Middle classes and school inclusion: Exploring the zone of mediation of desegregation within schools

Clases medias e inclusión escolar: Explorando la zona de mediación de la desegregación en las escuelas

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Background

In the context of one of the most privatized and segregated education systems in the world, in 2015 the School Inclusion Law (LIE) was enacted in Chile. In order to regulate the educational market and reduce the high level of segregation between schools, the LIE established the end of for-profit and co-payment fees in publicly funded schools, as well as the elimination of selective admission practices in public and private-subsidized schools through the implementation of a new centralized school admission system (NSAS).

This reform has been considered a desegregation law aimed at promoting social mixture within schools, by progressively eliminating two important schools' entry barriers -selection and co-payment- that had been identified as part of the causes of educational stratification.

International experiences have highlighted the multiple difficulties that school desegregation policies face, including the resistance of middle and upper-middle class parents to their implementation. Up to date, although families' reactions to the LIE have been anticipated as a major challenge, available studies that have provided evidence in this area have focused on the legislative debate of the reform or parental choice under the NSAS -which contrast with a lack of research about the implementation of the reform in 'middle-class' schools.

Aims

This paper explores the implementation of the LIE in schools traditionally composed by middle-class families. Using the framework of the zone of mediation of desegregation policies, which highlights the normative and political forces that may favor or hinder their implementation, and which must be confronted by schools in order to strengthen the transition to school inclusion, the article provides empirical evidence of the receptivity of parents to the reform, their responses to the changes in the schools' social composition, and the role of schools in this process.

Method & procedures

The research is based on a qualitative case study developed in 2018 in three schools of the city of Punta Arenas, where the NSAS -a key component of the LIE- was implemented in 2016 before being extended nationwide.

The selection of schools was intentionally developed based on the following criteria: i) schools receiving public funding that provide at least pre-k and primary education; ii) that prior to the LIE were composed mainly by middle-class families, and had selective admission processes; iii) with high demand according to the NSAS databases, and iv) in which there was quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of changes in the student composition since the enactment of the reform and the beginning of the NSAS.

In each school, along with the analysis of secondary information, individual and group interviews were carried out with parents, principals and teachers. After collecting the data, a thematic analysis was conducted.

Results & discussion

Three main findings arose from the analysis. Firstly, in the three schools, the LIE was received with multiple apprehensions from families, revealing the presence of a zone of mediation scarcely receptive to the reform. These apprehensions are

rooted in a set of normative and political forces present in schools' communities, which result in an interpretation of the LIE as a powerful threat for the middle class, their schools and the private-subsidized sector.

Secondly, in all three cases, away from a collective or organized resistance to the reform, parents are responding to the greater social diversity identified in schools after the enactment of the LIE with subtle practices, such as the drawing of symbolic distinctions between 'new' and 'old' students and families, and an incipient push to maintain explicit social divisions between the two groups in separated classes, which are tensioning schools' communities.

Finally, faced with the consequences -anticipated or visualized- that the LIE has had on the student composition, schools have introduced a series of technical changes (e.g., hiring specialists, generating networks for referring problematic cases, curricular reinforcement practices), which contrast with an insufficient attention to the normative and political dimension of change, and a limited management of the diverse tensions provoked by the reform in the schools' communities.

Conclusion

The main conclusions of the study warn about the powerful obstacles that the LIE is facing in middle-class schools and the complexities of transitioning toward school inclusion. In this area, the article emphasizes that the move from desegregation to inclusion is not automatic and that change in the zone of mediation of desegregation takes time and effort, requiring a continuous and deliberate work, without which there is a risk of transferring external segregation into the schools' inside.

Keywords: Chile, middle-classes, school desegregation, social inclusion, zone of mediation

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