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How local market pressures shape leadership practices: evidence from Chile

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ABSTRACT

Chile is well known worldwide for its extensive use of market-driven mechanisms in education. Using a case study strategy in three schools, this paper shows that 'universal' voucher system and mixed provision (co-existence of subsidised private and state-funded schools) policies are reshaping school management practices. The paper draws evidence from ethnographic data in disadvantaged Chilean public schools and uses Bourdieu's notion of field as an analytical tool in order to conceptualise the schools' practices within their local markets as a symbolic and strategic 'game' of competition. One of the main findings is that, in response to market pressures and their specific positions within local markets, school leaders built a market-competitive agenda, preparing detailed strategies and undertaking decision-making practices accordingly. These practices were distinctive in relation to different school market positions, impacting the schools' priorities, value disputes, and management goals.

1. Introduction

This article provides empirical findings from Chile in order to contribute to the international understanding of the reshaping of school leadership in increasingly market-driven educational systems. The Chilean case illustrates the struggles that public schools have under privatisation policies introduced since 1981 to date. In particular, this article reports the experience of a group of schools dealing with market forces at local level during 2007–2008. Since then and up until 2015, these schools have experienced a decline in terms of enrolment, social mix composition, and learning outcomes. The aim of this article is to provide an in-depth illustration of how structural market-driven policies have an impact at local level on schools' management practices and their relative competitive positions. Drawing on in-depth qualitative data, the article describes the association between the local market position of schools with the structure of particular school agendas, internal micro-political disputes, and the emergence of ethical dilemmas. In order to provide an historical framework for the structural forces shaping the schools' practices, a brief historical contextualisation will be offered in this introductory section.

The Augusto Pinochet dictatorship introduced radical privatisation reforms under a violent authoritarian regime where political parties, congress, and unions were forbidden.

Many analysts have renamed the dictatorship as a 'civil-military' regime (e.g. Hunneus and Martín 2000) by empirically illustrating the broad and decisive participation of civilians in the government headed by the military junta. The civilian participants designed and implemented both the economic transformation and the constitutional political reform that produced the backbone of the regime. The economic discipline in the early 1980s also helped reshape the organisation of the school system as well as pensions, health, and electricity provision.

The educational design consisted of building a market by introducing a set of public policy instruments (e.g. vouchers) intended to stimulate the incorporation, competence, and operation of private administrators and reduce the influence of the state. Once democracy resumed in 1990, the 'technocratic' elite of the governing centre-left Concertación coalition gave continuity to the market-based reforms initiated 10 years earlier, introducing further initiatives such as 'co-payments'. This produced schools (under private and public administration) that had only state funding via vouchers, but also subsidised schools (only private) that charged families an additional and deregulated monthly fee. Notwithstanding, it is important to underscore that, until 2008, the universal voucher system was a flat amount of money per child, with no consideration of the socioeconomic background of students. In 2008, the Preferential Voucher system was implemented for the poorest children, which, in practical terms, increased the regular voucher by approximately 30% (Mizala and Torche 2013). This extra funding was designed to support the greater educational and social needs of students living in socioeconomic deprivation. Even so, a larger proportion of school funding continued to be covered by the regular, competitive, and enrolment-dependent universal voucher, which subsequently continued to define the structure of local education markets.

In addition, competition between subsidised private and municipal-public schools redefined the nature of head teachers' work in complex ways. The intensification of competitive environments can be noted by the fact that, in Chile, the proportion of public schools declined from more than 80% of the total schools in 1981 to 36% in 2014. In turn, the proportion of subsidised private schools increased from around 40% in 2005 to 58% in 2014. In a system where school funding is contingent on market success, the downward trend has mainly affected public-municipal schools, to the extent of some being closed down. This process is the result of a set of market-driven polices introduced in the early 1980s and 1990s that promoted competition between schools, such as the voucher system, open school choice for parents, co-payment, profit making, a decentralised and unregulated pupil admission system, and a testing regime with ranking of public schools. While the impact of this market-based regime on school segregation and achievement gaps has been reported (Carnoy and McEwan 2000, Schneider et al. 2006, Contreras et al. 2011, Carrasco and San Martin 2012, Mizala and Torche 2012, Valenzuela et al. 2014, Seppänen et al. 2015), this article shows how such competitive environments impact the management practices of municipal-public schools. In particular, in recent decades Chilean head teachers have led public schools according to market forces and, at the same time, they have been dealing with what Thrupp (2005) and Thrupp and Wilmott (2003) described as a managerial leadership policy agenda. The managerial influence on school administration consists of transferring business-like conceptualisations, often without critical adaptation, such as referring to students as customers, or replacing learning achievements with profit. Internationally, this kind of policy agenda

has been defined in the United States as a Second Way of global educational reforms based on markets, standardisation, and accountability (Ravitch 2010, Suspitsyna 2010, Hargreaves and Shirley 2012). This way is supported by decontextualised conceptualisations of leadership and school reform.

