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Denying systemic inequality in segregated Chilean schools: race-neutral discourses among administrative and teaching staff

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the educational context in which ethnically segregated high poverty schools operate in Chile, and the ways that inequalities within these establishments are understood by members of their administrative and teaching staff. In particular we draw attention to the unwillingness of the majority of these employees to name or recognize specific forms of institutional inequality. Following critical pedagogy literature we argue that the Chilean education system reproduces a fear of talk among teachers working in areas with high density indigenous populations, which obscures unequal social structures and opportunities for specific (class, gender, ethnic) groups in school contexts. Based on data from 12 interviews with school staff and observations from four schools in southern Chile, we analyze how intersecting inequality is discursively reduced by predominantly white teachers to individual deficit, de-politicized geographical problems of access to schooling, and the normalizing of low achievement across schools with students from similar backgrounds.

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Introduction

No no, I don't think so, I don't think it's related [high ethnic composition and lower test scores], not at all, that would be like, er, completely discriminatory toward a student for having Mapuche ethnicity. (Mrs Salazar, School B)

As in other Latin American countries, Chile has implemented education policies catering to indigenous populations, and in some cases, specifically toward those residing in more densely populated ancestral territories. Schools with over 20% indigenous enrollment, for example, are supported to implement an intercultural and bilingual education program (henceforth IBE). Indigenous schooling grants have also improved access to education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. However, these initiatives pay scant attention to the environments in which indigenous pupils study. The schools discussed in this paper have limited material resources and infrastructures, reduced capacities to hire quality teachers,

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and are less competitive in Chile's educational market. Beyond these more 'structural' limitations, the schools lack teachers trained to work in intercultural classrooms so as to reduce bias or racist attitudes, and the majority of staff (especially those in directive roles) are predominantly non-indigenous. In this paper, we address why teaching staff fail to recognize potentially detrimental effects of indigenous school segregation.

Our research in *ethnically segregated high poverty* school contexts draws attention to the sociopolitical implications of power and privilege in these environments, and the structural effects of racism on teacher and staff outlooks regarding indigenous students. We emphasize the unwillingness of the majority of these employees to *name* or recognize specific forms of institutional inequality, and most significantly, racism. Following critical pedagogy literature we argue that the Chilean education system reproduces 'a fear of talk' (Fine and Weis 2003, 14) among teachers working in areas with high density indigenous populations, which obscures unequal social structures and opportunities for differentially empowered groups (class, gender, ethnic) in school contexts. To analyze the ways teachers' and administrative school staffs' expectations express the silencing of inequality, we put to work the concept of color-blind racism (see Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Rather than question why indigenous students might be densely clustered into low-achieving vocational and rural schools, why they constitute some of the poorest families in the local education district, or why curricular design might not be culturally sensitive to local indigenous knowledges, teachers focus on universalized ideas of meritocracy, personal effort or inadequate motivation. Intersecting inequality is discursively reduced to, and racially coded into individual deficit, de-politicized geographical problems of access to schooling, and the naturalizing of low achievement across schools with students from similar backgrounds. That is, Mapuche¹ majority students from low-income families studying in under-resourced schools become associated exclusively with a (non-ethnic) rural Chilean education system, whose characteristics are misrecognized as solely socio-economically driven at the individual or family level. Taken for granted notions of rural 'backwardness' and low expectations among school employees are naturalized as a race-neutral education, infringing the possibilities of critical consciousness being incorporated into the staff culture. Beyond the curriculum reforms implemented to increase indigenous inclusion, we suggest that teaching staff attitudes foment a hidden curriculum that is apolitical in regards to stratified inequality, thereby failing to create meaningful dialog or agency among their school populations, and negating the need for multicultural teacher training, culturally responsive pedagogy, or anti-racist education programs.²

Our analysis of the dominant assumptions held by teachers is intended to provide a critique of the ideological and political mechanisms of schooling and wider society, rather than of the teachers themselves (see Giroux 1988). These contexts present real material and educational challenges for both students and teachers. However, the difficulty of this task is exacerbated through racialized understandings of the young people's abilities to succeed in these social conditions. The prejudicial effects of segregation begin at a national policy level, but work themselves out *within* the classroom. We provide a critical analysis of staff culture in high ethnic composition³ schools in southern Chile to demonstrate the ways that opportunities to challenge 'difficult' schooling environments are lost through the uncritical acceptance of existing stratification and a denial of the political and social implications of segregated indigenous schooling.

We begin by discussing the negative effects of segregated schooling as indicated by international literature, followed by the theoretical lenses used to analyze teacher and administrative staffs' narratives regarding unequal schooling. In the third section, we provide contextual information about the Mapuche population, Chilean schooling, and segregation before presenting the research methodology and a discussion of the interview data.

Segregated schools and within-school effects

Evidence for the inherently unequal nature of segregated schooling has focused on both the academic and moral imperatives of overcoming socioeconomic and racialized inequalities in schools. Empirical evidence suggests that high ethnic composition schools negatively affect retention and achievement scores of minority populations (Harris 2010; Mickelson, Bottia, and Lambert 2013). These school arrangements also create negative racial stereotypes which are isolating for these cultural groupings, and deny equal opportunities of access to the quality schooling readily available to the white middle classes (Orfield and Lee 2007; Orfield, Siegel-Hawley, and Kucsera 2014). The uneven distribution of school populations – along racial and socio-economic lines – denies children and young people the democratic and civic right to foster relationships across a culturally diverse breadth of society. Although the US has been the focal point of (failed) desegregation initiatives since the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, numerous studies focusing on migrant populations demonstrate similar obstacles to equitable education systems in European countries such as the UK, Belgium, and Sweden (see Agirdag, van Avermaet, and van Houtte 2012). As a global phenomenon, then, segregated schooling along ethnic lines exacerbates existing socio-economic and geographic inequalities as well as being disadvantageous in regards to social inclusion.

