linear approach in transmitting knowledge. Meanwhile, young athletes engage in a multidimensional growth process since they are not just seen as people who should receive orders and perform flawlessly. So, SportVal and its two related projects, FutVal (football with values) and BoxVal (Boxing with values) promote values like respect, teamwork, honesty, commitment, solidarity, and resilience.

Lastly, Scholas Chairs, a global network of more than 100 universities, has been established to start a continuing dialogue about education, conduct research activities, and share experiences and best practices.

4. Scholas' Integral Educational Approach: Building Educational Communities

Since its very foundation, Scholas has developed its programs and projects during crises. These crises are various from specific contexts to the whole educational system. From its birth in Buenos Aires about 20 years ago, the organization has established offices in 15 countries and has worked all over the world.

This evolution has more to do with listening than scaling up the organization. In most cases, Scholas has answered calls for help, arising from places where the educational pact looked spoiled by different causes, no matter the country's development or the education systems' efficiency. Over the years, we progressively realized that the crises in education are global and require a concerted approach. The approaches to new countries and contexts are always conceived in agreement with institutions, schools, teachers, and youngsters at the very center of the experience. The synergy among different actors also continues in the follow-up, where families, community members, new educators, and more students are progressively involved.

As mentioned above, high dropout rates are a problem for its relevance, but it also represents an obstacle for the social and economic developments of the region. Several factors are explaining these dropout rates. Scholas works on unique factors in each context, with a greater emphasis on motivation and the cultivation of soft skills.

In the next five sections, we will highlight the importance of schools to build themselves as communities and safe places where students can learn, grow, and share. This process requires significantly empowering soft skills development within schools as a fundamental part of the path to become aware and engaged citizens. The argument will be supported by the three concrete experiences that Scholas has carried out on the field in Paraguay, Argentina, and Haiti.



4.1 A Cross-Cutting and Participative Approach: Schools as a Part of the Solution

Schools are at the core of education. It is almost impossible to think about education without schools. In most cases, rebuilding education includes reforming a part of the school systems. Besides, they represent a place where pupils spend their significant time during the day with peers and teachers, who are supposed to be the guides throughout their education. Thus, many efforts are made to build schools as safe places, where students can meet, share, and develop their knowledge while growing up as citizens.

We mentioned the benefits of creating a sense of a strong community in schools. However, schools are not islands. They are strongly influenced by their respective social contexts and vice versa. The attempts to create inclusive, welcoming, and positive environments in schools are important, but not they are not enough. When students complete their day at school, they risk going back to a context of discrimination and differences, where the other actors within the community are not aware or empowered enough to perform their educative roles. Schools and society should establish a new pact engaging different actors. A common and shared commitment is needed to address problems in and outside schools and eradicate them in both contexts, thus creating a virtuous cycle.

Scholas proposes wide, participative, and indirect approaches. We dissected the problem of dropout from schools to better understand it. We work on it by giving the voice back to youngsters. Scholas does not present a pre-packaged solution that was successful in another context even when sensing a problem. The proposed interventions are thought to stimulate youngsters' participation to make them choose the problem they want to address, while involving families, teachers, communities, and the local institutions. In Scholas' point of view, this is the best way to stimulate motivation and cultivate soft skills, which are often neglected in schools' curricula. In our experience, students often left schools because of the lack of motivation and mismatching between students' expectations and schools' programs. Scholas lets youngsters be free to understand why they feel unmotivated, what their expectations are, and how they would like to build their educational path, in the framework of a pedagogic approach that stimulates teamwork, listening, critical thinking, solidarity, and empathy. The programs are thought to create a spillover effect. While occurring in schools, the programs gradually involve different actors and train other educators to impact more community members, who act as multipliers.



