



Admission to early childhood education in elite Chilean schools: An exploratory qualitative study

Admisión a la educación parvularia en escuelas chilenas de élite: Un estudio cualitativo exploratorio

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Background

The Chilean educational system is characterized by high socioeconomic segregation of its educational offer. In a substantial proportion, upper-class families enroll their children in private schools that do not receive public funding. They are financed almost exclusively by the high monthly fees and annual tuition families pay. These schools represent around 9% of the system's total enrolment. The main gateway to private schools, and more especially, to those that can be considered elite, is in early childhood education, where these schools offer the largest number of places, since in the later levels, the places are set, available only from those isolated cases that for one reason or another may have cancelled their registrations. Following its meritocratic meaning, the elite school is defined as one in which students perform well academically. At the same time, its social definition refers to the resources students bring to school. From a sociological perspective, elite education is characterized by its strong concentration of inherited resources. Along the same lines, its functional definition points to its ability to pave the path of elite trajectory, opening the doors to its students in the labour world in particular and social life in general. Thus, purchasing and selling educational opportunities is a key factor, where the consumption of an elite education is understood as part of a cultural production process. Furthermore, elite schools favor social homogeneity and class reproduction.

Aims

Through this exploratory study, we sought to describe and analyze the perspectives of mothers and fathers about their lived experiences during the admission processes applied by elite private schools to their children when they applied to early childhood education.

Method & procedures

A qualitative methodology from a phenomenological approach was carried out, seeking to understand the perspectives and shared experiences of a group of mothers and fathers. The selection of the participants was intentional. Nine people were chosen based on the criteria of having applied their son or daughter to an elite private school, the result of which was not always favorable, or the process was characterized by being somewhat difficult from their point of view. The participants were accessed through a snowball strategy. The fieldwork was carried out between April and June 2022. The data collection technique consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted online through the Zoom platform.

Results & discussion

Findings show that, in their admission processes for preschool-age children, elite schools evaluate skills that are inadequate for the expected cognitive development of a boy or girl. Given that the admission processes begin well before the effective entry of children to school (approximately one year ahead), there is a gap between what is evaluated and what is reasonable to expect and observe in a child. These results provide evidence of a schoolification trend that begins before children enter preschool education, complementing the national evidence reported on this topic. According to what has been reported, elite schools not only evaluate children but also, preferably, families. This is implicit in the admissions processes since the elite schools do not formally indicate it; however, it is known among the families participating in these processes. As the literature points out, elite schools have a large degree of autonomy concerning their admissions decisions. This research confirms that: elite schools are autonomous in this regard. Another noteworthy aspect is that families' contact networks are essential to succeed in being admitted to an elite school. Being linked with other families that are part of the educational community and with influential people in that community (priests, politicians or prominent people in some field relevant to the school) are strategic advantages that allow the barriers to entry to these schools to be raised, thus fulfilling the function of social reproduction previously reported in the literature. These results confirm the centrality of these criteria in the admission processes, which we consider to increase the socioeconomic segregation in the Chilean school system.

Conclusion

The stories of fathers and mothers presented in this paper contribute to the literature on elite education and its definitions, mainly referring to its role in the social reproduction of class and in the search for social homogeneity. Our study confirms what has been shown in the Chilean evidence on the selection processes of elite schools in Chile. It also adds an element not previously reported in the literature: it places the attention on the evaluation experiences of boys and girls from the perspective of their parents. In this way, our research sheds light on a phenomenon that jeopardizes the right to education of children by discriminating against them and their parents based on class and religious characteristics, among others.

Keywords: early childhood education, elite schools, school admission, schoolification of early childhood education

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