The reasons offered for why high ethnic composition school conditions might prepare students for unequal futures are multiple; ranging from the low status or prestige of the school (affecting selection processes and between-school competition), peer effects and school climate (Ogbu and Simons 1998), lower aggregated years of parental education, fewer school resources, instability of enrolments and dropouts, school tracking, or other forms of school segregation (Oakes 1985), quality of instruction and school management such as teacher recruitment (Harris 2010). The 'black box' effect of such diverse mechanisms makes it difficult to account for exactly *how* ethnic and social class stratification are perpetuated in highly segregated schools, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that much of it is reproduced in interrelated ways between pupil culture, school management, and structural issues within schools (Sykes and Kuyper 2013).

The role of teachers is deemed central to this interplay (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane 2004). The sociocultural fit between teachers and pupils in these contexts is broadly thought to affect student expectations, the cultural relevance of the curriculum taught, the appropriateness of teaching styles for local communities and the quality of classroom interaction (Rist 1970; Nieto 1996; Dickar 2008). Even structural issues are thought to influence teacher expectations, particularly when schools (such as poor high ethnic composition) carry negative stereotypes, since they reduce teachers' sense of agency and accountability to learning outcomes (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane 2004). In these types of schools, teachers learn ethnically and class-inflected dispositions toward the predominant type of student, guided by a 'school-based organizational habitus' (2004, 76). As teachers become incorporated into

these institutional settings, they take on collectively defined and taken-for-granted notions about normal student abilities, curriculum design, and pedagogy. Similarly, *staff culture*, identified by Agirdag, van Avermaet, and van Houtte (2012) speaks to the ways specific educational establishments define collective teacher identities in ways that make it difficult to express individualized expectations about students. In high ethnic composition schools these authors confirm that staff culture influences pupils' sense of futility or resignation toward school culture and achievement (as self-fulfilling prophecies).

Race-neutral education and silencing

Michelle Fine's work on dropouts in an upper Manhattan Comprehensive, severely segregated, high school exemplifies the role of staff culture in regards to denying racism through silence and cycles of blame that gravitate around the individual and their family environment (Fine 1993). Her conceptual work of silencing refers to much more than the denial of the right to speak, or the prohibition of dissenting speech, but also to the specific ways schools, 'contain the ironies of social injustice through what and how they teach, and *what and how they won't*' (Fine 1993, 9, italics ours). Fine's ethnography draws precise attention to the fear of naming anything related to racism or structural discrimination against communities or groupings. Individual equality of opportunity is continually reaffirmed in these contexts so as to silence or discredit any contradictory evidence, ideologies, or experiences that might come from students or parents. Not naming institutional and contextual factors related to systemic inequality is a type of 'administrative craft' (1993, 35) that avoids monitoring and comparing opportunities of access, resources and outcomes for student bodies in regards to intersecting issues of gender, social class and ethnicity, focusing instead on comparisons with similar school-types and geographical proximity. Teachers generally believe they 'know better' than the lived-realities of low-income high ethnic composition social contexts, preferring to view failures as 'personal problems' or individual responsibility (Fine 1993, 140; 2003, 16). As we detail later, school principals generally prefer to compare their aggregate national test results (SIMCE) with those of other 'vulnerable' schools in the region, rather than question why cycles of low achievement might be reproduced there.

Fear of appearing racist is particularly prominent among school staff because of the democratic, humanitarian and civic principles for which education allegedly stands (Solomona et al. 2005). Teachers who work under the pressure of espousing anti-discriminatory attitudes, political correctness and liberal values often do so by silencing, rather than developing critical discourses or political commitments among their students. As noted by Pollock (2005), 'Knowing silences ... are themselves actions with racializing consequences: actively deleting race words from everyday talk can serve to increase the perceived relevance of race as much as to actively ignore race's relevance' (2005, 174). Racial issues are always in the background of these segregated schools, but rarely acknowledged. The question, however, is what these silences are reconstituted into. We argue that these silences are filled, or substituted, by institutional talk that diverts attention away from racism. That is, Fine's analysis of silencing – the fear to name (as passively active) – is augmented by Bonilla-Silva's notions of color-blind racism that fills these voids with alternative explanations and meanings.

Color-blind racism, according to Bonilla-Silva (see also Stoll 2014), feeds on four particular ideologies (or frames) – liberal forms of tolerance, naturalization of unequal outcomes, cultural explanations of difference, and the minimizing of discriminatory practices – to

misrepresent the world through half-truths regarding equality of opportunity that maintain the status quo of white dominance (2006, 26). These half-truths acknowledge disadvantage, but only as the naturalized predicament faced by all Chileans in isolated, under-funded rural schools. Our analysis draws on this framework to discuss the specific forms of liberal tolerance, the non-naming of difference, and culturally ingrained claims of neutrality that express pervasive and endemic forms of racism.

One substitute for silence is ‘racially coded language’ (Castagno and Brayboy 2008, 321; Bonilla-Silva 2006). This relinquishes the teaching staff in high ethnic composition schools from questioning or de-constructing binary oppositions between tolerance and discrimination, political correctness and explicitly derogatory terminology, culture and nature (Gillborn 2006). Rather than name race and class as double-binding forms of systemic inequality, shorthand codes such as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘rural’ (in our case study) convey geographically neutral descriptions of family background or culture that contain implicit meanings about the indigenous-majority students in the schools. By protecting their professional image and using value-free terminology, power and privilege are reproduced by white teachers in these institutions. We contend that educational disparities in high indigenous composition schools are discussed by school staff as socioeconomically driven differences; as cultural deficits, as individuals failing to taken the meritocratic opportunities offered to them by the education system, but never as a form of institutional racism.