4.2 Cultivating Soft Skills: Implications for Youngsters

It is not easy to provide a comprehensive definition or list of soft skills, because they are more related to personal attitudes and seem less tangible than hard skills. There are various frameworks, which makes it difficult to measure, evaluate, and develop coherent programs within the educational systems. This paper will focus more on socio-emotional skills and how Scholas works on them. We will use the CASEL framework, which refers to socio-emotional learning as a process through which a person learns how to recognize and express emotions, thus establishing relationships with others and making significant and responsible decisions (IADB, 2019). These skills can be divided into five categories, although the distinction is not clear: self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (IADB, 2019).

All Scholas' programs are permeated with cultivation - either explicit or implicit - of these skills. On one hand, empowering socio-emotional skills means empowering the self, because they act on wellness, mental health, and healthy relationships with others, thus working on motivation. Researches show how these skills are fundamental in mitigating youngsters' risk factors, highlighting their equality to cognitive ones. On the other hand, they are pivotal for youngsters' futures because they represent a basis for creating their civic awareness while being increasingly requested in the job market, and the different experiences youngsters can take once they complete school. For what concerns LAC countries, they have generally recognized the importance of including the development of socio-emotional skills in schools' curricula, but it remains more an implicit effort, used more during the quality evaluation. Some countries, like Chile, Colombia, and Perú, have developed some specific programs. The general trend is to leave the cultivation of these skills as a general objective while developing coherent evaluation methods.

In this sense, Scholas works on empowering soft skills to improve youngsters' present and make them protagonists of their future, both in and outside of schools.



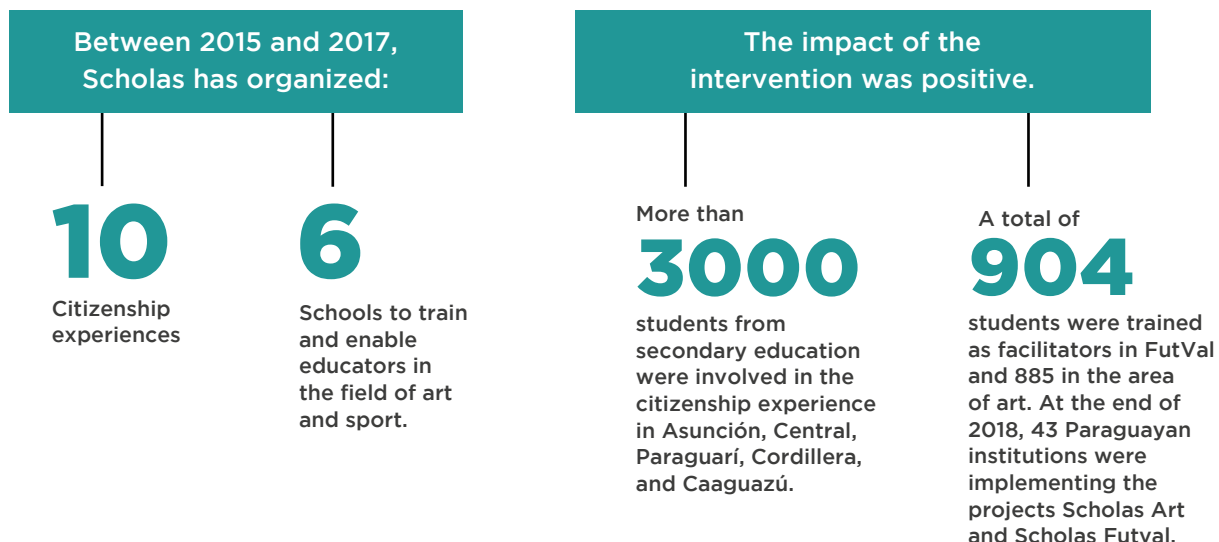
4.3 Scholas in Paraguay: Acting in Present, Supporting Schools

The Paraguayan Development Institute published a study in 2013 to investigate the high dropout rates in the country's secondary education. The investigation found that, regarding the cohort who started school in 1997, only 29% of the registered students completed the second cycle of their study. The same study denounced the lack of a systematic evaluation that could help understand the roots of school abandonment and explore possible public policies. According to the same investigation, there are many reasons for this choice. The most prominent reason for this is related to the economy and poverty. However, interest and motivation turned out to be also influential.

