



School Admissions and Educational Justice: Parents' Moral Dilemmas Facing the New Chilean School Admission System¹

Macarena Hernández

Centro de Justicia Educacional, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Chile

Alejandro Carrasco

Faculty of Education, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Chile

Angélica Bonilla

Universidad Alberto Hurtado – Universidad Diego Portales
Chile



Ngairé Honey

Institute of Education Sciences, Universidad de O'Higgins
Chile

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Abstract: In the context of the increased interest in social justice within education policy debates, this article addresses the new justice-oriented school admission system

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implemented in Chile. Considering the critical role of parents in education policy, we explore families' negotiations about the new school admission system, focusing on the moral dilemmas they experience when confronted with changes in the rules that organize the distribution of school seats and the notions of educational justice they adhere to. We draw on interviews with 80 families from different social classes and belonging to five regions of Chile who were choosing a school under the new school admission system. Our findings underline that—while families tend to agree with the principle of equal formal opportunities in the school admission field—the reform brings in a set of moral dilemmas and competing notions of justice that encompass its different components. Based on these findings, we shed light on the distance between policy intention and interpretation, and between abstract conceptualizations of justice in educational policies and what counts as just policies in families' views. In addition, we outline a set of implications for justice-oriented reforms worldwide.

Keywords: educational justice; parents; moral dilemmas; school admission system; Chile

Admisiones escolares y justicia educacional: Los dilemas morales de las familias al confrontar el nuevo sistema de admisión escolar chileno

Resumen: En el contexto del creciente interés por la justicia social dentro de los debates de política educativa, este artículo aborda el nuevo sistema de admisión escolar orientado a la justicia educacional implementado en Chile. Tomando en cuenta el papel fundamental de los padres y madres en la política educativa, exploramos las negociaciones de las familias sobre el nuevo sistema de admisión escolar, centrándonos en los dilemas morales que experimentan cuando se enfrentan a cambios en las reglas que organizan la distribución de los cupos escolares y sus nociones de justicia educativa al respecto. Nos basamos en entrevistas a 80 familias de diferentes clases sociales y pertenecientes a cinco regiones de Chile que estaban en proceso de elegir una escuela a través del nuevo sistema de admisión escolar. Nuestros hallazgos subrayan que—si bien las familias tienden a valorar el principio de igualdad de oportunidades formales en el ámbito de la admisión escolar—la reforma conlleva un conjunto de dilemas morales y nociones de justicia contrapuestas en sus distintos componentes. Basándonos en estos resultados, discutimos la distancia entre las intenciones y las interpretaciones de las políticas educativas, y entre las conceptualizaciones abstractas de la justicia y lo que las familias definen como políticas justas. Además, esbozamos una serie de implicancias para las reformas orientadas a la justicia educativa alrededor del mundo.

Palabras-clave: justicia educacional; familias; dilemas morales; sistema de admisión escolar; Chile

Admissões escolares e justiça educacional: Os dilemas morais das famílias ao enfrentar o novo sistema de admissão escolar chileno

Resumo: No contexto do crescente interesse pela justiça social dentro dos debates da política educativa, esse artigo aborda o novo sistema de admissão escolar orientado à justiça educacional implementado no Chile. Levando em conta o papel fundamental dos pais e mães na política educativa, exploramos as negociações das famílias sobre o novo sistema de admissão escolar, centrando-nos nos dilemas morais que experimentam quando enfrentam as mudanças nas regras que organizam a distribuição das vagas escolares e as noções de justiça educativa a que aderem. Baseamos-nos em entrevistas com 80 famílias de diferentes classes sociais e pertencentes a cinco regiões do Chile que estavam escolhendo

escola através do novo sistema de admissão escolar. Nossos resultados evidenciam que—ainda que as famílias tendam a estar de acordo com o princípio da igualdade de oportunidades formais no âmbito da admissão escolar—a reforma traz um conjunto de dilemas morais e noções de justiça contrapostas em seus distintos componentes.

Baseando-nos nesses resultados, discutimos a distância entre as intenções e as interpretações das políticas educativas e entre as conceitualizações abstratas de justiça e o que se definem como políticas justas desde o ponto de vista das famílias. Além disso, esboçamos uma série de implicações para as reformas orientadas à justiça educativa ao redor do mundo.

Palavras-chave: justiça educativa; famílias; dilemas morais; sistema de admissão escolar; Chile

School Admissions and Educational Justice: Parents' Moral Dilemmas Facing the New Chilean School Admission System

Parents are an increasingly important policy actor in education policy. In the context of the global quest for education justice, some of the opportunities and challenges of reform are related to families' views about what constitutes a just education system (Keddie, 2012). This translates into the relevance of entering the normative dimension of justice-oriented reforms to understand parental approaches to educational justice and the conflicts and negotiations within their policy interpretations. In this line, this paper explores the moral dilemmas experienced by Chilean parents facing a new justice-driven school admission system and discusses its policy implications.