The absence, or numerical isolation, of ethnic minority teachers in these environments is especially detrimental to the possibilities of transforming such staff cultures away from the act of silencing. Fine’s case study school employed 6 African-Americans out of 122 members of staff, but had predominantly African-American and Latino enrolments. This type of imbalance leads many white teachers to consider their students as beyond help, thereby limiting the transformative potential of the classroom. White educators working in high ethnic composition schools, according to Dickar (2008), are unlikely to acknowledge, ‘their relationship to “the culture of power” because they experience it as natural and common sense rather than as culturally specific’ (2008, 115). Christine Sleeter has also argued that the process of overlooking racism is not exclusively an individual issue of prejudice to be addressed by changing people’s attitudes, ideas and stereotypes (a psychological approach to racism) but rather exists as a structural arrangement whereby access to power and privilege are restricted to whites (Sleeter 2004). Under this rubric, the lack of congruence between teacher and pupil ethnic origins is more than an issue of establishing mutual cultural understandings and experiences in the classroom, or of developing culturally relevant pedagogies (though it is also this). Schools will continue to reproduce cultures of whitened privilege as long as ethnic minority teachers are underrepresented. This, the author suggests, is deeply connected to white teachers’ insistence that they only see children, rather than race, in the classroom (2004, 168).

Segregation and whiteness in the Chilean education context

The unevenness of ethnic residence and school enrolments in rural and semi-rural southern Chile are directly connected to historical-political processes of territorial dispossession during the late nineteenth century. From 1880, the Chilean state, through military conquest, began expropriating indigenous lands to strengthen the country’s agriculture industry, and confined the Mapuche to reservations (*reducciones*) totaling approximately

6% of their original territories (Bengoa 1985). Schooling played a crucial role in building the nation from this time. In 1920 primary education was made obligatory (*Ley de Instrucción Primaria Obligatoria*) and schools rapidly expanded into the isolated areas of countryside where Mapuche reservations were located. The intentions behind the reform were assimilatory; since Chilean nationhood was premised upon a whitened European descent ideal from which Indians were excluded, schooling would disseminate ideologies of legitimate state power, and provide the civilizing mechanisms to transform 'backward' indigenous populations into industrious citizens (Serrano 1995).

After almost a century of reservation life, the dissolution of communal land ties and the implementation of a national voucher system during the Pinochet dictatorship (1974–1990) only exacerbated existing class and racial hierarchies in rural spaces where schooling became synonymous with pre-modern, backwards and deficient populations (Webb and Radcliffe 2015). The voucher system implemented in 1981 de-centralized education decision-making, transferring it to local municipalities and schools, turning education into a competitive marketplace (Carnoy 1998). The lack of state regulation led to the expansion of private-interest (individuals and corporations) stakeholder schools where efficiency and management were prioritized over and above the educational goals and expertise of the schools' founders. The illusion of greater autonomy of school choice being handed to families were constrained by school selection policies, and existing residential segregation within *comunas* (municipal districts) which exacerbated social stratification (Matear 2007). Unlike for-profit private voucher schools, located principally in urban areas and targeting more advantaged pupils, non-profit private voucher schools (constituting 16 per cent of enrolments nationally) and municipal schools became magnets for low-income and indigenous students (Elacqua 2009).

Socioeconomic forms of segregated education (including rural variants) in Chile are well-documented. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2010) found Chile to have the second worst record in this regard among the 65 participating countries of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey in 2009 (see also Valenzuela, Bellei, and Ríos 2014). Rural schooling has also been the focus of a government reform program (MECE Rural), which ran from 1992 to 1997 and sought to make schooling in these areas more equitable by providing additional teaching materials and micro-centers providing training for teachers in these contexts. However, indigenous segregated schooling has received little attention.

Social indicators across numerous surveys and censuses suggest the Mapuche suffer lower levels of education, literacy, employment, family income, life expectancy, and poorer health (see Mateo Piñones and Valenzuela Carvallo 2017). The severity and extensiveness of this situation for Mapuche students becomes apparent by reviewing Ministry of Education data.⁴ In 2011, 10% of all Chilean schools where students took national tests (SIMCE) had an indigenous composition over 30% (the national average is 13%). The majority of these schools are located in the regions containing ancestral territories. Although approximately 32% of Mapuche now reside in the Chilean capital, Santiago, where residential segregation also occurs, Mapuche pupils tend to be minorities in these urban schools (35% of schools in Santiago have indigenous compositions above the national average, but there are very few schools where indigenous students are the majority). In the Araucanía Region, 90% of schools have indigenous compositions above the national average (13%), but more significantly, 20% have compositions where indigenous students are a majority – above 50%. In addition, 78% of all schools with indigenous compositions greater than 50% are

technical-professional schools catering to a market demand for low-wage vocational capital. The authors found that in this educational context, socioeconomic and indigenous status are deeply entrenched since these highly segregated schools cater to some of the poorest segments of the population (Webb and Radcliffe 2015). Premised on these descriptive statistics, this paper looks to articulate some of the double-binding inequalities faced Mapuche students in these types of establishment.

While much of the international literature on segregated schools focuses on urban contexts with large migrant populations, settler society contexts with indigenous populations such as Canada and Australia confirm that the geographic remoteness and quality of education in segregated rural schools is particularly problematic (Bradley et al. 2007; Friesen and Krauth 2010). Although indigenous populations share similar disadvantages to other ethnic minorities, and whites in the same social class, such as parental years of education, residential segregation, health and life expectancy etc., their experiences of schooling are not identical. As Yinger (1985) notes, 'we lose explanatory power if we equate contemporary urban ethnicity – with its largely symbolic, affective qualities – with the more deeply rooted attachments and firmer boundaries of less mobile times and places' (1985, 161).