This article is empirical in nature, but is framed by accumulated critical scholarship that has called into question generic notions of leadership and management. In Chile, policy-makers and a circle of non-scholarship 'policy science' (Avis 2006) have disseminated a context-free leadership perspective (Weinstein and Muñoz 2012). This contributes to what, in the UK more than a decade ago, were called 'blaming' and 'shaming' strategies for school improvement (Wrigley 2006, Ball 2008, 2012). Moreover, the view of leadership as an abstract, universal, school effectiveness factor has been empirically and theoretically challenged, as some research has shown it is instead a context-dependent locally nego-tiated school practice that cannot be reduced to a transferable, apolitical, and psychological set of skills (Reay 1998, Thrupp 1998, Gunter 2001, Gewirtz 2002, Gunter and Ribbins 2003, Bottery 2007, Thomson 2009, Lupton and Thrupp 2013). However, there still needs to be progress in one aspect regarding the accumulated understanding of the con-textual nature of leadership practices: to consider how market-based environments shape school leaders' practices. In addition, this advance will contribute to the understanding of multiple impacts of global patterns of market-based reforms that are being implemented across the world (Forsey *et al.* 2008, Miron *et al.* 2012). Even considering the fact that Chile has one of the most deregulated education markets in the world, the connection between school competition and school management has not been explored. Specifically, this paper offers an understanding of the challenges that local markets pose for disadvan-taged schools in a highly competitive school system such as Chile.

In order to inform our empirical findings, on the one hand, the second section explains the importance of school contexts in understanding both school processes and school out-comes, while on the other hand, a brief review is presented of the market-based reforms in Chile in order to understand the broader policy context in which head teachers are working. Section 3 provides a description of the ethnographical strategies used by the study. Section 4, the empirical core of this article, offers a detailed description of three case study schools. Finally, Section 5 contains some final remarks.

2. A contextualised approach to study the influence of local markets on school leadership

Leadership in educational research has often established a prescriptive approach to describe effective head teacher practices. This approach responds to the problematic con-ceptual architecture employed by the general research on school effectiveness, of which leadership research is a part (Teddlie *et al.* 2000). Use of school studies based on the identi-fication of single cases that appear to be successful in areas of great poverty might lead to the fallacy of concluding that if one school can make achievements in this way, all similar schools can do likewise. This was the basis for comparing and 'blaming' schools that were unable to succeed despite difficult circumstances.

Nevertheless, the progress of research evidence from broader approaches questions the notion of 'effectiveness' in favour of a more socially contextualised approach. It has long been criticised that both policy-makers and researchers have produced generic notions of

'good practices' based on outstanding schools where good leadership, management, and teaching appear to have overcome wider social, cultural, and economic inequalities (Slee and Weiner 1998, Thrupp 1998, Wrigley 2006). In contrast, some argue that social class issues and social mix seem to have a much deeper impact on schooling that has so far has been recognised (Thrupp et al. 2002, Lupton 2005, 2006, Thrupp and Lupton 2006).

The contextual nature of leadership was previously noted by Thrupp (1998), who offered descriptions of the impact of school mix composition on school processes. Turbulent, hard-to-teach students transform schools into unpredictable organisations shaping the limits and possibilities of what head teachers can or cannot do. By studying similarly disadvantaged, but contextually different schools, Lupton (2005) suggests that less advantaged contexts are normally approached using only classic school culture variables, while others like social mix, ethnic composition, and class segregation issues have not been considered at school and classroom level. However, the charge that school effectiveness research has not considered contextual issues when analysing the influence of certain school factors on school practices and performance is contestable and firmly challenged (Reynolds and Teddlie 2001, Teddlie and Reynolds 2001, Stringfield 2002). Meanwhile, some have sustained (Gewirtz 2002, Macbeath et al. 2007, Thrupp and Lupton 2011) that 'best practice' notions are unreliable as a quality standard, because it is more difficult to achieve in disadvantaged areas and even the meaning and relevance of the set of school goals differ.

By contrast, decontextualised conceptualisations of successful school leadership both in effective schools (Leithwood et al. 2006, 2008) and in challenging circumstances (Harris 2002, Harris and Chapman 2002) do not argue about how to deal with counter-evidence about the complexity and the restraints of leading with insufficient resources, the lack of flexibility, market pressures, and difficulties to attract and retain staff (Thomson 2009). Such developments have shaped educational leadership theory, a body of knowledge that has been developed during the last 35 years regarding what should be done in a school in order to achieve educational objectives. As a body of knowledge it has been used to base educational policies on school management. The knowledge is organised in empirically tested dimensions that are used as a performance guidelines. The findings are then recommended and disseminated without considering the organisation and wider contextual circumstances in which the description was found. Accordingly, it is also used to form educational leaders through training, postgraduate programmes, self-learning sources like books, and, most of all, frameworks of performance standards and intervention policy for school improvement. Educational leadership has thus been described as a 'form of pseudo science' where policy-makers 'deny political dialogue and marginalise challenging knowledge' (Gunter 2010, p. 519). She makes it clear that educational leadership knowledge is not developed as a critically examined theory that enables agents, but as an interested network of professors, private consultants, policy-makers, and entrepreneurs who 'determine what is known and what is worth knowing about leadership' (Gunter 2010, p. 519).

The Chilean Ministry of Education has established a 'Good Leadership Framework' (MINEDUC 2005) for head teachers and mid-level positions and it is not an exception in the world (Murphy 2003, CCSSO 2008). After its issue in 2010, more than 800 head teachers or other school managers started training each year under a nationwide policy

of leadership development at 17 centres (Arancibia 2011). Considering a total of more than 4000 trainees during the 5 years of operation, a significant amount of the 11,000 schools in Chile have already been influenced.