Scholas started to work in the country in 2015, through technical cooperation with the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the Paraguayan Ministry of Education and Science (MEC). All the parts, at that time, were recognizing the necessity to address some chronic criticisms in the Paraguayan school system, mainly linked to the *quality of education*. The MEC had established some priorities such as the necessity to rethink teachers' pedagogic approaches and work on the lack of human and economic resources, which had made Paraguay one of the countries with the lowest numbers of compulsory schooling hours. These factors had been found to contribute to the dropout rates within the state. To improve the education quality through innovative approaches, Scholas was then involved in a partnership to introduce a methodology that could support this effort while enriching the educational offer by including sport and art.

Scholas' journey in Paraguay started with the organization of the Citizenship Program, in the extremely vulnerable area of Bañado, characterized by high rates of criminality, violence, and addictions. The objective was to develop conditions to keep students at school, create a safe environment through quality improvement, and increase the time they spend there. By doing so, their motivation could increase. Simultaneously, the program's benefits in terms of socio-emotional skills and civic engagement could positively impact their communities, starting a virtuous circle.

Thus, the organization was included as part of the ministerial project to eradicate dropout since primary school through the Project to support school day extension and improve transportation conditions in rural areas. Under this agreement, Scholas' target has doubled. On one hand, it has been working with adolescents (aged 15 to 17 years) in schools and training them as sport and art educators. On the other hand, the students who have participated in the programs of citizenship and the follow-up activities have started to volunteer as educators in primary schools, representing a valuable and fundamental resource in supporting the extended day with children. This has several benefits. For example, youngsters are involved in programs that cultivate their socio-emotional skills and push their civic engagement and commitment toward their communities, in a context characterized by a lack of resources. One of the project's strongest points is its intergenerational nature, where older pupils are prepared to support children in schools by proposing other stimulating activities linked to play, sport, and art.



The ongoing evaluation carried on by IADB has shown positive results. The preliminary results of the assessment carried out by Scholas and IADB proved that, during the intervention, students were reporting improvements in school commitment and the self-perception of control on their future. They also reported an increase in the time they spent on cultural activities.

Scholas continues its official cooperation with MEC within the same framework, aiming to increase the number of schools and areas involved all over the country. The kind of intergenerational activities Scholas has organized is contributing to the creation of a sense of community, positively impacting their choice to attend school. The children spend more time participating in different and more stimulating activities, such as sport and art. Moreover, secondary schools students are motivated to act as role models and play a positive role in their realities in terms of service, cooperation, and solidarity.



Sports activities during the extended day program

The youngsters chose various topics during the Citizenship Program. They are mostly related to education. The topics reflected the necessity for institutions and authorities to show more proximity to the youth's needs and to tackle corruption. The program is an excellent example of how education requires everyone's effort and that concerted actions can improve schools and communities.

4.4 Scholas in San Antonio de los Cobres, Argentina: Boosting Soft Skills

In the last decades, Argentina has made efforts to create an educational system that is as inclusive as possible, especially in secondary education. Youth participation in school increased by about 20% (Dussell, 2013), despite vast differences between rural and urban areas and between private and public schools. The progress in schools' enrollment has been the result of various attempts by the Argentinian government to reform the school system by introducing compulsory schooling up to the secondary level. The problem of student dropout in Argentina has always been a significant issue. The abandonment rate is about 50% (Narodowski, 2014) and public schools are most affected.

The increasing secondary school population has not been matched with social and economic reforms, creating huge disparities and fragmentation within schools. The target of the educational reforms is mostly economic and socially vulnerable students. They have been included in the education characterized by poor quality and resources, especially in rural areas (Dussell, 2013). In analyzing the different roots of this problem, Dussell discussed a crisis of the sense, caused by the amplification of the school population without accompanying it with opportunities linked to the job market and personal growth, thus failing, in a certain sense, the promise that the efforts will be paid off in the future. She denounced the rigid distinction between different schools, depending on their location (city-centers, peripheries, rural areas), which does not reflect the continuous changes in the demographic configurations of the cities anymore; the high rigidity of schools' curricula, which does not reflect the demands arising from outside, and the weak relationship between teachers and the institutes they work in since they are often displaced in several institutes over the same week.