In this regard, drawing on US studies of black/white relations – which have markedly different socio-political histories and demographics – to analyze the Chilean context, has certain limitations, but also some important similarities. Although white-European privilege is embedded within Latin America's colonial history, nation-building in the Southern Cone countries took a different direction to those in Central American and Andean Regions. In countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, racial and cultural mixing (*mestizaje*) became a prominent and celebrated ideology, advocating an alleged 'racial democracy' of integration and horizontal social relations (Telles 2004). In contrast, Chile's state-building and modernization was premised on racelessness or the exclusion of 'indians', via extermination and assimilation of some indigenous populations, and the segregation of others (the Mapuche), thereby maintaining a binary white/non-white existence during much of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century (Mitnick 2004; Richards 2013; Webb and Radcliffe 2015). This binary distinction disseminated from state discourse and policies became infiltrated into the general social imaginary. Whiteness, over time, moved from an exclusively 'color-line' distinction of pigmentation and European origins, to a greater extent toward class-based distinction of superior position within the social hierarchy, associated with urban, educated, modern Chilean society. Indigeneity, on the other hand, remains, for the most part, associated with social imaginaries of backwardness, rurality, and poverty. *Mestizaje* – which has been widespread in Chile since pre-independence – remains largely unacknowledged and unproblematized, since much of the population assume a whitened (binary) ideal in response to the low social status of indigeneity. This leads to what Bonilla-Silva calls greater instances of 'honorary whites' (2006, 179).⁵ While this is progressively the case in urban areas of Chile, the geographical associations of indigeneity, and non-whiteness remain entrenched in the ancestral landscapes of the Chilean south where our research was conducted.

Rural schools in indigenous territories, according to Michael Marker, ought to produce a distinctive sense of place and belonging among students that visibilizes Indian-white histories of power relations and conflict, as well as identities connected to those spaces (2000). However, post-colonial schooling, he suggests, removes 'place-based consciousness' by excluding local knowledge and indigenous culture from schools based in these territories (Marker 2009, 758). In this regard, schools are ideologically presented by the state

as apolitical, democratic and neutral institutions, committed to equal treatment without regard to particular geographies or histories (Giroux 1988). We argue that the lack of critical understanding among teaching and administrative staff at schools (white and indigenous) around ancestral territories in southern Chile leads to similar outcomes.

One response to the post-colonial, assimilatory and discriminatory Chilean education system has been to create grassroots, politically empowering, and autonomous schools for indigenous students. The state-implemented program of IBE launched in 2000 for elementary schooling has been met with skepticism by a number of indigenous organizations. For these communities, segregated schooling contexts offer a more appropriate response to these inequalities, by incorporating culturally appropriate pedagogies, indigenous elders and teachers, and vital links to relevant communities and indigenous territories (Luna 2015). These spaces offer an opportunity for teachers to interrupt whitened privilege, by critically voicing structural inequalities and offering alternate epistemologies and pedagogies. However, the vast majority of Mapuche students in the Araucanía region are located within municipal or non-profit subsidized schools without these conditions, and consequently are more likely to suffer discrimination and lower teacher expectations.

Research methodology

Qualitative research was conducted in four schools located in adjoining *comunas* (municipal districts) in the Araucanía Region, as part of a one-year mixed-methods study of ethnic segregation in Chilean education. Schools A and C are rural, Schools B and D are semi-rural. All four schools have an ethnic composition above the national mean of 13%, but were selected with a varying degree of indigenous enrollments (School A 71%, School B 18%, School C 67% and School D 25%). At the time of research, School A had the highest number of indigenous teachers – 6 of the 33 members of staff – while School B had 3 of 32 teachers, School C 4 of 26, and School D 3 of 27.⁶ The two establishments with the highest ethnic composition follow a vocational education curriculum (Schools A and C), the others a science and humanities curriculum. All the schools are private non-profit subsidized, and range in size between 235 students (School C) and 473 students (School D). Semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, principals (directors), and administrative staff, student focus groups (8th and 10th grade), and observation (hanging out, listening to day-to-day passing conversations, watching peer routines and dynamics) of school yards and corridors were conducted with a view to understanding the everyday logics of interaction and, meanings associated with these school contexts, student achievements, and their family backgrounds. In total, 28 interviews and 8 focus groups were conducted with the entire school community. In this paper we draw mainly on the 12 interviews conducted with principals, teachers and administrative staff at the four schools listed in Table 1.⁷

The interview questions directed to the school staff and parents requested descriptive accounts of the school and its enrolled population, its strengths and weaknesses as a school community, and the key challenges with regard to its aggregate standardized test results. The second part of the interviews focused on evoking opinions about possible unequal social conditions in which the schools were located. The interview protocol included the following questions: ‘What do you think about the standardized testing results (SIMCE) of the students in this school?’ ‘Why do you think that students in this school obtain those results, and do you see any differences with other schools?’ In response to the participants’

Table 1. Segregation and silencing.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Ethnicity	Position	School	Years at the school
Mr Valencia	Male	White	Principal	School A	20
Mrs Fuentes	Female	White	Language Teacher, 10th Grade	School A	6
Mrs Barraza	Female	White	General Education Teacher, 8th Grade	School A	16
Mr Saez	Male	White	Curriculum co-ordinator	School B	12
Mrs Salazar	Female	White	Biology Teacher 10th Grade	School B	3
Mrs Mardones	Female	White	Physical Education Teacher, 8th Grade	School B	3
Mr Romero	Male	White	Principal and elementary teacher	School C	16
Mr Manriquez	Male	White	Physical Education Teacher 10th Grade	School C	6
Mrs Solar	Female	White	Language Teacher 8th Grade	School C	6
Mr Venegas	Male	White	Principal and History and Geography teacher	School D	2
Mrs Panguilef	Female	Mapuche	Teacher 10th Grade	School D	5
Mrs Contreras	Female	White	Music Teacher 8th Grade	School D	4

answers, we then probed for the ways geographical location in the region, rural residence and isolation might be related, followed by questions concerning the characteristics of the student population. These questions were ordered so that participants might reflect first on how the tests scores in their school were perceived by the school community, followed by possible social effects that could differentiate their school from others in the country. If participants had not already discussed socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics, we further probed to establish what role the interviewees assigned to these in connection with unequal educational opportunities.