During the last few decades, there has been an increased interest in social justice within educational policy debates (Francis et al., 2017). This tendency has been partly prompted by the spread of market-based reforms in education and the growing body of evidence regarding its adverse effects on equity (e.g., Zancajo & Bonal, 2020). Much of the discussion has focused on the global expansion of school choice policies and the school admission systems in which parents practice choice. The advent of school choice programs has been accompanied by a rise in research from diverse disciplinary fields and methods (Berends et al., 2020). On the one hand, quantitative outcome-based studies focused on the effects of school choice policies on students' achievement have yielded inconclusive or mixed results (Berends, 2021). While valuable, these studies have been criticized for not capturing “the fuller social contexts and processes in and through which school choice policies and practices operate” (Potterton et al., 2020, p. 4). In response to this gap, on the other hand, extensive sociological research has investigated parental explications for choice and the weight of class and race in families' decision-making, showing how white and middle-class parents take advantage of these new market environments (e.g., Ball, 2003). These studies have concluded the influence of school choice on social reproduction and segregation of school systems (e.g., Dixson et al., 2019).

Alongside the mounting empirical evidence on school choice from these two strands of research, a passionate philosophical debate has developed around principles of liberty, pluralism, autonomy, democracy, equity, and justice embedded in this kind of reform (Wilson, 2017). While these theoretical debates have illuminated crucial conceptual discussions in the field of school choice, there has been a call to reconcile philosophical scholarship and empirical studies of parental choice by exploring the “morally, ethically and politically complex nature” of families' decision making (Wilson, 2015), in which this paper is situated. This implies delving into the intricate nature of parents' choices and the struggles they face when confronting this arena. Amid other topics, this line of research—mainly focused on middle-class parents from North American and European

contexts—has highlighted parents’ internal conflict between being a good parent and a good citizen when choosing schools, and the competing principles in which their choices are made (e.g., Frank & Weck, 2018; Roda and Wells, 2013). While these findings have helped to shed light on the complexity of parents’ decision-making, this line of research has certain gaps, such as the dominance of studies from the US, the UK, and other European contexts; the exclusive concentration on the professional upper middle class; and the focus of studies on choice itself with lesser attention on families’ approaches towards the specific rules that frame their schooling decisions, i.e., the school admissions systems (Lareau et al., 2016).

The case of Chile and its recent school admission reform appears as an opportune scenario for addressing these gaps. In the context of a universal school choice model in which each school maintained its own procedures and rules of admission, the reform introduced a centralized admission system that prohibited selectivity with the broader aim of desegregating the education landscape. This system may be considered an attempt to temper parental choice by some social justice considerations (West, 2006). To date, the new admission system has captured significant attention worldwide and has stimulated a rich research agenda—mainly focused on key stakeholders’ visions of the reform and its early outcomes in the school desegregation (e.g., Carrasco et al., 2021; Rojas Fabris et al., 2021). While a few of these studies have introduced some of the tensions underpinning the reform’s enactment, none have profoundly addressed the moral dilemmas parents face when confronting the new principles in school admissions from an educational justice approach.

Against this background and based on the premise that social justice must be understood in specific contexts and engage with concrete dilemmas and not merely abstract conceptualizations (Gewirtz, 2006), this paper explores how Chilean parents are negotiating the reform, focusing on the moral conflicts they experience when confronted with the new rules of school admission and the notions of educational justice they adhere to. Our findings provide novel empirical evidence of the complexity of introducing new principles of justice in education policies in underexplored contexts and from a large-scale and varied qualitative sample of families. While located in Chile, the paper discusses policy implications relevant for worldwide justice-oriented reforms and provides crucial insights for global policy aimed at balancing choice and equity through changing school admissions regulations.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section sets the reform context and develops the new principles of justice introduced by the new school admission system in Chile, and the second part presents our research approach. After presenting our methods, we turn to the main findings and a discussion pointing out the main policy implications of the study.

Context: The Transition to a Justice-Oriented School Admission System in Chile

Chile presents a pioneering and radical case of a market-driven school system. The so-called neoliberal experiment radically fostered competition, privatization, and choice by implementing a universal voucher system as a competitive school funding mechanism and several incentives to expand private subsidized providers that enhanced historical freedom for parental choice. One of the most contentious features of the market competition model has been the limited regulation for private subsidized schools, which until recently were allowed to be for-profit and to charge families add-on fees and enjoy a high level of discretion for selecting students and defining their admission criteria and procedures. The main features of the market model have resulted in a privatized, atomized, and socially segregated school system (Bellei & Muñoz, 2021) that has ranked the Chilean school system as one of the most socially segregated worldwide (OECD, 2019).

