

Education reforms and its impact on the educational experiences of recently arrived Black immigrant students in Chile

Introduction

In 2006 when thousands of students from public schools took over the streets of Chile with posters that said “Education is not for sale: public, free and quality education for all” they did not know that 13 years later “all” was going to include people from different countries, races, and who did not speak Spanish as a first language. At the time, the students were demanding to remove the market-oriented practices from the system to achieve socioeconomic desegregation. Today, the educational reforms that are currently under implementation to meet their demands are impacting the educational experiences of a group that has been mostly ignored by community activists, policymakers, and academics in Chile: immigrant students who identify as Black. The purpose of my fieldwork in Chile was to talk with the actors directly involved on the one hand, on providing educational opportunities to immigrant students and on the other, on implementing de-marketization reforms in Chilean public schools. I wanted to know firsthand how the changes that aimed to remove market-oriented practices, which brought high levels of socioeconomic segregation into Chilean schools, are impacting the experiences of recently arrived immigrant students. I selected and contacted two schools with high percentage of immigrant enrollment and students who qualify for extra government subsidy and support. One was a voucher school that following the de-marketization reforms had stop charging copayment to families and also stop selecting students. The second was a traditional public school that had been under the administration of a newly implemented institution called local services of education. This institution had been created to strengthen traditional public schools and improve the education quality of public schools.

Background

The relevance of my project resides on a sudden and dramatic increase in the immigrant population in Chile. According to an abbreviated census conducted in 2017, 750.000 immigrants live in Chile, which represents almost 4% of the country. Out of those, 66,7% arrived after 2010, and 35% after 2016. Captured another way, between 2012 and 2017 the immigrant population in Chile increased by 300% (INE, 2017). These demographic changes have directly impacted the education system. The presence of immigrant students doubled between 2016 and 2017 and the decline in enrollment experienced by the public schools since the early 1990s has stopped in recent years mainly due to the enrollment of the newcomers (Bellei et al., 2018). According to the Ministry of Education, in 2017, 57% of immigrant students were enrolled in public schools. In the same year, only 35% of the students in Chile enrolled in such schools, while 55% enrolled in voucher schools and nearly 10% in private schools (Fernández, 2018).

Method

To achieve the goal of my research, I obtained IRB approval to conducted 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews that lasted one hour on average. I interviewed the following actors: immigrant students (from Venezuela, Haiti, and Colombia), Chilean students, teachers, principals, head of school convivence, government officials, public policy actors, academics working on education policy and immigration, and NGO professionals. All interviews were transcribed, and I am currently on the process of analyzing the data. Additionally, I visited and conducted onsite observation of two schools.

Preliminary findings

After visiting the two schools and interviewing policy actors and government officials, I was able to conclude that schools are only receiving administrative support to welcome immigrant students. They receive guidance about enrollment and about how to add students to the system to receive governmental funding to educate immigrant students. Recently arrived students can be enrolled in the system and start attending school as early as one week after they arrive in Chile. However, what happens with their learning process and their social inclusion is all in the hands of the schools.

Due to the freedom to assign the use of resources in charter schools, they could set aside funds to hire professionals that support the inclusion and integration of immigrant students into the school. The school that served as a site for this project hired two teachers who had specialized in learning Spanish as a second language and a cultural mediator that spoke Creole and Spanish. The reality of traditional public school was very different. The school was labeled as “insufficient” by the ministry of education. This means that their enrollment and results on standardized test had decreased systematically. The traditional public school has been able to remain open because immigrant students had back away the decrease in enrollment, but because the school had not received any guidance on how to support immigrant students their results on standardized test has remained very poor. Discrimination and racism against black students were present in both schools, but mostly in forms of colorblind discrimination. On the one hand, students felt discriminated against but through microaggressions and in indirect ways. On the other hand, Chilean students and teachers mostly said that race discrimination was not prevalent in their school.

Policy actors and governmental official are aware of the needs of schools with a high percentage of immigrant students, especially of those schools with high enrollment of students who do not speak Spanish as a first language. Nonetheless all the resources are focused on making sure that immigrant students attend school, not on the educational experience they would have after begin attending school. The interviewees also agreed on the lack of preparation as a country to welcome immigrants in general, from an administrative and social perspective. They recognized that racism and discrimination must be fought at school level, but there are no plans or activities in place to achieve such goal. The schools are working on the go. All the tools and resources that they are implementing to integrate immigrant students better are a result of an independent and isolated work conducted by school personnel that in many cases must work outside of their duties and during extra hours.

After the fieldwork conducted in Chile, I was able to conclude that the education reforms that aim the improve the education quality, especially for the students most in need, are failing one group in particular: immigrant students.

Conclusion

Conducting this research was very demanding and challenging. Entering the school space and gaining the trust of the participants to talk about sensitive issues such as racism, discrimination, and social exclusion was not easy for many reasons. First, such topics are not openly discussed in Chile. Second, time is a very scarce resource at the school level, especially for teachers, principals, and other school administrators. Finally, I arrived in Chile one week before a national strike of teachers paralyzed the whole public education system for 50 days. However, regardless of the challenges, I was able to conduct the interviews and visit the schools for one week.

References

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