Among others, this policy design obeys a performative logic, where the individual is taught and encouraged to follow a given set of principles and practices in order to 'be successful', irrespective of contextual issues like the local market environment, which remains unproblematic and unseen. Subsequently, the call for a contextualised research agenda in general and school leadership in particular goes hand in hand with a deeper understanding of the relationships between leadership and the schools' contexts in terms of poverty, accountability, and market-based policy regimes (Thrupp *et al.* 2007).

In order to understand head teachers' decision-making in local markets, it is important to offer a short overview of the Chilean market-based education system. From 1981 to date, the underlying economic theory has been accepted that markets can spontaneously organise complex economic and social activities, and education would be no exception. This organisation seems to result in positional disputes, reputation-building, and strategic struggles in a particular policy framework for the actions of school leaders. The basic assumption is that competition between schools is a key stimulus to generate innovation, to respond to parents' wishes, and improve teaching. The reduced state regulation organising the funding, provision, and distribution of education follows the assumption that democratic control of education is inefficient and does not promote quality, diversity, or innovation. Under this perspective, as schools seem to need or benefit from pressure to adapt and improve education, funding should not be secured. The Chilean voucher system allocates funding to schools depending on the number of students who enrol and attend them. In a competing public–private provision system, open and free parental choice is crucial in defining both the school enrolment and, subsequently, the amount of school funding. A free school choice system allocates students by parental choice, supposedly in an effort to select the best-performing schools. This key element forces the schools to become the preference of parents, through competition, with some of them using the prerogatives of an unregulated admissions system to achieve that. In short, competition between schools, parental choice, and voucher mechanism funding are typical aspects of the Chilean market-driven school system (Kosunen and Carrasco 2016, Seppänen *et al.* 2015).

On the whole, this paper follows the hypothesis that markets are not neutral spaces. Head teachers working in the market face uncertainty, moral dilemmas, and marked vicissitudes in funding, particularly those dealing with disadvantaged schools. While researchers have studied the impact of the modalities of the market in education in relation to positional advantage, particularly regarding the middle classes (Ball 2003, Power *et al.* 2003, Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007, Reay *et al.* 2008, Reay *et al.* 2011) and in relation to the subjectivity of working class groups in market forces (Reay and Ball 1997, Reay 2007), research concerning the specific impact of markets on head teachers is still required.

Analytically, echoing Bourdieu's (1990, 1992) work, we use the notion of *playing the game* within a specific field to shed light on head teachers' practices when manoeuvring their schools in local market-driven educational spaces. The education marketplace at local level is conceptualised as a specific *field*; a hierarchical social space where agents move strategically and creatively both to fight for specific resources at stake and to improve their position within that space. When playing the game, social agents know

what resources are at stake within a field, what kinds of capital need to be mobilised, and what the implicit rules governing the game are. Bourdieu (1990, 1992) has coined this underlying understanding of the game as the practical knowledge that agents have about the relative social position they occupy within the social structure (a field). As a result, they come to an understanding of the possibilities and limits of such locations, which provides them with some control over social life. As an analogy, schools develop concrete and deliberate strategies to perform, to improve, or to gain ground through their practices. This understanding is relational as schools evaluate the position they occupy, what is at stake, what resources they have, and the role they play in the local market with respect to other nearby schools. With this understanding of the game, they organise and assess their resources and set reasonable goals in order to deploy specific strategies.

Thus, this article aims to understand the game and the practical knowledge of head teachers under the influence of the local market positions that determine their leadership practices. This is well illustrated by Bourdieu's (1990, 1992) concept of 'the causality of the probable' explaining that agents' possibilities for maneuver are constrained by the objective conditions of the field (i.e. the local market). Therefore, the working hypothesis throughout the paper is that local dynamics are well understood by schools; agents know where they are located in the social space and this spatial orientation affects the school agenda, value disputes, and management decisions.

3. The study

The original research was undertaken in five municipal schools in Chile with different levels of disadvantage. The fieldwork produced records of 59 staff meetings, 41 classroom lessons, and 110 semi-structured interviews.

Due to space limitations and theoretical consistency, this paper reports findings from three case study schools located in two regions of Chile (Valparaiso and Santiago). The research strategy was based on an ethnographic approach over a seven-month period. The first author of the paper was immersed in all daily school activities from before the school day started at 8 am, remaining until the school closed. Since the purpose was to observe the connection between school contexts and school practices regarding the way in which a policy works on such relationships, the data collection needed to be carried out over time so that issues could emerge. The fieldwork was organised accordingly into two consecutive full-day appointments so each school was visited every two weeks over seven months during 2007 and 2008. Indeed, the ongoing concerns never emerged from the first interviews or during the first month of fieldwork. The extensive qualitative fieldwork combined several interviews (with teachers, students, parents, head teachers, and administrators), analysis of school documents, observations of staff meetings (on a weekly basis), and field observations (classrooms, parents' meetings, break times, teachers' lunch times, management team meetings, and so on). Senior team members (head teachers and senior teachers) and teachers were interviewed repeatedly in order to understand the school dynamics and to construct questions afterwards. The strategy consisted of organised interview protocols following the school's emerging issues derived from interviews and meeting observations. Therefore, the data analysis was a continuous and iterative

process. A huge amount of data was collected by recording interviews (all transcribed verbatim), field notes, photographs, and copies of documents.