In this context, the School Inclusion Law was launched in 2015 with the broad objective of reducing school socioeconomic segregation by introducing new market regulations. The reform included three major measures for schools receiving public funding: i) the end of profit-making, ii) the progressive end of copayments, and iii) the prohibition of selectivity in school admissions, through the gradual implementation of a new centralized school admission system (NSAS) -which represents a significant change for Chilean education policy. The former school admission system was completely decentralized, and each school maintained its own admission rules, criteria, priorities, timings, and procedures. Despite the previous soft regulations regarding selectivity, multiple studies have found widespread evidence of selective admissions practices, such as play sessions, student testing, or parental interviews (e.g., Carrasco et al., 2017). In contrast, the NSAS is a centralized non-selective school admission system that explicitly seeks to ensure transparency, inclusion, universal access, equity, and non-discriminatory/arbitrary criteria in admissions, while respecting the parental right to choose a school for their children. It operates through a web platform where parents must submit their school preferences (at least two in urban areas). At the end of the application period, students are allocated to schools using the deferred acceptance algorithm. In this system, all students should be assigned to their top choice if available seats exist. In oversubscribed cases, four preferential criteria of admission were established (students with a sibling in the school, a 15% quota for low-income students, students with parents who work at the school, and students who previously attended the school and left for a reason other than expulsion), after which the remaining seats are randomly assigned. The NSAS was implemented gradually in the country, starting in the Magallanes region in the 2017 school year. In 2018, it was extended to four additional regions (Tarapacá, Coquimbo, O'Higgins, and Los Lagos), before later being implemented throughout the rest of the country. The following table synthesizes the main differences between the prior and the new school admission system, which is the focus of this paper.

Table 1

Comparison between Prior and New School Admission Systems

| | Prior selective system | New school admission system (NSAS) |
|------------|--|---|
| Governance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decentralized admission system governed by each school - Each school maintained its own admission system with its own rules | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centralized system governed by the ministry of education - Single countrywide system |
| Criteria | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Soft regulations for selectivity - Widespread use of selective admission criteria in schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prohibition of selectivity set by law - All students must be accepted if there are sufficient vacancies - In cases of oversubscription, use of priority criteria of admissions and random allocation of seats |
| Procedures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-person or online applications depending on each school - Variety of practices of admissions (timing, documentation, etc.) depending on each school | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Single online platform for applications to all schools - Same procedures for all schools |

The NSAS has been considered part of recent reforms that seek to recalibrate the market to reverse or compensate for its negative effect on equity (Zancajo et al., 2021) and to balance choice and equity (OECD, 2019). From this perspective, the system may be posited as part of what West describes as a more just choice/admission system, which—while considering parental preferences—can also serve “a social justice function in terms of allowing students from different social or ability groups to have an authentic choice of schools and ensuring a social mix that is likely to optimize achievement levels and reduce polarization and segregation of schools” (West, 2006, p. 29). In this regard, the NSAS introduces new principles in distributing school seats that are considered initial steps to move closer to an ideally just distribution (Schouten & Brighthouse, 2014).

Since the NSAS is a complex policy incorporating changes in various aspects of the admission system, such as its criteria, purposes, and expected impact, an operationalization of its core elements is required to specify its justice approach. Hence, we disaggregate the NSAS into four components that encompass the main justice-oriented changes in admissions set by the reform: i) Allocation criteria: the NSAS eliminates exclusionary admission practices based on ascriptive characteristics of children and tests of student’s academic ability. With this change, the new system promotes the principle of equal opportunity in the school admission arena by restricting the range of permissible sources of educational inequality in the distribution of school seats (Schouten & Brighthouse, 2014); ii) Preferential criteria: the NSAS introduces four factors of preferential admission in cases of oversubscription, which are based on convenience/practical aspects for parents (e.g., having siblings in the school) and on a redistribution principle that set a quota for disadvantaged students. Therefore, the principle of equal opportunity is combined with a principle of priority (Schouten & Brighthouse, 2014) that gives preference to worst-off or less advantaged groups in cases of over-subscription; (iii) System’s purpose: the NSAS—while ensuring the private interest of parents in school choice—introduces a public orientation in admissions by seeking the optimal collective outcome in the distribution of seats, which is ensured by the use of the deferred-acceptance algorithm (Oyarzún et al., 2021). Yet, the system, while introducing a macro-level justice approach (Gewirtz, 2006) in admissions, translates into the micro-level, as its search for the collective optimal implies that families may confront some inadequacy in their school assignment (i.e., not being assigned to its first choice) in order to improve opportunities for all children; iv) Reform’s expected impact: the NSAS has the broader objective of desegregating the school system and promoting a socially inclusive conception of schooling.

In this background, this paper explores how families negotiate these new justice orientations in school admissions, focusing on revealing the moral dilemmas they face when navigating into these components and the notions of educational justice embedded in them.

Research Framework and Related Literature: Exploring Educational Justice Policies in “the Real World”

Harry Brighthouse—one of the leading philosophers of education interested in justice and education—asserts that “education policy ... should be guided principally by considerations of justice” (Brighthouse, 2008, p. 41). However, he notes, in unjust societies, justice is complex and “is not simply captured by identifying a single value (e.g., educational equality) because other values are also important” (Brighthouse, 2008, p.41). Consistent with this perspective and within the field of school choice policies and admission rules, philosophical scholarship has extensively debated the purposes, aims, and values of these reforms, organizing the main disputes around principles such as liberty, rights, pluralism, equality, and democracy (Wilson, 2017).