We detail a number of these responses below, particularly in regards to how socioeconomic ‘vulnerability’ is detached from the high ethnic composition of the schools, to the extent that cultural difference is preferred to acknowledging ethnic inequalities. Hence, although as many as 71% of students at the participating schools are indigenous, teachers’ racially coded language normalizes low achievement as being connected to rurality and vulnerability, without needing to name racism (see also Bonilla-Silva 2006, 54).

Findings

The data gathered in the four schools were relatively consistent in that *the degree* of ethnic composition made little difference to teachers’ narratives about the context of the schooling in the Araucanía Region, or indigenous pupils’ attainments. Indigenous staff in the case study schools tend to occupy less influential roles (special needs education or technical assistants), and we argue that the central staff culture consists of implicit cultural racism discernable in non-indigenous teacher narratives. We do not consider segregated schooling to be the source of inequality per se, but rather the context in which solutions to the systemic inequalities contained within them are hindered through denial and misrecognition.

Many of the teachers interviewed for the research had accumulated a vast number of years’ experience working in schools contexts with low income rural families, whose parental years of education were below the national average. In this regard, we take their authority to speak about legitimate and real concerns over the barriers and daily problems facing these school populations seriously. Among these obstacles were increasing class sizes, lack

of control over the quality of students enrolling, discipline issues, student use of mobile phones in classrooms, difficulties of access to the school for more marginalized students, lack of parental involvement, poor infrastructure, lack of materials, and resources. Combined with these concerns were a number of depictions regarding the student body; their abilities, family backgrounds, and futures. Our discussion addresses teaching staffs' specific narratives regarding these depictions, and in particular the racially coded language used to describe students.

Family, rurality and individual achievement

Teachers working in segregated high poverty schools are particularly challenged to fulfill the multiple roles required of them in order to meet the students' affective, physical and cognitive needs. Given the lack of resources within these schools, teachers often complained that they did not have the institutional support to deal with complex personal issues faced by some their students. However, their narratives also extend to criticisms of the 'functionality' of the families and the ability of the parents to give their children a proper upbringing:

They belong to very vulnerable families, that don't have the conditions to get ahead ... the children have unmet emotional needs and it is very evident, for example, when they are working at their desks and you go up to them and touch them they jump. (Mrs Solar, School C)

The students need more than a teacher, they need a father, a mother, a psychologist. (Mr Saez, School B)

The vast majority of our students come from rural areas, they are children from dysfunctional families, they lack many things, and we have to create expectations in order for them to carry on studying. (Mr Valencia, School A)

Many of the children don't have well-formed habits for studying at home, despite our efforts to create them, and many don't want to continue studying – they would rather work so by ninth or tenth grade they drop out ... so the teachers here try to motivate them, and even accommodate to those working so they can carry on with their studies. (Mr Manriquez, School C)

With each year that passes we have more dysfunctional, less committed families; the role of the family is passed on to the school, so now we fulfill that role. (Mr Venegas, School D)

While the teachers express a commitment to pedagogical ethics of care (see Owens and Ennis 2005), and a responsibility to generate higher expectations, what is most conspicuous about these narratives is the naturalizing of inequality. Although socioeconomic disadvantage is recognized by some of the participants, it is almost exclusively used as a descriptive term; as something possessed or lacking, rather than as a social determinant of opportunities to be challenged. The matter-of-factness present in teachers' narratives about the student family backgrounds suggests a belief that the mobilizing possibilities offered by education are in some way overwhelmed or drowned-out by family culture. Generating higher expectations, according to the teachers, is a matter of working against family characteristics by locating individuals who can be molded to the values and norms of the staff culture. As Fine (1993) suggests, teachers working in school environments with marginalized students tend to be pessimistic about the chances of changing their futures, generating belief systems that range from 'things can't change', or 'work with the survivors', to 'I do the best job I can' (Fine 1993, 155–157). The author argues that teachers tend to see their role as getting the

best out of promising students while simultaneously managing (disciplining or throwing out) trouble-makers. Similarly, Pollock et al. (2010) note that this pessimism among teachers working with multicultural classrooms tends to gravitate around three central inflections: a lack of concrete actions or steps to intervene, the inadequacy of individual power or agency when facing structural inequalities, and a lack of personal training to cope professionally. The result is that teachers tend to adopt an 'either-or' approach (either you can or you cannot) that closes down opportunities to inquire how these tensions can be addressed, rather than view them as ongoing issues to be resolved dialogically over time in the contexts where they work.

Our interviewees expressed similarly one-sided ideas about their abilities to change the status quo, focusing on negative student backgrounds and their potential. Specifically, that parents from agricultural backgrounds, 'do not see a future to pursue in education' (Mr Manriquez, School C) or, 'parents at this school ... do not see beyond their own noses because as long as they get a 5,0 [mid-range grade] everything is fine' (Female, non-indigenous, parent at School C). Both comments, observed at School C where 67% of students are indigenous, are racially coded in that rurality, family dysfunction, and vulnerability become more politically acceptable terms for expressing backwardness and lack of commitment to education among the indigenous-majority school population. There was, for example, no questioning about the cultural appropriateness of the education offered, or regarding the incompatibility between agricultural vocations, school annual calendars and parental commitments (See Castagno and Brayboy 2008). More significantly, narratives about the overlapping effects of being indigenous from isolated rural agricultural homesteads were conspicuously absent.