The schools studied were selected among the national primary school database provided by the National Department of Primary Education of the Ministry of Education of Chile.[1] The three case study schools are Neruda, Redoles, and Parra. Table 1 shows some relevant data about the size of enrolment, level of social disadvantage as measured by the proportion of priority students, and learning outcomes on national standardised tests (Language and Mathematics), comparing their evolution between 2007 and 2014.[2]

Neruda is considered to be a poorer, smaller school (300 students) in a satellite-type municipality of Santiago. Its enrolment rates have decreased in recent years, reducing the funds available. Redoles is a larger school (904 students) with fewer social problems in a less poor municipality near Valparaiso, 110 km from Santiago. Redoles' enrolment has grown in recent years. Parra is also a comparable larger school (992 students) in a deprived peripheral municipality of Santiago. Its enrolment rates have been growing, but its intake was from lower socioeconomic backgrounds every year (BCN 2012). However, looking at the period from 2008 to 2015, it is clear that all schools exhibited a dramatic decline in all school indicators, which seems to illustrate the decline in their relative competitive position in their local educational markets as a consequence of the rise of subsidised private schools.[3]

At the time of the fieldwork, the extra Preferential Voucher funding mentioned earlier was introduced in the case study schools, which helped them to relieve the critical and extreme situation of underfunding in which they were immersed, so it is important to note that the growth in extra funding was not large enough to increase the reputation of schools and, as a result, to increase their enrolment. Recent research assessing the impact of the Preferential Voucher has reported increased academic and socioeconomic school segregation, paradoxically resulting from the effects of this policy (Valenzuela *et al.* 2013). Accordingly, such additional funding, which is still insufficient to deal with the range of problems faced in teaching students living in severe deprivation, has not been able to improve the market position of public schools, which could explain the decline of the case study schools in terms of enrolment, socioeconomic composition, and school outcomes over the 2007–2008/2014–2015 period.

4. Local schools' positions and strategies in competitive environments

The cases analysed show how the schools apparently served similarly disadvantaged communities, but reacted with different sensitivity to the local market dynamic in which they were located. Specifically, the Neruda school, the first case, was trying to attract more

Table 1. Evolution of characteristics of case study schools 2007–2008/2014–2015.

| | | | | | School outcomes on standardised national tests (SIMCE 8° grade) | | | |
| | Enrolment | | % priority students | | Language | | Mathematics | |
School	2008	2015	2008	2015	2007	2014	2007	2014
Neruda	300	195	70.3	79.5	203	178	264	235
Redoles	904	463	42.1	63.5	221	202	227	231
Parra	992	835	49.5	71.3	245	222	264	235

Source: Prepared by the authors. SIMCE: www.simce.cl.

pupils under difficult circumstances. The second case, the Redoles school, had a privileged position where selective admission policy strategies were accepted and desired. The third and last case, the Parra school, was facing internal tension over which strategy should be followed, as if it were between the positions of the other two schools. Considering the contextual similarities between the schools, the differences are understood as strategic distinctions and different positions, and the according practical knowledge, between the three schools.

The problems of the Neruda school, were its poor local reputation, that it was attended by pupils expelled from other nearby municipal schools, and the low levels of enrolment characteristic of 'basket' schools. The practical reaction was an unfruitful marketing strategy to rebuild the school's corporate image by changing the school name and undertaking publicity. In contrast, Redoles had a better reputation in its local community, related to the prestige of its relatively mixed social composition, and privileged by the municipality among other public schools to the point of open segregation. The majority of teachers and parents were aware of the privileged position supported by the selection policy without the need to question the ethical and pedagogical consequences. In turn, Parra was attempting to return to a past in which the school served a middle-class population. This school was internally deciding what position it should strive for in the local market, noticeably being a case 'between' the other two cases described.

Neruda school: reputation of serving extremely disadvantaged pupils. Attract pupils through doubtful marketing

Neruda school had been suffering a marked decrease in enrolment compared to other schools with similar socioeconomic characteristics on the national scale. This decrease was a result of newly founded private subsided schools that skimmed off the best students. While some municipal schools have a captive population in nearby shantytowns, Neruda is located in the competitive environment of the urban centre. The school targeted the poorest students in the neighbourhood, but showed a slight increase in social intake. This was explained by the demographic development of the middle class in the vicinity that increased enrolment, however, it means that the school seemed to be out of place.

The findings show a clear understanding of the extremely deprived socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the students the school served, the 'unsuitable' characteristics of its students for other local schools, and the specific role it played within the district in terms of accepting students whom no other nearby school would accept.

With respect to the Neruda school's awareness of its student intake, in its official Institutional Education Project it explicitly described the type of students it served:

Neruda School's Institutional Education Project, 2001:

> The school enrols students coming from subsidized schools, even if they were not upgraded or have low levels of attainment, learning difficulties, or misbehaviour problems […] Our students also come from dysfunctional homes, broken families […] sometimes they are in the presence of familial violence, and therefore, students have some degree of emotional, affective, social, and attention disorder, which the school must deal with.