Among other topics, two controversial issues related to justice have dominated the theoretical debates about school choice and fair admission systems: freedom of choice and equal

opportunity. Regarding the first, many proponents of school choice policies tend to emphasize freedom of choice as a relevant value for its own sake (Howe, 2006). For their part, Brighouse, Ladd, Loeb and Swift (2018) argue that, while not indisputable, parents have a particularly strong claim to it, since they have invaluable relationships with their children, and invest money, time, and emotion to ensure their well-being. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why freedom of education is a well-recognized right in most countries. However, sometimes State intervention can best serve freedom of choice. In this regard, Sigal Ben-Porath (2010) has crafted a compelling argument for ‘structured paternalism’, i.e., that the State should “take an active role in equalizing and expanding opportunities rather than leaving it to individuals to make up their life story, under the false pretense that they are doing it as free and equal members of society” (pp. 41-42). Therefore, enlarging the availability and accessibility of quality options for all, without which choice can be rendered meaningless, could also be a way of enhancing freedom of choice. This later argument brings us to the second issue: equality of opportunities, which has been a key argument for school choice advocates, especially regarding, for example, school choice programs for children living in poor neighborhoods (Schouten & Brighouse, 2014). Nevertheless, other authors have questioned the egalitarian potential of choice policies, considering them an unfeasible and flawed reform that makes things worse in terms of social justice (Foster, 2002)—e.g., by increasing social and racial segregation (Wilson & Bridge, 2019)—since parental partiality may clash with the State’s duty to promote the common good. So, limiting school choice for the sake of equality may imply accepting some degree of inadequacy in the school attended, based on the imperative of moving towards a collective “share of the burdens of injustice” (Clayton & Stevens, 2004).

Beyond this extensive theoretical debate, several researchers have advocated for an empirical exploration of these philosophical understandings in “the real world”, developing an explicit interest in linking the philosophy of education, empirical research, and policymaking (Bischoff & Shores, 2014; Schouten & Brighouse, 2015). In this line, there has been a call to expand upon how school actors weigh and negotiate competing moral and ethical goods in the non-ideal complex grounds of their actual experience (Wilson, 2015), and to understand justice within specific contexts (Gewirtz, 2006), in which we frame our research. Consistent with this approach, there has been a growing interest in discussing educational actors’ notions of justice and the practical dilemmas they face in the “real world” (Levinson & Fay, 2016), where values not only clash but also face feasibility constraints (Bischoff & Shores, 2014). In school choice research a rising trend of studies has focused on parents and the competing values they confront when making their schooling decisions, in which they tend to mobilize notions of justice in education, often in tension. Most of the literature on this topic has been focused on middle-class parents in countries such as the US (e.g., Roda & Wells, 2013), France (e.g., Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007), Germany (Frank & Weck, 2018) and England (e.g., Reay et al., 2011), and has underlined the internal struggles families’ face between being a good parent or a good citizen, i.e., the tensions between the interest of providing the best education for their children and the contribution to the egalitarian ideals of public schooling (e.g., Frank & Weck, 2018; Reay et al., 2011; Roda & Wells, 2013). While these studies have provided valuable evidence of parents’ moral dilemmas and approaches to justice within school choice environments, this strand of research has several gaps, such as the overwhelming dominance of studies situated in North American and European contexts, the exclusive attention to the professional upper middle class, and the focus of studies on choice itself with lesser attention to families’ perceptions of the rules that frame their schooling decisions, i.e., the school admissions systems (Lareau et al., 2016).

Considering these gaps, we argue that the reform implemented in Chile is a key scenario to expand the understanding of these ethical dilemmas in underexplored contexts and with a varied sample of family profiles. Given its strong tradition of universal school choice, as well as extreme

privatization, the assessments and accommodations parents make when confronted with the new set of rules for school admissions that frame their school choice decisions do not reflect oppositions like those of public/private or comprehensive/selective education, but mainly a question about the legitimate ways to exercise their freedom of choice and their parental prerogatives. Thus, we focus on the moral conflicts parents experience when confronted with the alleged justice principles introduced by the reform and the notions of educational justice attached to families' concerns, grievances, and agreements. The broader aim of this analysis is to provide valuable empirical evidence for policy discussions regarding justice-oriented reforms in education and the role parents' opinions may play in them.

Method

To explore the moral dilemmas experienced by parents when confronted with the NSAS and their notions of educational justice, we rely on a qualitative approach, which has been highlighted in educational studies as especially relevant for addressing philosophical questions through empirical research (Wilson, 2015) and for philosophically-oriented policy research (Schouten & Brighouse, 2015). Data is based on a broader study investigating families' perceptions of the NSAS and their school choice practices, which was approved by the university's Internal Review Board.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 80 mothers, fathers, or caregivers who were in the process of choosing a school for their children's first year of schooling using the NSAS in five regions of Chile (Tarapacá, Coquimbo, O'Higgins, Los Lagos, and Magallanes) in which—as stated previously—the reform was first implemented in 2017 and 2018. Sampling criteria included: i) families living in mixed-SES, low-SES, and a small portion of high-SES urban neighborhoods, and with diverse educational levels, through which we sought to arrive at a heterogeneous set of parents in terms of their social class; and ii) with and without direct previous experiences of school choice under the old admission system, which we anticipated as a source of variation in parents' perceptions of the NSAS. Table 2 presents the main characteristics of the participants. Our sampling strategy resulted in a diverse group of parents in terms of their SES and their experience with the previous admission system. All families are located in urban areas—in which school choice research is generally focused—and—in line with the gendered nature of parental choice—most of our interviewees are women/mothers. Other characteristics of participants, such as their ethnic identification or migrant background, were not considered in our sample, although we have explored their choice experiences under the NSAS from an intersectional approach in related studies (e.g., Oyarzún et al., 2023).