Scholas has a long history of interventions in Argentina since it is where the organization took its first steps. This paper will describe a particular experience in San Antonio de los Cobres, in Salta province, in 2016. According to the data, the province of Salta shows school dropout rates of 54.4%. The city, which counts for less than 8.000 residents, is in a desertic region, is difficult to reach using transportation, and presents a depressed economy based on mining and wool weaving.

Under such conditions, it is easy to imagine the low motivation and opportunities for the few youngsters residing in the city. Yet, in this case, Scholas' intervention did not explicitly tackle dropout rates, even if it represents an issue. Instead, the reasons were lying more on the necessity to understand the roots of youngsters' lack of motivation, especially in the face of a high rate of youth suicides.

In 2016, Scholas arrived in the city through the first Citizenship Program, involving about 300 students from local schools. Scholas wanted to gather all the students in the same place and engage them in an immersive five-day experience, where they could feel free to express themselves and listen to each other. In other words, the aim was to create a space for them to cultivate their socio-

emotional skills while pushing them toward the inspection and the possible solutions to what they perceived as a pain and a problem within their communities. During those days, the trouble that emerged was indeed youth suicide. In the previous months, 29 friends, mates, and youngsters had killed themselves by jumping off the bridge. They called it the bridge of the solution.

During the experience, the students started to deconstruct the problem, share their opinions and feelings, and work together to find possible solutions. Finally, they decided to transform the bridge, which had become a symbol of death, into a symbol of life, through art. They gathered together and started to paint the bridge without any limit or directive. The results are today represented by 12 murals that celebrate life and encounter.

The students also agreed on the lack of community spaces where the city's residents could gather and grow together, by simply sharing their lives. It was not only a matter of youth spaces, since they felt they were living in an atomized place, where the intergenerational links were weak. The civic impulse triggered by Scholas continued its path and established the Scholas Room. They organized the first cinema of the city, which is opened to the whole community. Furthermore, in that space, they have created a meeting point where they set their services to the community through activities such as cleaning the river, visiting the hospice for older adults, and organizing games and activities with children.



Painting the bridge in San Antonio de Los Cobres

The experience has been followed by the Schools of Art, Play, and Thought in 2018, to keep them engaged in their community and provide the pedagogical approach to become educators and further support children in their growth in challenging contexts. The story demonstrated how the cultivation of values, such as empathy, solidarity, teamwork, and mutual listening, can make a difference in youth's attitude, motivation, and active civic engagement. After Scholas' intervention, the suicide rate fell from 29 (in the previous month before the intervention) to zero.

4.5 Scholas in Haiti: Creating Engaged Communities

The Haitian contexts were one of the most challenging ones that Scholas has ever worked on. The earthquake that destroyed the island in 2010 has kept the country in economic, social, and institutional turmoil. It has exacerbated the social conflicts that were already present in the country with violence and unrest. The reconstruction and recovery of the country were slow.

Education, which was already suffering from many problems, such as underfunding, backwardness, and high dropout rates from schools, was further hit and weakened by the island's unfortunate developments. The number of private institutes flourished without being counterbalanced by a similar offer from the public sector. Many children and youngsters have found themselves forced out of school because of their economic status, thus putting the social equilibrium and capacity even more at risk.

In such severe conditions, the priority was to address all the youngsters outside schools and involve them in an educational process and experience that could take care of them and make them protagonists of their country's reconstruction through their proposals and solutions. In this case, the Citizenship program proved to be the one that could benefit more from the necessities stemming from the context.