This 'hard-to-teach' student intake is a recurrent topic and a practical problem that the school faced on a daily basis. Committed staff members recognised their role to provide

social support because these schools are not equipped with specialised staff (social workers, psychologists, or counsellors). The students attending Neruda School were declared 'undesirable' by other local municipal schools:

> Within this district, we have the worst students. All of them are sent to us, the students that nobody else wants to receive. We accept anyone, and then we are asked to achieve better outcomes in SIMCE. (Teacher, Fifth Grade, Neruda school)

The fact that Neruda school received mostly 'hard-to-teach' students led it to play a specific role in the local education system, which was recognised by all local actors (schools, parents, pupils, and local authorities). The school had no option but to assume the particular role of 'accepting anyone' as its 'mission'.

> We are considered the worst place in this district. The [another nearby school] threatens their pupils by saying that if they misbehave they will be sent to Neruda school. (Teacher, Second Grade, Neruda school)

The quote illustrates a hierarchical social space where the task of Neruda was to deal with the most socially disadvantaged and 'hard-to-teach' students living in the local area. This was *functional* for the success of other local schools and defined its *low* position.

Effectively, this practical knowledge of working at the bottom of the local marketplace seems to be part of *the game* that has to be accepted, but which leads teachers into disputes and despair. Mrs Arias, the head teacher, called for support for this school mission, increasing and perpetuating a vicious circle of unavoidable pressure for teachers. As a school with minimum agency in selecting students, its low reputation and the decreasing school enrolment explained the pressure for its head teacher to consider the school's closure as a definite risk. Although every school has the common external pressure of mobilising subsistence strategies, this is a threat to school sustainability. The impression given by Neruda's head teacher was explicit in the quotes below:

> The school is not going to be closed. You should be calm and we should all work together to improve the school's situation. I will do my best to accomplish it. (Mrs Arias, staff meeting, March15, Neruda school)

> A new school is being built nearby. It will look beautiful. The battle is going to be tough; it will be very difficult to compete with them. (Mrs Arias, staff meeting, March 15, Neruda school)

In the context of a voucher system, the crucial task for schools is to attract more students in order to increase their funding. This can be achieved either by attracting new students or by retaining the students who are not 'hard-to-teach'. Thus, the task of attracting or maintaining intake is based on particular competition where schools are not all similarly equipped, adjusted, and shaped by the specific contextual conditions that they face.

Consequently, the actions undertaken by the head teacher were fundamentally aimed at modifying the school's prestige and reputation. A first initiative was to change the school's name, which had been in place since 1968. According to Mrs Arias, the rationale for this decision was related to the need to make the school more sellable, countering its poor reputation in the local area. This 'nothing to lose' strategy received full support from the community, but also demonstrated the limited set of alternatives available for schools at the bottom of the local marketplace.

A second initiative was to conduct systematic marketing activities to capture new parents to 'attract enrolment'. The head teacher organised two kinds of activities, which exemplified the strategy. One consisted of making several visits to the neighbourhood and nearby shantytowns, taking colourful activities with them and using different attractions each time: clowns, cartoon characters, storytellers, and dressing-up parades. The other consisted of organising bingo events to which parents from the local area were invited. During these activities, speeches were made about the new school project and modest flyers about the school were distributed.

However, a minority of teachers expressed a degree of scepticism about the efficacy of these actions and asked for more drastic measures, such as the expulsion of unruly students.

In brief, the school had to attract more students in order to avoid closure, undertaking an array of time-consuming activities of uncertain efficacy, using time, which in a perfect world, would have been better employed for pedagogical issues.

Redoles school: a school with a previously prominent position. Recovering prestige through a selectivity policy

The next case, Redoles, is a school that increased its enrolment eight years before the study due to a 'merger', where another nearby poorer school was closed and all its students and staff were integrated into Redoles. Its social intake decreased since then, not solely because of the merger, but also because of local market dynamics like other schools in better positions skimming off the best students. The change over the last decade is not only evident through data analysis, but is also present in school perceptions. Currently, the constant decrease in intake in a stable enrolment rate is seen as problematic by staff and parents as it would affect teaching and prestige. It was clear from interviews that the school felt affected by the 'merger', as students of a lower social class were incorporated into a traditional middle-class school. The quote below from a senior teacher, who had been at the school for 25 years, exemplifies this point:

> The problem is that our students are more violent now, they insult each other, you come out to the schoolyard and you see they speak rudely, there are small gangs within school, etc, etc, but I also see that teachers lack motivation. I see that every time a new student comes to their classroom, they ask: 'where has this student come from, show me their behaviour report'. But my perspective is that they have to understand that we are a municipal school and therefore we are working with these kinds of students now, because this school had high prestige for many years. People used to queue up to enrol their children, but now the story has changed. Now we have seven subsidized private schools around us! Imagine, and they are taking our students from us. (Senior teacher, Redoles school)

To some degree the school was abandoned by middle-class students and slowly became a lower middle-class school. Both events (the merger *and* skimming of better students) reinforced each other by integrating students from the merged school and then the school was abandoned by students from higher social backgrounds until enrolment stabilised again. This recent history of transformation was not an obscure anecdote, but was still thoroughly active in the school's self-understanding. Nowadays, this produces courses of action for a school's future.