Each of the families was interviewed twice (before and after obtaining the results of their applications in the NSAS). The interviews were performed in Spanish and delved into various topics such as their biographical context, educational expectations, the characteristics of their choice set, and the outcome of the process. Additionally, we explicitly asked families about their visions of the reform, its advantages and disadvantages compared to the prior admission system, and the opportunities they consider it to open and close for their children and society. These latter questions operated as a catalyst for the arising of parents' dilemmas and justice notions involving the NSAS. Consistent with empirical studies exploring justice dispositions (e.g., Mills et al., 2019) and the moral complexities of parental choice (e.g., Wilson, 2015), we did not use direct questions to identify parents' notions of justice and their moral dilemmas. Instead, their beliefs around justice and ethical conflicts arose when responding to questions about their opinions of the NSAS (Wilson, 2015).

Table 2*Sample Participants (N=80)*

| Characteristic | N |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Region | |
| Tarapacá | 16 |
| Coquimbo | 29 |
| O'Higgins | 13 |
| Los Lagos | 10 |
| Magallanes | 12 |
| Type of neighborhood | |
| Mixed SES | 36 |
| Low SES | 36 |
| High SES | 7 |
| Missing information | 1 |
| Educational level | |
| Incomplete secondary or lower | 12 |
| Secondary | 37 |
| Tertiary | 21 |
| Missing information | 10 |
| Gender | |
| Woman | 69 |
| Man | 7 |
| Woman and man participate | 3 |
| Missing information | 3 |
| Former experience of choice | |
| With experience | 39 |
| Without experience | 41 |

We carried out a systematic thematic analysis of the data, following the step-by-step proposal of Braun and Clarke, which included five stages: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes or patterns, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, after transcribing the interviews and repeated reading of the material, we coded our data using the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose, which is especially helpful for team projects. The codification of our data was collaboratively built. During this stage, as Saldaña (2013) recommends, we engaged in regular team meetings to review, add or eliminate codes and solve discrepancies between analysts. After this process, we arrived at our final codebook comprised of 35 codes. Among them, we specifically coded direct and indirect references to principles such as liberty, exclusion, meritocracy, equity, and justice that emerged in parents' discussions of the reform —on which the analysis presented in this article is based. Our coding strategy —suggested for managing large sets of qualitative data (Namey et al., 2008) — allowed us to focus on those specific codes, in which we searched for patterns and similarities and differences according to our sampling criteria in parents' dilemmas and notions of justice that arise when confronted with the NSAS reform.

The specific analysis in this article reveals four major moral dilemmas of justice that are shared by most families around the different components of the NSAS, which correspond to the central patterns found in our data. These patterns are illustrated in the next section with particular

cases of families, which aim to present “realistic and richly described accounts of the complex ethical dilemmas that arise” (Levinson & Fay, 2016) among parents regarding the NSAS and the conceptions of educational justice embedded in them. These illustrations represent the principal trends in our data and correspond to a vivid account of families’ moral struggles when faced with the reform. Therefore, following Braun & Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis orientations, we have chosen “particularly vivid examples, or extracts which capture the essence of the point you are demonstrating, without unnecessary complexity” (p. 93). While our interviews were conducted in Spanish, the excerpts we use in what follows were translated to English for this paper.

Findings

Our findings underline that the NSAS brings in four moral dilemmas that we organize around the main components of the reform presented above. These dilemmas tend to be widespread among parents, irrespective of the regions and social groups they belong to, or their experiences in the former school admission system. While there are slight nuances in families’ opinions regarding the reform that we have exposed elsewhere (e.g., for a social class analysis, see Carrasco et al., 2021; for an intersectional analysis, see Oyarzún et al., 2023), in what follows, we focus on the dilemmas and notions of justice that tend to be shared by parents when discussing the NSAS, which we illustrate with specific cases of families. Only when appropriate, we include the minor differences we identified regarding our sampling criteria.

Dilemma 1: Ascriptive/Arbitrary vs. Meritocratic Admission Criteria

The first tension in parents’ approaches to the NSAS refers to the schools’ admission criteria prompted by the reform. In this component, the NSAS eliminated the widespread presence of schools’ selective practices and implemented an impartial admission system that ensures equal opportunity for all children to be admitted to public and private subsidized schools, regardless of their social class, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, or academic background. Our interviews reveal that, in general, families—independent of the region in which they live and their social background—tend to support the principle of equal opportunity to obtain a seat in a school and positively contrast the justice-oriented approach of the NSAS with the former selective practices of admission. However, while the ban of ascriptive (e.g., social class, race, special needs, or physical traits) or arbitrary (e.g., cronyism) criteria is commonly accepted as fairer admission criteria, parents’ agreement with this principle collides with their lesser support of the abolition of non-ascriptive or—what they describe as—“meritocratic” admissions criteria. The following cases illustrate this tension.