Scholas started its experience in the country in 2016, through an institutional agreement and technical cooperation with IADB, which allowed the organization's first experience in Port-au-Prince. In 2018, the other three Citizenship programs took place in Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haitien. Among the problems the participants chose during the 5-day lab, there were educational deficiencies and political issues. Among the proposed projects, there were:

- **Continuous training of teachers** to improve their competencies and give them technological material to keep updated while renovating their pedagogical approaches;
- **The dialogue improvement** and the relationship between youngsters and their families inside schools, churches, and socio-cultural organizations, through sessions of dialogue and awareness, to engage families in the education of their children;
- **The restoration of the Haitian public educational system**, through the promotion of a new role of teachers and innovative teaching models, more oriented toward the students' future and their necessities.

On the one hand, the necessity to address urgent and present problems related to education requires all the actors within society. On the other hand, Scholas left space to reflect on the future, letting the students think about what future challenges are concerning them more and how they can start to cope with them, even with limited resources. They expressed their worries about environmental degradation and the high concentration of trash in Haiti's streets. Scholas decided to support them in developing a new project, called Pibel Pubel (Beautiful Trash), by gathering students and artists. Under this project, some Haitian schools have been converted into waste recycling centers provided with trash bins where they collect plastic items, cans, and other garbage taken from the streets or produced inside the school.



Making art objects with trash, Haiti.

After that, the trash has two different uses. First, the cooperation with a local enterprise helps them transform the recycled material into bricks to use them in construction for solidarity purposes. Also, they cooperate with artists to create art objects out of the material. In just one project, the youngsters contribute to the future of the environment, providing a valuable and free service to the community and stimulating their artistic side by discovering the beauty inside what is usually thrown away and considered useless.

The evaluation carried out by Scholas after the experiences had confirmed the positive attitudes students had developed during the activities. Almost the totality of the surveyed participants reported having learned something during the project. Positive values were also registered with regards to self-perception of the ability to change communities (about 90% of surveyed participants); the possibility to establish links with students belonging to other schools and realities (about 90%); the capacity of detecting and investigating social issues (87%); the improvement of the ability to work in a team (100%); improvements in the capacity of self-expression and dialogue (98%), and increasing self-confidence and self-acceptance (96%).

These three stories show that big changes can be triggered and achieved through little steps. Scholas' added value lies in that interventions are not pre-packaged, even with similar pedagogical frameworks and activities. Scholas provides a space everyone can experience listening, dialogue, and free self-expression, which schools and educational institutions seem to be neglecting. At the same time, it creates synergies among youngsters, teachers, parents, institutions, and communities. The organization tries to listen to youngsters' pains and problems, and give them ownership of possible solutions and interventions.

5. Conclusion and Future Challenges

This paper has focused on the reasons behind the choice to leave schools from LAC countries. Yet, it is not meant to be exhaustive because such reasons are interconnected. Some of them need to be further investigated, addressed, and integrated into public policies.

Instead, the paper aims to show how to act on some of the risk factors by proposing a broader, bottom-up approach to education. The youngsters are at the center of the discussion. They are stimulated to build a community, think about possible solutions, and progressively involve other actors, including institutions. By doing so, they are pushed to develop all the soft skills indispensable for their wellness and future perspectives as members of society and future employees.

5.1 Breaking the Walls: The Importance of the Community

All the interventions showed in this work share some features beyond the programmatic framework. They happen in school, but they break walls and emphasize the importance of school within the society, proposing a continuous, interactive, and mutually influencing relationship. For example, it would be very limiting to insert programs in school to empower soft skills and let students wait until they finish school to be back to their real-world and give back what they have learned to the community in terms of services, job, and competencies. This path starts in the very present because it requires time, commitment, innovation, and a mindset shift.

The year 2020 was meant to be the Global Compact on Education year, launched by Pope Francis and supported by Scholas. It represents a call to address a more complicated, atomized, and globalized world through education. The education, however, should be wholly re-thought while placing the human being at the center. It is considered a lifelong process that “integrates and respects all the aspects of the person, “uniting studies and everyday life, teachers, students, and their families, and civil society in its intellectual, scientific, artistic, athletic, political, business, and charitable dimensions.” It is an alliance “between the earth’s inhabitants and our ‘common home’, which we are bound to care for and respect. An alliance that generates peace, justice, and hospitality among all peoples of the human family, as well as dialogue between religions.” (Pope Francis, 2019).