This process also caused some pedagogical consequences. Most of the staff shared the view that the modification of the school's intake made their teaching job more complex and engaging. Senior teachers still seemed to be nostalgic and attached to a pedagogy that was suitable for the school in the past. The quote below underlines this point:

> Now it is difficult to teach, very difficult. Many students who attended this school in the past became professionals, but look at it now, things are different. (Teacher, Fifth Grade, Redoles school)

Overall, the perceptions of Redoles' staff showed a well-defined understanding of the place that it historically occupied and the changes that underwent in terms of its position. This view was shared not only by teachers and senior staff, but also by the whole school community. What clearly emerged was that the school's reputation operated on the condition of the school's future strategies.

Accordingly, Redoles school was implementing a regular and comprehensive selection and expulsion policy. In some ways, this strategy was related to the better position that this school occupied in its local market, because it had a high-status past to recover. Indeed, its municipal stakeholder was attempting to improve the school's reputation by appointing a new head teacher in 2006. His professional background was strange, as was mentioned in the following quote:

> I come from a different reality. In my professional life I have only worked in private schools. This is the first time I have had contact with a municipal school. During the job interview I was asked about my experience and knowledge of effective schools. The municipality was interested in someone able to turn this school around. I think I have that experience. Although I have realized that the reality here is quite different. It is harder. It is more challenging but without sufficient resources, here a headteacher does not manage any 'peso' [Chilean currency]. But I have felt very good so far. I have had a warm welcome. (Headteacher, Redoles school, first interview)

The strategy implemented was a systematic policy of expulsion, which was colloquially called the 'clean-up' in all of the interviews conducted. Consistent with the background, the first action of the head teacher was to expel about 40 pupils from different year groups at the end of his first academic period. In the following quote, the head teacher openly described the mechanism used as a strategy to attract a different student body:

> The idea was to cause a shock; it had to be a strong shock, so that is why I announced this across all the school and all the grades and during parents meetings over two months […] I built a list of students from Year 5 to Year 8, students with behavioural problems, psychosocial difficulties, and psychological disorders. At the outset, the municipality disagreed with my policy because it meant we would lose money. But then they accepted it because they understood my argument that in the end it will bring back parents who are disappointed about what the school has become. In the end, if you keep these children here, you will lose more children. This year [2007] we will draw up the famous 'blacklist' again. (Headteacher, Redoles school, second interview)[4]

The decision exemplified the strategic knowledge of the head teacher about the rules of the game ('in the end it will bring back parents') and what kinds of students are more or less 'valuable' (easier to educate and attractive to other 'proper' parents).

Significantly, the school community supported the head teacher's strategy. Some doubts on the strategy were encountered among teachers and staff, but the general consensus was that it was beneficial for the school. The quotes below indicate the general feeling:

> It was impossible to teach last year. Now things are better. Those students were very bad elements. The headteacher came to bring order here. The clear out of troubled students has been a good decision. (Teacher, Fifth Grade, Redoles school)

> […] the cancer was removed, so hopefully he [the headteacher] will continue with this. He must be firm on this. (Teacher, 4th Grade, Redoles school)

The parents at the school understood and even agreed with the selection mechanisms to reverse the decline in the school's prestige. They attributed importance to discipline, behaviour, and students' manners as an indication of the school's reputation. Therefore, they demanded a more selective regime in which pupils who do not comply with the school regulations can be expelled easily.[5]

In a nutshell, it is plausible to suggest that the school considered that its future depended on the success of the 'clean-up' strategy. The importance of recovering the past reputation of Redoles school provided the basis for a stronger selection policy.

On the whole, there are some specific factors that were used as resources in this case, that lent viability to segregation. Some conditions, such as a blacklist, the existence of a prestigious past, strong support from the stakeholder, a head teacher with particular skills, and a background of school selectivity, as well as the presence of other local schools such as Neruda (which are obliged to accept pupils expelled from schools like Redoles) are necessary to support a high-ranking position in the competition between schools.

Parra school: stressed by accepting a low role in municipal education and held accountable for outcomes

Another illustration of the schools' perceptions of their positions in the local market could be seen at Parra school. This school maintained a high level of enrolment and was considered by teachers and parents, according to the interviews, to be among the leading schools in the district. Indeed, it offered a desirable range of extracurricular activities, like violin, orchestra, and karate, which was unusual for a municipal school. In addition, Parra served a lower proportion of deprived pupils than the other two schools, but that proportion was increasing.

In contrast to the other case study schools, there was a well-defined conflict between two groups at Parra school: a group of teachers self-denominated as 'the opposition',[6] and another group comprising the rest of the staff and directors.

Teachers belonging to the 'opposition' expressed concerns about the difficulty in teaching that the mixed social composition of the school implied. They claimed that a large group of students exhibited disruptive behaviour, impeding the teaching processes and affecting the learning of their classmates. Typical of most of the teachers in this group, one said:

> I would like it if, in the future, my students could become doctors, engineers; I am tired of working to achieve nothing. Here there are some who want to learn, but others do not. (Opposition Teacher, Parra school)

Therefore, according to their view, the lack of selectivity that characterised the school affected the social intake little by little as parents consequently removed their children from the school. Further, they demanded stricter behaviour standards and the expulsion of unruly students.