Carolina is a social worker who lives in a low-SES urban neighborhood of Iquique, a northern city of Chile. She has two daughters, including a 5-year-old, for whom she is using the NSAS. When discussing the reform, Carolina clearly states her approval of the new regulations by positively highlighting the end of what she calls “subjectivity” in admissions and the more extensive opportunities the new system opens for all children:

The good thing is the platform itself because it was very easy to handle, it is friendly, and there are no human criteria that look if you are ugly or bad. There is no subjectivity for my daughter’s school assignment: there is no photo, no one knows if she is a girl, Black, White, Chinese, etc. There is not that kind of thing, and that is why I feel that, in that sense, it was something positive. ... In that sense, we all have greater opportunities.

In addition, Carolina also celebrates the elimination of selectivity for the fostering of schools’ social inclusion it entails. Indeed, she defends an open-door admission policy that does not

exclude children for their personal characteristics: “I feel that schools—no matter how exclusive they are— do not have to leave people out because of students’ education level, physical shape, gender, or where they come from”.

While Carolina values the end of ascriptive criteria and recognizes the burden that the former system entailed for some previously excluded children, her positive approach to this justice-oriented principle of the reform is tensioned by her ambivalence toward the prohibition of other admission criteria—such as children’s efforts (as evaluated by testing) or students’ parental support or concern for their children: “Although it is true that the old system was very restricted for some people, the problem are also the parents [who do not take care of their children at home]”. Later, differentiating between discriminatory and non-discriminatory criteria of admission, she endorses testing as a relevant consideration to evaluate children’s access to schools: “although it is true that some parents may not like admission testing, I feel that it is necessary to have at least the same [academic] level or at least to know how the child is doing ..., this is not to discriminate”.

The case of Carolina is illustrative of a tension within parents’ discussions of the reform between morally unacceptable and acceptable admission criteria—in which the former refers to ascriptive/arbitrary attributes and the latter is grounded on merit or deservedness. The following case further exemplifies the conflicting positioning between these two principles of school admission.

Pablo—a father of a 5-year-old child applying for schools under the NSAS—lives in the same city as Carolina. He has primary education and works in the construction sector. During the interviews, Pablo demonstrates a marked adherence to the prohibition of using arbitrary admission criteria and the transition to fair rules, based on his positive view about the fact that the NSAS “does not see faces”. This latter statement about the NSAS is explained when he narrates the situation of children with special needs previously excluded by some schools:

[In this system] there is no cronyism, the child—without being known—can have access to school. ... The other day, I saw a news report where a child had the problem of being autistic, and he applied to a school, and the school did not want him because he is autistic. With the new system, they will not know that he is autistic; they will not discriminate against him and must accept him.

Nevertheless, his positive appraisal of the NSAS from an equality perspective crashes with his vacillation towards eliminating academic grades and hard work as admission criteria. The ambivalence in this respect appears when he narrates a conversation he overheard in the street about the NSAS:

They were saying that the child studied a lot to get good grades, to apply to a school, and then the school didn’t accept him, while other children with worse qualifications were assigned there. ... And suddenly I put myself in her place and, of course, if her boy had good grades and he [applied] to a good school, he should have been admitted, because the kid studied hard, tried to do well in life, and he can’t get a seat in the school that he wants.

The cases described illustrate the emergence of a dilemma in most parents’ approaches to the reform regarding the role of ascriptive/arbitrary versus meritocratic assignment criteria as principles of educational justice in admissions, which is spread across regions and social groups. This conflict shows the distinction drawn by families between two conceptions of justice, in which a difference is stated between forms of inequality that are beyond an individual’s will (involuntary aspects of inequality) and those forms of inequality that are the result of

individuals' choices and effort (Sardoč & Deželan, 2021). Therefore, despite endorsing a notion of justice that aims at a fairer admission system based on equal opportunities regarding involuntary or arbitrary aspects, families tend to proclaim minor support for intervening in forms of inequality that seem for them to result from individual or parental effort. This distinction underlines that fulfilling the goal of achieving educational justice is tensioned by the contradictory prevalence of a meritocratic conception of equality in admissions among families, which opposes the broader aim of the NSAS and acts for many parents as a legitimizer of inequality in access to schools. The patterned nature of this conflict, and its emergence in families belonging to different regions and social classes, is consistent with the high level of support for meritocracy as a principle for redistribution found in Chilean society and in the schooling landscape (e.g., UNPD, 2017). However, as expected, while most families share this tension, we identified some subtleties in the intensity of this dilemma, in which low SES families or those who have had negative discriminatory experiences under the old system tend to show a slightly higher valuation of the end of ascriptive criteria of admissions (Carrasco et al., 2019).