5.2 Involving LAC Youngsters, Teachers, and Families in Building the New Educational Pact

Educational pact should be globally built. It must reflect the current reality and growing interrelations. At the same time, this does not mean that the local communities' roles are neglected. Instead, local communities' involvement, with all their peculiar dynamics, problems, interactions, and traditions, is pivotal.

As we have shown, Scholas has been promoting all the actors' engagement in the educational process, shaking up the conviction that educating is confined to school and is limited to the role of teachers within the framework of – scarcely participated – public policies.

LAC countries are very different from each other, with several differences within the same countries. Exploring contexts is not enough, and the risk is to think about solutions, which will mismatch the real necessities and priorities.

For these reasons, Scholas tailors its programs on youngsters and communities. It mainly provides the framework and arena where the discussion about education takes place, while it supports the whole process to bring the instances to the institutions, at a local, national, and international levels. In the meantime, it helps youngsters to develop their socio-emotional capacities and to put them to work.

In a region characterized by significant differences and inequalities, Scholas firmly believes that this can genuinely engage the whole community toward a change. Therefore, it plans its interventions wherever needed, against different social backgrounds, from the small village of San Antonio de Los Cobres to Asunción and Haiti.



5.3 Future Challenges: Scalability and Commitment

Over the years, Scholas has committed to producing a mind shift in the discourse on education. It has not been easy. Creating a spillover effect has been challenging especially in rigid contexts. The involvement of other actors from society is not automatic and requires much effort and innovative approaches. Difficulties grow increasingly as the process starts to go up to the institutions. Many LAC countries have reformed their educational systems, but the process has often happened without considering the real needs arising from the contexts.

Many problems still exist, accounting for the students' choice to abandon school. Specifically, we found three challenges:

- First, dropout problems require more comprehensive public policies that should consider the peculiarities of contexts and proposals from communities.
- Second, public policies on education should focus on the development of socio-emotional skills within their curricula and share the ownership of educational processes with youngsters.
- Lastly, the scalability depends on the institutions' and governments' roles and their willingness to truly consider the demands arising from youngsters and communities.

Despite these challenges, Scholas' experiences showed how youngsters could be a fundamental resource for society, identify and feel their problems, and think about constructive solutions, when adequately valued. Additionally, Scholas' work in many countries has required cooperation at the institutional level. In other words, they have shown the governments' willingness to effectively introduce innovative pedagogical approaches in their educational systems to address the challenges they are facing. All this has allowed Scholas to scale up, involve, and integrate many more youngsters, impacting different communities. The next step is to continue these efforts to help youngsters empower their voices and be true protagonists of their educational path. A real change in public policies is also needed, which would be participated and fully representative. It is fundamental to break the schools' walls by building bridges to connect youngsters with communities and institutions, and by recognizing their value and their empowerment as active citizens.



Acknowledgments

The work that Scholas carries on revolutionizing education worldwide strongly depends on the cooperation with organizations, funding bodies, and institutions, who believe and trust the organization's values, mission, and vision.

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This work could not exist nor be narrated without the hard work and the passion of all the people belonging to Scholas, who are pursuing the shared dream of promoting an education that generates sense, starting from the importance of listening. Scholas is a living example of how people from different parts of the world, with different cultures and backgrounds, can break barriers and work together to create a new world and a new culture.

Finally, and most importantly, this work has been written while thinking about the beautiful and moving stories Scholas has seen through youngsters, families, and all the people who embraced Scholas' dream. The organization's ordinary choices depend on them, as they are the hearth of the Educational Pact. This means living a continuous pathos, fulfilling our work with emotions. We invite you to be moved with us by starting with a visit to our YouTube channel, since images and voices can often tell more than simple words.