The rationale of the position they maintained was paradoxically based on a principle of *inclusiveness*; by avoiding poor learning conditions for the majority of students in the classroom. As an 'opposition' teacher remarked:

> Very often the conflict of an unruly student is actually related to some learning difficulty, they trouble others because they cannot concentrate, and what do we have to offer those pupils? One SEN teacher for 1,200 students! So I think that this situation is not fair for anybody, so yes, it may be something crazy to say, but I think that this [more selectivity] could be a way of saving both groups of students, because, otherwise, what is going to happen is that good students will leave the school because here they are hit, harassed. So parents will enrol them into subsided private schools […] in the end. We are not serving anyone well here; we are not serving either group properly, not the ones with problems, nor the others. (Opposition Teacher, Parra school)

In contrast, both the senior staff and the other half of the teachers thought differently. In their view, the attitudes of the opposition reflected the teachers' lack of commitment to the *place*, a municipal school, in which they were working and its *implications*, such as students facing multiple difficulties. The senior staff and other teachers considered that it was part of the school's mission to serve disadvantaged pupils (as was seen in the case of the Neruda school).

Senior staff and the group of teachers who supported them seemed to understand themselves as serving a disadvantaged kind of community. The 'opposition' was considered to be working in 'the wrong place', as schooling took on a different nature, as can be noted in the following quote:

> One day Jennifer [a seven-year-old student] came to school with scars, marks on her face. Her mother is not doing well, she is an alcoholic and is suffering from drug addiction and this child has psychological problems, but not cognitive ones, and the teacher [one belonging to the opposition] did not notice the marks in the morning – I saw them at lunch time, why?, because they do not see their students, the teacher does not see this condition because this teacher is not interested in Jennifer; the teacher aspires to teach other kinds of children; they have different aspirations […] Unfortunately you need to have a special vocation to work here. (Senior Teacher, Parra school)

Notwithstanding this, and contrary to the senior staff's views, the opposition declared that they were concerned about the lack of real acknowledgment of the constraints to which the teaching profession was subjected. The contradictory 'irony' they identified was what they defined as being akin to playing the game of normality, while 'the ship', as one teacher put it, 'is full of holes' and 'is going to sink'. That is, the official conviction is that it is possible to achieve high attainment goals without taking into account the multiple problems that municipal schools face on a daily basis in serving a severely deprived population.

This case exemplifies the difference that exists between schools like Neruda, that accept their low-ranking role in the social game, and Redoles, which considers exclusion to achieve its goals. The internal tension between senior staff and 'the opposition', was fundamentally the same as that between accepting the role that municipal education is increasingly assigned in Chile to provide social support and education in disadvantaged

backgrounds, and the rules that allow subsided schools in Chile to skim off and compete for the best students to achieve accountable results.

Considering the perceived position and the practical knowledge of the Parra school drove the conflicting groups to mobilise their positions. In other words, a micro-political dynamic of permanent conflict was explicit during staff meetings and in the interviews. The opposition group's main tactic was to habitually obstruct any decision emanating from the senior team, or at least make them difficult, even insignificant ones. The senior staff tackled the opposition's attitude of resistance by wresting power and status from its members by reassigning them from the formerly 'higher grades' (fifth to eighth grade) to the 'lower grades' (first to fourth grade). Another more radical measure was being planned by the senior team:

> We are seriously evaluating whether to dismantle this group. We will talk to the DAEM [Municipal Education Department] in order to undertake certain actions. We do not care what we will receive back [in terms of quality of teachers], but under this current situation we will be unable to move on and get results. (Headteacher, May 24, 2007)

It is particularly important to highlight the firm decision to fire some opposition teachers because of workplace guarantees and the fact that almost every one of them was a competent teacher, according to the results of the National Teacher Assessment.[7] The reasons for this measure were related solely to the value differences concerning the school mission that we have described.

In sum, the case of Parra school showed a different dimension of the conditions that market dynamics impose on schools. It should be noted that, under these external pressures, other goals of building collective capacity in divided organisations seem to require greater leadership and organisational efforts. This suggests some caveats about the universal use of categories like 'moral purpose', 'strong collegiality', or 'clear and shared goals' in conceptualising the process of school change, particularly for schools located in competitive markets.

Final remarks: possibilities of school management under market dynamics

The case studies offer plausible evidence for the claim that some strategic decision-making dynamics are influenced by the place that schools occupy within their local education market. Considering local markets as a contextual factor, internal school issues seem to be affected by pressures for competition, the consequences of which are survival or declining student intake. This study contributes to confirming previous findings about the impact of school context on school practices (Thrupp 1998, Lupton and Thrupp 2013) and towards documenting the importance of local markets in order to understand the relationship between context and practice in schools. Nevertheless, the contextual differences between relatively similar schools lead to substantially differing consequences for school practices. The cases analysed show that, despite the fact that all municipal schools are apparently serving similarly disadvantaged communities, a school's development seems to be sensitive to every dynamic of the local market in which they are located.

