

Identity and resistance: Reactions of a Chilean elite school in front of a context of interpellation

Identidad y resistencia: Reacciones de un colegio de elite chileno frente a un contexto de interpelación

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Background

The “elite schools” in Chile, that is, highly selective establishments chosen by the elites and that allow the intergenerational reproduction of the elites, have been questioned from citizens and social movements in the last decade. These questions have alluded precisely to the role that these schools play in the reproduction of inequality and segregation within Chilean education. These interpellations range from public questioning by social movements such as politicians or opinion leaders, as well as from certain laws that have been approved (Inclusion Law (No. 20.845)), or that are in process as the “Machuca” law.

Aims

Face to the Chilean context of interpellations and questions regarding the legitimacy of elite schools, the article investigates how these institutions understand and explain this context, as well as the strategies they deploy -and their justifications- in order to maintain their positions of privilege and power they hold.

Method & procedures

This is an ethnographic investigation in an elite Chilean school carried out in 2019. This school has an educational project of an international nature, since it was founded by British immigrants during the 20th century. The selection of this case was made from the crossing of the list of Chilean elite schools identified by UNDP (2017) and the typology of educational projects elaborated by Thumala (2007), who identifies three types of educational projects (traditional Catholic, neo-Catholics founded during the military dictatorship, and international schools or founded by immigrant communities). Observations were made for seven months in various educational spaces of the school. In addition, 23 interviews were conducted and official documents were analyzed.

Results & discussion

The establishment has an identity that responds to four categories: (i) being a British international school; (ii) a college of academic excellence; (iii) not to be an elite school, but for “effort” students and families (rhetoric of merit); and lastly, (iv) to be a “family” school, that is, a community school with ties that transcend generations. These elements are supported by institutional and daily practices, as well as discourses. All this is shaping the identity of the establishment, as well as the way in which this institution understands the context and responds to criticism from society. The field work and analysis of the data produced show that, as a result of its identity, the school does not perceive much of the questions coming from social movements. Indeed, the school perceives itself as an actor that contributes to the quality of education and that the problem is in public education. In this way, in the face of questions from the public, the school seeks to resist the questions by reinforcing its social closure.

Conclusion

Unlike what happens in some Chilean elite schools, which deploy adaptive strategies in order to legitimize themselves before society, in the case presented in the article, the actions are aimed at consolidating its social closure and a greater homology between its educational project and the elites most reluctant to the changes that citizens are

demanding. Although in recent years' studies have been carried out regarding the adaptations of elite schools, few delve into how they understand these contexts and the justifications for the type of reaction carried out. In this sense, this article also provides clues regarding the justifications and explanations that the Chilean establishment makes and how they correspond to its identity. At the same time, the proposed analysis of the reaction developed by this elite school allows a better understanding of the agency developed by an elite establishment in the school field (how does it work? Why? Does this agency have limits?) -following the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, a dimension little investigated in studies on educational fields. The analysis shows that the educational and symbolic capital of the school, as well as its identity and imbrication with families, allows it to adopt measures aimed at greater social closure. In that sense, their agency in the field enjoys strong autonomy. Finally, the article leaves open new research questions from this analytical perspective, particularly regarding the spaces of resistance or struggle by certain actors; Are there spaces of resistance within? Which actors lead them and what capacity for internal agency do they have? On the other hand, the question remains at the field level; there is some accumulated knowledge regarding elite educational projects of a progressive type; Do they challenge only the elites or the other establishments as well? What type of individual do they seek to form? How do they adapt to the questions of society?

Keywords: Chilean elites, educational field, elite school, inclusive education system

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