

## Inclusion, equality and assimilationism in schools with socioeconomic diversity

### Inclusión, igualdad y asimilacionismo en escuelas con diversidad socioeconómica

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#### Background

Chile is a key case to observe both exceptional socioeconomic segregation and an unusual process of recent educational reforms (i.e., 'Inclusion Law') attempting to promote inclusion and diversity of school populations. Research on social diversity in schools (school mix) shows that these are crucial spaces to promote cultural exchange, inclusive attitudes towards social differences, and democratic citizenship. However, internal segregation and reinforcement of prejudices might also occur, particularly when there is no school mixing (i.e., interactions between students from different backgrounds). Empirical evidence generally corroborates the students' tendency to establish homophilic relationships even in socially diverse environments, that is, to engage with people from a similar social background to theirs. Furthermore, the processes of social integration in educational spaces (school mixing) are usually subject to the acculturation of those who occupy marginalized identity categories (for example, people of low SES and ethnic minorities) under dynamics dominated by those who occupy positions of power in society (for example, people of high SES and so-called "white"). Thus, mixing processes, democratic learning and citizenship must not be seen as a taken-for-granted result of inclusion and school mix.

#### Aims

To explore members of staff's views on socioeconomic differences and school mix to understand what elements of the institutional habitus of socioeconomically diverse schools may be contributing to democratic coexistence.

#### Method & procedures

A qualitative multiple case study was conducted in two Chilean schools with above-average levels of socioeconomic diversity prior to the implementation of the Inclusion Law, to understand existing processes of school mix/mixing and the potentialities of the Law. To identify those schools with exceptional socioeconomic heterogeneity levels, we conducted statistical analyses of the information collected by the SIMCE questionnaire to parents to create an Index of Socioeconomic Diversity (ISD). The schools that make up the final sample are Rodríguez and Inti schools. Both are private subsidized schools with a majority of socioeconomically advantaged students, with a minority with a low socioeconomic profile who have been given internal scholarships. In each school, we conducted observations, informal conversations, and in-depth semi-structured interviews (40) with parents and members of the staff. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The material was systematized using the NVivo v12 software and then analysed using a thematic analysis strategy which was first case-by-case and followed by a comparative analysis of the cases.

#### Results & discussion

The article gives an account of two critical axes in the institutional habitus or ways the schools under study approach the difference and socioeconomic mix among their students. On the one hand, the school actors interviewed value the existing socioeconomic diversity insofar as it is perceived as something that accounts for the inclusive nature of the establishments and that can promote the development of egalitarian dispositions in the students: incorporated ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are based on an ethical commitment to equality among human beings. In other words, it is expected that the encounter between students of different social origins promotes the

development of attitudes and values to relate to others as equals. This aspect of the school institutional habitus may contribute to democratic coexistence, as it is observed that those who work in schools are interested in encouraging the daily practice of dialogue in difference. On the other hand, the analysis shows an institutional concern in both schools to homogenize socioeconomic differences on a day-to-day basis and to manage them so that they are not noticed in the daily interactions of the schools. This is to constitute the school space where social inequalities are not relevant and where everyone is appreciated as equally valuable individuals, regardless of their social conditions of origin. However, in dialogue with the literature in the area, the article argues that the value attributed to equality seems to be sustained by the assimilation of the socioeconomically disadvantaged students, who are expected to incorporate (that is, adopt into their bodies) the cultural capital of their more socioeconomically advantaged peers (for example, their ways of expressing themselves and eating habits). Thus, school mix appears as a strategy to include these students in the ways of being of their more socioeconomically advantaged peers. This aspect of the schools' institutional habitus may hinder democratic coexistence since, despite the schools' interest in promoting the daily practice of dialogue in difference, symmetric recognition between students from different social backgrounds is not observed.

### Conclusion

At both schools, the institutional habitus seems to be inclusive as well as assimilationist. We argue that assimilationist aspect of this institutional habitus is problematic. The findings suggest that promoting social diversity in schools is a key step to advance towards democratic coexistence. However, it is crucial to reflect and conduct more research on how to implement inclusive educational dynamics that do not fall into school assimilationism that makes the social and cultural identities of boys and girls invisible. The paper finishes presenting some proposals on how to address this challenge.

**Keywords:** habitus, inclusion, school segregation, social differences, student diversity

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