Teachers working in these contexts (high indigenous composition, rural/semi-rural, poor schools) seem more inclined to focus on factors other than their teaching strategies to explain student motivation and outcomes (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane 2004). Congruent with neo-liberal ideals of individual effort and rewards, successful students are those who 'overcome' the deficiencies of their home backgrounds, or those whom the teachers manage to transform:

One can always achieve regardless of their socio-economic status. Unfortunately though, it does influence things. You have to be a very methodic or organised person to make it, but it can be done, it can be done ... if the child has that spirit of getting on, of motivating him/herself, he/she can achieve anything. (Mrs Contreras, School D)

We have seen instances where a child from a very humble family, with parents with little education, but a well-formed family – I don't mean others, I don't want to be accused of discrimination, rather I mean well-formed in the sense of having a supportive mother and father – and that child goes very far because of the family behind him/her. (Mr Venegas, School D)

Normative values about the functioning family unit are deeply embedded in this taken-for-granted idea regarding socio-economic disparities. That is, the students' cultural and economic backgrounds are thought to be a matter of having and not having; shortcomings in regards to constitution rather than as being structurally ingrained inequalities in society. As Mr Venegas alludes to, there is a concern among some participants in relation to the anti-discrimination law implemented in Chile from 2012 to avoid being interpreted as classist or racist. Interviewees generally recognize that ability is not determined by one's social class, but as we address in the section that follows, their emphasis on individual merit is such that when asked about the aggregate effects on achievement when attending poor rural or semi-rural schools, most remain unable to account for structural barriers.

School choice, test-scores, and socioeconomic comparisons

The inequitable nature of school choice policy for socioeconomic groupings is well established, particularly given the severity of residential segregation in prominent cities, and the market-oriented nature of schooling which has ‘highly unregulated admission policies’ (Valenzuela, Bellei, and Ríos 2014, 221). In contexts of rural residential isolation, school choices for low-income families are especially restricted by their social capital and the information available to them (Elacqua and Fábrega 2004). When asked about how parents came to send their children to the case study schools most cited recommendations by family, neighbors or friends, free school transport, and low enrollment costs (part of a co-payment system). Parents who were interviewed in our case study schools generally expressed gratitude and satisfaction regarding the ‘freedom’ afforded to them to choose their schools, despite the limited criteria available to them. Affordability and accessibility of schools take preference over concerns regarding quality of schooling. When asked about the quality of these establishments, and whether they knew the schools’ national tests scores⁸ before enrolling their children, only one of nine parents interviewed had accessed this information. Consequently, parents are reluctant to see inequality wherever a school is ‘chosen’:

I think it’s fair, there is no difference – with the new reform one can choose the school, but everyone has different criteria – everyone looks for a school according to what each hopes for. In general I don’t think there’s a problem choosing a school. (Parent, Mapuche, School A)

Teachers were somewhat less enthusiastic about their schools being marketed as ‘open to all’. In competing with other education providers, by offering low-cost, vocational schooling, certain teachers expressed concerns about the profile of students they receive to replace those ‘creamed off’ by more educationally competitive institutions. However, market demands require that the schools accept as many students as possible since the school finances derive from state vouchers based on number of enrolments (all four are state subsidized schools):

We receive youngsters who aren’t accepted by any other school, and gee if we don’t take them, they won’t carry on with their studies, they will drop out, simple as that. (Sra. Fuentes, School A)

In the city there are all sorts of expenditures that come out of parents’ pockets, but here we pay for it. I think that’s why parents bring their children here. So they think the school will do everything, and that’s not a good way to attract students. (Mr Manriquez, School C)

The good students have a different vision – many of our best students leave in sixth grade to study a science and humanities curriculum at St. Agustina [psudonym] ... Private schools get better results not just in SIMCE but also in PSU (university entrance exam) because they have more resources, and better social relations. Here by contrast the youngsters don’t even go to the nearest cities, so their relationships are restricted. (Mr Valencia, School A)

The school culture that emerges from our conversations with parents and teachers is one in which the effects of segregation are ever-present, but rarely referred to in these terms. Teachers, for example, preferred to speak of competition between schools and parental/student options for changing schools, rather than monopoly of school types or constraints imposed by the school financing system. School choice is viewed – not dissimilar to social class background – as open to individual opportunities. One of the effects of school choice policies, evident in the preceding extracts, is that it minimizes teachers’ accountability to learning outcomes (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane 2004). Mrs Fuentes for example, argues that were it not for their efforts, students would drop-out of schooling altogether,

thereby reinforcing a compromised message that any achievement is better than none. Mr Valencia recognizes that many of the students in his school do not have the same material resources at home, access to cities, or opportunities to develop socially heterogeneous relationships as those in schools following a more academic curriculum. His narrative, while acknowledging social determinants affecting his school population, naturalizes the tendency for high-achieving students to change schools in sixth grade, and for those with lesser grades to remain in an inequitably distributed establishment. Like Mr Valencia, many of the interviewees had developed taken-for-granted notions about the average student abilities within their establishments. Their emphasis gravitated mostly around ‘doing the best one can with what one has’, and providing opportunities to those who achieve, rather than critically opposing the inequalities faced by those left without any school choice.

When the teaching staff were asked to evaluate their schools’ ranking in the national system, many reiterated that following the advice of the Ministry of Education they assess their students’ national test scores (SIMCE) in relation to schools with comparative socio-economic levels or status. On the one hand, this practice avoids overly critical and unrealistic targets set by education policy (such as No Child Left Behind in the US, for example). However, on the other, it has the effect of re-endorsing ideas about individual family deficit. This impedes predominantly white teachers from seeing intersecting inequality that is specific to contexts of high indigenous composition, low quality education, and poorly resourced schools in post-colonial spaces of the Araucanía Region. Instead, these schools – within the technical rationality logic of SIMCE results – become one of many municipal or private subsidized non-profit, low-income, under-achieving national institutions:

I don’t want to detract from the school’s efforts but if you do the simple calculation any given teacher working in a low achieving school might get their students to reach 230 points in SIMCE, and the following year in a private school the same teacher will get students to reach 300 points, even using the same methods. The answer is the family’s socio-economic position. If you compare SIMCE by socio-economic group – something the municipality encourage us to do with other public schools in the region – we are comparatively competitive. (Mr Saez, School B)