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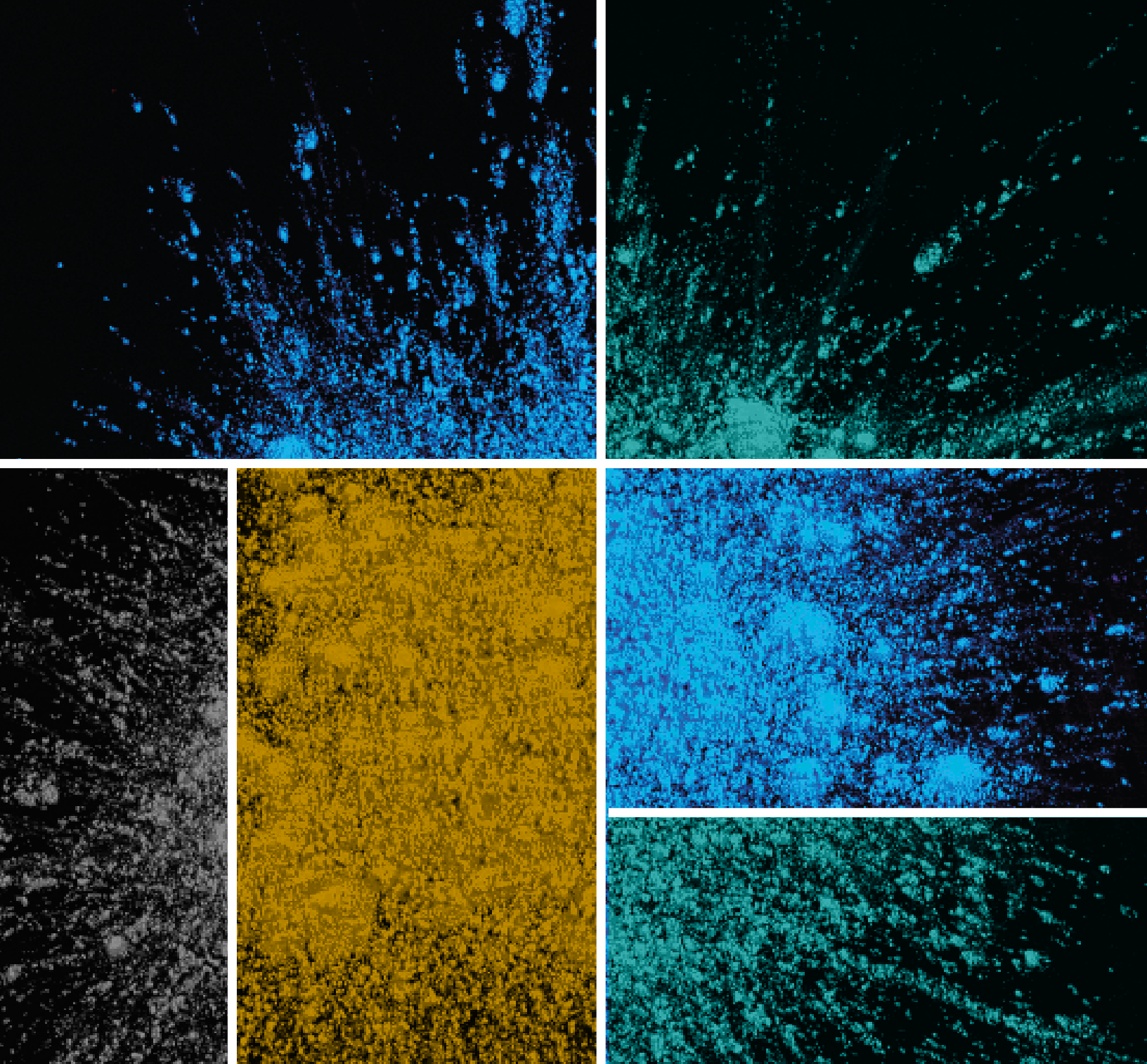
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