It seems that the schools are far from irrational, ineffective, or negligent. On the contrary, their actions, strategies, and daily agendas are strongly consistent, not only regarding their structural conditions and resources, but also having an understanding of particular

conditions that shape 'the causality of the probable'. So it emerges that schools have developed a clear sense of the place they occupy in a social space. It means that they know, understand, and put into practice the *rules of the game* regarding what is at stake (the struggle for specific resources) within their specific local market field. This knowledge of the rules of the local game (the resources at stake and specific position of schools) is associated with specific development strategies; but it is revealed that playing the game had noticeable and significant implications for internal school practices. Indeed, the Neruda school is developing a time-consuming marketing strategy to change its local and long-deteriorated reputation to attract more students. The head teacher in particular is attempting to rebuild the school's corporate image by changing the school name and undertaking publicity. The Redoles school conducts selective policy strategies that are ethically and pedagogically questionable, but which are supported by the majority of teachers and parents. Alternatively, Parra is using more subtle tactics to reposition the school in its former position, which is more attractive to middle-class parents. It is debating an exclusionary strategy as a key school policy or the acceptance of the low position considered natural for public schools.

Whatever the strategy, they are part of the school's agenda to a greater or lesser degree. Some are extremely time-consuming ('marketing' and 'corporate image'), while others are symbolically and ethically problematic ('clean-up', 'blacklist', and 'parent warning meetings'), and some micro-political disputes between school members about alternative selectivity strategies were also part of the school agenda ('inclusion as a duty' versus 'selectivity for improvement'). The schools managed different resources or capitals (even though all of them were municipal schools) to address their particular local challenges. While the Neruda school did not have the power to negotiate with the municipality and lacked resources to tackle the reduction in its enrolment over the last decade, Redoles school was part of a broader municipal plan, including the appointment of a new head teacher with expertise in effective middle-class schools. Meanwhile, Parra school's senior team was tackling 'the opposition' with whatever decisional capacities they had. Overall, schools became strategic to respond to the underlying rules of the game at local market level in order to maintain or improve their positions. As a result, this means that rational action based on values of care and ethical education *compete* with a reconfiguration of social practices based on market values, or what Stephen Ball calls the new moral environment under which education is reorganised. When this influence emerges, harmonised rationality is disrupted and agents are stressed internally and/or with each other. Despite these efforts, all schools have shown a dramatic decline in their relative positions in their local markets in terms of enrolment, socioeconomic composition, and learning outcomes. It seems that the configuration of a school agenda, particular strategies, and a clear school agency turned out to be fruitless for public schools dealing with competitive local environments, particularly regarding other local subsidised private schools.

Presumably, as Chilean head teachers are immersed in market struggles, they become troubled educational practitioners, ethically pliant, driven by a market-oriented mindset, and generally externally pushed to focus on issues other than pedagogy or collegiality. School leadership and management issues become something other than merely a matter of lack of 'vision' or 'goal-setting'. Fundamentally, the analysis of the possibilities and constraints of schools immersed in competitive local contexts cannot ignore the

particular influences that market-driven policies have on school leadership and their possibilities of building learning communities and improving professional capacities.

Notes

1. A statistical analysis using SPSS software was run using the national database of Chilean primary schools, firstly, selecting the 30% of the most deprived schools, and secondly, the statistical procedure divided those schools in three subsamples of different levels of socioeconomic deprivation (priority student index). This procedure was consistent with the research aim of examining schools in poor areas exhibiting fairly different levels of disadvantage. Finally, in each subsample, a small group of schools was randomly selected from which a preliminary pre-sample was chosen to be visited in order to explore the possibility of and interest in being studied over a considerable period of time. The final case study schools were selected according to these criteria after visiting all of the pre-sample schools.
2. The index of priority students is built according to statistics collected by the Ministry of Education and JUNAEB (National Board of Student Aid and Scholarships).
3. It is important to note that the anonymity and confidentiality of all school members mentioned have been respected by changing names and modifying key details that preclude any attempt to identify them. The schools' names are pseudonyms and correspond to famous Chilean poets: Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra and Mauricio Redoles.
4. The blacklist consists of the list of the 'hardest-to-teach' students. This list is built using different sources; mainly the opinion of classroom teachers and the review of the class book, which teachers use to note bad behaviour in or outside the classroom. The blacklist was thus a key background tool for identifying students to be expelled from school.
5. In Chile, a new law (*Ley de Inclusion* N° 20,845 and 20,609) has just gone into effect in 2016, banning expulsion of students from schools, as these practices are now considered discriminatory. Schools must serve the social and educational needs of children.
6. The 'opposition' is composed of nine teachers (out of 32). They are younger than most of the teachers and have each been working at the school for five years or less. The term 'opposition' was coined by one of the teachers interviewed. A primary feature of this group is its visually evident cohesion, which was observed several times during the six months of fieldwork. During lunchtimes they all ate together at a specific table, during staff meetings they sit together in the same positions, and during break times they drink coffee in a specific area of the staff room.
7. The legal regulations in the Chilean education system gave the head teacher no autonomy to hire or fire staff. As the official employer, the DAEM has constraints such as like preparing a formal inquiry and paying expensive compensation when firing a teacher. Usually such teachers are transferred between schools under the same administration. Head teachers generally disagree with this practice because the replacement could be a problematic teacher from another school in the same district. Fundamentally, this reveals the risk that the Parra school's head teacher is willing to take, which is clear in the quote above: '…we do not care what we will receive back'.

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