If you look at the national standard, we are below it. But if you compare us with the schools in the same category as ourselves, with the same socio-cultural déficit, it’s different. In the children’s homes there often isn’t even a single magazine, or if you put the children in front of a computer and ask them to do some work instead of a game, they look at you as if you are speaking chinese to them. We are doing well with those kids. (Mrs Fuentes, School A)

I personally don’t think that it [socio-economic status] affects anything – they are always talking about gaps and inequalities, but I myself was educated in a rural school and when a person wants to, they can achieve – it takes a lot of effort, but it can be done. That’s what I try to communicate to the students but if we keep looking at our level within the national mean, of course we will always be talking about gaps and inequality. (Mr Manriquez, School C)

Good grades, then, frequently become crystallized as the work of individual motivation and good teaching practice, while negative results owe to individual failure and inadequate family environments. The only exception to this discourse came from Mr Saez who recognized the cultural bias in the SIMCE testing, and the segregated effects of the schooling system:

We have families who come from remote areas, and generally the people from the countryside are very intelligent with a great deal of knowledge, but that isn’t measured by SIMCE ... Since the system is segregated, a child from the countryside doesn’t get to relate to someone with lots

of resources; there is no dialogue between them which is where learning takes place. That's key ... Children from private and subsidised schools don't mix. (Mr Saez, School B)

This participant was an especially isolated voice in regards to expressing more critical and socially determined sources of inequality among segregated school populations. As noted earlier in the article, the everyday effects of staff culture and organizational habitus drown out individual teacher expectations that attempt to challenge prevailing attitudes about the school culture. Mr Saez's critique of the SIMCE and its cultural bias are lost in School B – as in our other case study schools – where indigenous inequalities are silenced. This is largely attributable to the school's prestige in the local community on account of its SIMCE score. Although Mr Saez is well positioned to instigate changes (as the academic coordinator), the pressure to maintain the school's standing, and resulting salary bonuses paid to its teachers, mean that these critiques remain fairly muted. This is especially the case in regards to our questions posed to the participants about the possible detrimental effects of having high indigenous compositions in the schools. The socioeconomic conditions of the schools' student populations reinforces color-blindness on account of the fact that they are among the poorest pupils in the country which tends to blot out recognition of ethnic inequalities.

Silencing indigenous inequality

Language scores are low, low because of the low level among the families, and since there are a lot of Mapuche communities, vocabulary is limited, they speak incorrectly and write incorrectly. That's why it is low. (Mrs Solar, School C)

Apart from Mrs Solar, the only teacher to directly name Mapuche communities as an educationally disadvantaged group (cited above), the remaining interviewees denied the possibility that indigenous status could be in some way connected to low attainments. For the purposes of comparison, and to demonstrate the continuity of this narrative among teachers (and one parent) in different schools, we cite six different responses:

No, no, I mean, no, no, it has to do with the student, family support, but not race or finances. (Parent, Female, School B)

No no, I don't think so, I don't think it's related [high ethnic composition and lower test scores], not at all, that would be like, er, completely discriminatory toward a student for having Mapuche ethnicity. (Mrs Salazar, School B)

No, no, I don't think that, I wouldn't even have imagined that, no, I think it is only related to the motivation that they or their families have, I cannot see how it could be related to it. (Mrs Barraza, School A)

No, ah now that I definitely don't think ethnicity influences ... it doesn't influence much, at all in fact. No, why would having a Mapuche origin or Chilean or German origin influence. The family environment has an influence, but their surname doesn't, nor their ancestry, no. (Mrs Fuentes, School A)

No, honestly I don't think so. Being Mapuche wouldn't make a kid more or less intelligent. I think it is more related to the economic side of things. (Mr Valencia, School A)

I think there are Mapuche students who are intelligent, just like other cultures. That's not related, no it's got nothing to do with that. I think it is a family issue, homes that are badly constituted, and I know a lot of cases. It's mainly that. There is a lot of alcoholism, at weekends, and those factors are negative influences. (Sr. Manriquez, School C)

The linguistic overlap of repetitive negation in these narratives is most likely attributable to the same anti-discrimination law mentioned earlier and its social sanctions; the interviewees are aware of the controversy surrounding the implications of associating ethnicity and achievement and use evasion as a form of self-defense. Following the same logic applied to socioeconomic status, the teaching staff emphasizes the individuality of each students' abilities and academic potential in meritocratic terms. While recognizing the importance of parental involvement and support, they deny and silence (following Fine's definition as the fear to name) the existence of structured inequality that is common to large proportions of the school's student body. Critical reflection and discussion of these issues among teachers are prevented by their immediate and initial denial. Abstract liberalism and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) occur by imputing the individual qualities of all students, regardless of ethnicity. According to Mr Manriquez, individuals from all cultures may express intelligence, but alcoholism and poorly constituted families are cited as the cultural deficits among this particular school population. Hence his rejection of explicitly racist associations between achievements and indigenous majority schools are replaced by culturally racist forms that avoid naming any specific ethnic or socioeconomic group. Mr Venegas also exemplifies the minimization of racism by drawing on a personal relationship with an indigenous teacher and friend:

Our teacher Lidia Curinao [pseudonym], is Mapuche; she was a fellow-student at university with me where we were on the same course, and now we are back together again here ... She has a Masters from England, and is now in Argentina planning our curriculum. So imagine, how could I be despective toward one [ethnie] over another? (Mr Venegas, School D)

The principal emphasizes the individual accomplishment, and his close relationship to, a Mapuche colleague so as to distance himself from any racist implications between ethnic origin and lower achievements. This reaction, like those of other teachers cited above, poses an instantaneous rejection of reflecting on the possible social forces operating in the school community and the region in a more critical manner. Consistent with our findings about geographical residence and socioeconomic backgrounds, staff culture in these schools is individualistic but simultaneously universalistic. That is, all students are alike in that they have social backgrounds that are less favorable toward high educational achievement, but each individual should hypothetically, with the correct motivation, be able to achieve in spite of their backgrounds. Whiteness as a 'normative identity' (Dickar 2008, 124) is reproduced by teachers in these high ethnic composition schools through un-differentiated, color-blind terms.