Dilemma 2: Equal Opportunities for All vs. Priority Principle of Justice in the Preferential Criteria for Admission

The second tension in parents' approaches to the reform is related to the system's preferential criteria of admission. In this component, the NSAS—while proclaiming equal opportunities for all in the admission field—introduces four preferential criteria in cases of oversubscription. These criteria follow two logics: on the one hand, a preferential admission is granted for convenience/practical issues (i.e., siblings in the same school, children of school personnel) and, on the other hand, preferential criterion for the worst-off is introduced (i.e., a quota for disadvantaged students). When confronting this component, despite the endorsement of parents to the equalizing principle of admission prompted by the reform, families across different regions and social groups tend to expose a tension between the equal opportunity for all approach and the priority principle of justice introduced in the NSAS design. While most parents share this tension, there are nuances in its intensity depending on whether or not the child enjoys some of the preferential criteria. Indeed, parents of children with a preference in admission show a more positive endorsement of the introduction of this principle in the reform. On the contrary, parents of children with no priority in admission—especially middle-class ones—tend to be more critical of introducing this principle. We illustrate this tension with the following cases.

Francisca lives in a low SES neighborhood of Puerto Montt. She has completed secondary education and has a 4-year-old child in the process of applying to schools under the NSAS. When referring to the aim of the NSAS, Francisca positively highlights the justice orientation of the reform that she labels as a new system in which “everyone can access” a school. Through this statement, she shows her valuation of equalizing the field of admissions and the banning of arbitrary criteria, which are dramatically contrasted with the former system:

[The new system] gives you more options, and it is more egalitarian. Even the [name of a Catholic school] was one of those schools that used to not accept children from single mothers and only accepted students of properly composed families, in which parents were religious. So, yes, I believe that now it is equal for everybody.

Besides celebrating the end of arbitrary admission criterion, she also positively underlines the class-based social equality prompted by the NSAS when referring to children from low-income families whose access to certain types of schools was impeded:

[The reform was passed] for allowing that all children have the option of applying to schools. ... Before, a child from a low-income family was not able to apply to school [name of school A] or to school [name of school B], which are very strict schools. So, I believe that now everybody has the same option ... as it is a process in an internet platform. Before, you used to go to the school, and if a poorer person went, they look from head to toe ..., you know that people judge for what they see.

While Francisca tends to endorse this equality principle, she manifests a particular criticism to the preference criteria set by the reform, which are labeled as “unjust”. As the following quotation shows, this disagreement is partly shaped by her misinformation regarding who are the students prioritized:

The new system is, allegedly, for inclusion, that everybody can access ... but this is not completely true. ... I believe it is unjust. Why? Because schools tend to leave only some seats available. They firstly ensure their old students, then to the old student they ask if they have brothers, cousins, friends, uncles who wish to enter, and only then do they put seats available for the lottery. So, it is unjust in that side.

This conflicted vision about the preferential criteria shows the moral ambivalence prevalent in some families between the NSAS approach of equality for all and the priority principle of justice set for some types of students. Therefore, the equal opportunity principle of the NSAS—which parents endorse—appears in some families as denied by the reserved seats introduced by the system. The case of Juan illustrates the collision between these conceptions of equality further.

Juan is a teacher and lives in a mixed SES neighborhood of Punta Arenas. He has one daughter for whom he is using the NSAS. When talking about the reform, Juan positively recognized the system’s justice orientation by pointing out that the reform was set “to give an opportunity to all ... to integrate all children and that they all have the same opportunities of accessing the schools they want”. Later, he endorsed the equal opportunity principle of the reform, putting it against the former selective system: “[the system looks to] end with the access of those who have better grades or have a particular income, or if you knew someone inside you used to have more facilities to enter to a school.” In this sense, he emphasizes that the new system is “fair for people who search for good schools”.

However, this support to the equalizing approach of the NSAS is tensioned by the preferential criteria that he considers a “bit unfair”. This unfairness is based on his displeasure toward a policy that aims to provide equal opportunities for all while giving some advantages in the name of convenience to certain groups of students:

I believe that the preference criteria of the NSAS are a bit unfair in the sense that the first priority is that you already have a child in the school, and there are many families that only have one child, so you are already discarded. ... And the other is if you have some direct relationship in the school or being the child of school personnel. ... So, I think that these criteria do not correspond. Maybe if I have a child there, I will be obviously benefited, but you are leaving behind other children who also should have the possibility to be in that school.

Besides his disagreement with the preferential admission criteria based on convenience, Juan extends his criticism to the preferential access for a quota of low-income families, which he

understands as an arbitrary criterion that affects him personally: “After [the other preferential criteria] comes the topic of ... I don’t remember very well, but it is the percentage of socioeconomic vulnerability. ... This affects a lot of people like me, I consider myself a middle-class person”. Confirming this apprehension, he underlines during the interview that the NSAS “only” benefits some families, mostly “those more disadvantaged”, which suggest a disapproval toward the preferential access for the worst-off set by the reform.