I think it's the same for all; all are equal, there is no difference because everyone studies the same, so you can't compare one group with another. There's no difference – they [Mapuche] are on a level footing with the others. (Mrs Contreras, School D)

Here there is a lot of emphasis placed on diversity, so we've had additional training, and days for school reflection on accepting those who are different; especially regarding aspergers – we've received specialist talks on this issue. But here the issue of being Mapuche and non-Mapuche is not discussed; no differences are made because everyone is treated equally. I've never seen a school year where they single out the Mapuche student in the corner – no, never. (Mrs Panguilef, School D)

In this final example, Mrs Panguilef, the only Mapuche teacher to be interviewed, reduces diversity to non-racial issues of difference. In relation to Sleeter's observation that white teachers claim to only see students, rather than race (2004, 168), in our case even ethnic

minority teachers may succumb to this staff culture of color-blind racism. That is, Mrs Panguilef begins by stating that it is within the school establishment that being Mapuche is a non-issue, before specifying how her own practices have been influenced. As an extension of racialized society, and the predominantly white world of teaching, same-ethnic principals and teachers may also be capable of reproducing deficit-based narratives and internalized racism regarding ethnic minority students (See Khalifa 2015). In these contexts, indigenous teachers become legitimizing agents for establishing those unrecognized whitened norms to which minorities must adhere.

Conclusions

Our paper addresses teacher and administrative staffs' opinions regarding inequality in highly segregated school contexts and the ways their narratives speak of a staff culture that is complicit in the silencing of social injustice and barriers to equitable forms of education. As Fine states, 'to not mention racism is as political a stance as is a thoroughgoing discussion of its dynamics' (2003, 35). We have argued that conformity to these silenced forms stem from wider education policies that fail to recognize differences between intersecting forms of inequality: social class and ethnicity. Critical dialog regarding the wide ranging, everyday and implicit ways that racism intersects with issues of class, (as well as gender, age, and religion) enables these dichotomies to be challenged, yet teachers lose this transformative potential by giving priority to individual explanations for differential achievements (Giroux 1988). As noted in our analysis, teachers' narratives are generally conservative, apolitical and meritocratic ideologies of schooling which implicitly assume anti-racism to be a passive non-recognition of difference.

Bonilla-Silva's concept of color-blind racism fits with the Chilean context and the accompanying narratives voiced by teaching staff. The author's four frames of color-blindness (2006) were observed in our case study: indigenous and non-indigenous students are all valued equally as human beings (abstract liberalism), are thought to be equally capable, individually, of achieving educational 'success' but only according to their class positioning (naturalization), are culturally hindered by their rural upbringing (cultural racism), and only face discrimination in the adult world outside the school (minimization). Racially coded language, in these contexts, fills in the silences left by the fear of naming racism, allowing everyday institutional life to continue uninterrupted. In particular we detailed teacher and administrative staffs' narratives about family backgrounds, school choice, aggregate achievements on test-scores and the denial of indigenous inequalities.

Even where more critical opinions are expressed (for example our interview with Mr Saez, School B), staff culture is a potent form of organizational habitus that prevents individual criticisms of inequality from transforming the school culture. White-majority teachers⁹ in high ethnic composition schools tend to be complicit in as much that colonial histories of territorial usurpation, nationalistic assimilation, and whitened privilege are misrecognized as owing to individual effort, family support and adherence to teacher motivation. Teachers, on the other hand, fail to recognize or name the culturally biased curricula, low teacher expectations, insufficient information for parents surrounding school choice and quality of education, limited resources and materials. These are just some of the intersecting and structurally inequitable forms of schooling that students from these ethnically segregated high poverty schools face.

Existing education policies aimed at improving indigenous students' access to, and experience of, education have generally overlooked the effects of segregation. Although financial assistance is provided to schools with high proportions of socioeconomically 'vulnerable' students goes some way to addressing existing segregation, indigenous forms of this same problem remain silenced. We suggest that silencing filters down into classrooms where predominantly white teachers are ill-prepared to work in multicultural environments, and express an unwillingness or incapacity to recognize specific forms of institutional inequality. As Pollock observes, 'Silence about such patterns, of course, allows them to remain intact: racial patterns do not go away simply because they are ignored' (2005:170). It is unlikely that the detrimental effects of indigenous segregated education will be transformed until teacher training incorporates more critical approaches to the political contexts surrounding these schools.

Notes

1. The Mapuche are the largest indigenous group in Chile, comprising 84.4% of the indigenous population, and 7.7% of the national population (CASEN 2013).
2. Despite the implementation of an intercultural and bilingual education program in Chile, teachers are not trained to work within high composition indigenous contexts.
3. As discussed later in the article, indigenous populations are distinct from other ethnic categories such as urban migrants, but we use the term ethnic composition and indigenous composition interchangeably.
4. The data presented in this paragraph is based on the authors' descriptive analysis of national test score data.
5. Inter-marriage, social mobility and assimilation have contributed to the diffusiveness of mestizaje and indigeneity in Chile. High levels of exogamy among the Mapuche have challenged Chile's racial ideology (Mateo Piñones and Valenzuela Carvallo 2017) but it is unusual to hear racial categories of mestizaje such as 'chamurrria' used in Chilean society.
6. We note that although some schools employ more indigenous teachers, many of these are part-time roles with less responsibility, as we discuss later in greater detail.
7. Two parents' opinions are included here, though parent and student 'voices' will be addressed in greater detail in a separate paper.
8. We acknowledge that aggregate school test score results are a relatively poor indicator of quality of education. We detail other aspects in this section.
9. Luna (2015) also notes that ethnic minority (Mapuche) teachers are also susceptible to assimilating these racialized understandings.

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