Finally, he explicitly argues that all preferential criteria are mismatched with the “inclusion” prompted by the system: “so, I believe that the process doesn’t match the final objective that is to integrate more children and that all children have the same possibilities. With these preferential criteria, it is difficult to do it”.

The narratives of both parents—which are illustrative of a shared tension in families’ approaches to the reform—highlight the conflict between dimensions of justice (Gewirtz, 2006) among parents. Indeed, while most families value the enactment of equality of opportunity in school admissions, this endorsement is tensioned by the preferential criteria that prioritize certain types of students in oversubscribed schools. The struggles raised by families in this arena are underpinned by two competing principles of educational justice—namely the “equality principle” that considers unfair that, as in the previous selective system, some students enjoyed significantly fewer possibilities of being admitted in particular types of schools, and the “priority principle” of justice (Schouten & Brighouse, 2014), which include preferential criteria of admission for certain types of students. Alongside the tension raised by the convenience/practical factors of preferential admission, parental narratives also uncover a concern over the redistributive principle of prioritizing the least advantaged, which is interpreted by parents as a contradiction within a reform that seeks to distribute equal opportunities for all children.

Dilemma 3: Private vs. Public Interest in the Purpose of the NSAS

The third tension relates to the purposes of the NSAS. While the NSAS is based on the parental right to choose a school for their children—i.e., it considers their school preferences—and tends to protect families’ private interest in school choice, it also privileges the public interest within the education field. Indeed, the system—maintaining the parental right to choose—works by favoring the societal or collective optimum, as it introduces the possibility of an inadequacy in children’s school assignment (e.g., not being assigned to their first preference) in the broader quest for equal opportunities for all. In this dimension, while parents agree that the former selective system was ‘unfair’ for some students and entailed a certain level of discrimination, most of them are unwilling to compromise their private interests for the common good. Thus, families—from all regions and social groups—confront a trade-off regarding the NSAS purpose, as a conflict appears between the endorsement of the public or social interest prompted by the reform and the supposed restriction it introduces for their freedom of choice. We illustrate this tension with the narratives of two families.

Antonia lives in a mixed-SES neighborhood of Iquique, has a tertiary degree, and works in the service sector. She has a five-year-old child in the process of applying to schools under the NSAS. When talking about the reform, Antonia states her positive vision of the eradication of arbitrary criteria in admissions:

The advantage of this system is that it ensures that everyone is assigned to a school. ... I like this system, it reduces cronyism because there is no invisible hand, nobody gets involved. ... It is also good because it opens the opportunity for children to access schools that perhaps with tests or other things they could not access.

In addition, she posits her positive view to what she conceives as a more just system for all, which she considers as the basis for achieving more social integration within schools and society:

We will all be together: the good with the bad, the rich with the poor, the good grades with the bad grades, and we will be one. I think that's good. ... It decreases social discrimination a little; I think that the objective [of the NSAS] is the non-discrimination of students, that we are more equal. ... I think it is good, I think it is fair that we are not so separated by social class. Even if we will always be [separated by social class], now this will not come from schools, that I study here and you study there, and the educational difference is noticeable.

Nevertheless, despite her support of the NSAS justice orientation, her perception is tensioned by her vision that the reform conditions her parental choice agency by a "lottery" which is signified as a loss of her right to choose a school for her child:

It seems to me that admission is a bit random because the child may have excellent grades and is made for that school but the lottery says 'no,' and he will have to go to another school. It complicates me a bit that I cannot decide which school to send him to. ... Maybe they will assign him to the last school of my choice, and one must resign oneself when as a family you do not want that for him, so I am a bit shocked by the system. I believe that one should have the right to choose where one's child wants to study and to choose freely.

While the tension between the private interest and the public or social purpose of the system raises an ambivalent approach to the reform in a non-negligible number of cases, some parents—based on their broader support of equal opportunities for students in the education field—suggest different alternatives to achieve a justice-oriented school system. Indeed, certain families, demanding the respect of their freedom of choice, propose that rather than changing the school assignment system all schools should be improved. Therefore, there is a demand for a major role of the State in ensuring a good quality education for all independent of the specific choices made by families. The case of Paula is illustrative in this respect.

Paula—a mother of a 4-year-old boy—lives in a mixed SES neighborhood of Punta Arenas and holds a vocational degree. During the interviews, while she recognized a certain sympathy for the inclusive purpose of the system, she raises her voice against the loss of her parental right to choose a school for her child:

I consider it unfair that the State tells me, 'here you have to educate your child' by a sort of lottery system. ... It is good this inclusion, but I find that many things start at home. I want to give my son the best and I want to decide with whom my son relates. ... I do not accept because I don't know where my child is going to be admitted.

Yet, while Paula is not willing to accept a certain inadequacy in the school assignment decision of the NSAS, she strongly supports a more active role of the State in improving all schools. Therefore, the dilemma she confronts is conditioned by the uneven quality of the school offer available in the territory:

Here, education is not the same for everyone. But, if all the schools provided the same it would be different, but it is not like that, because they do not have the

same infrastructure, they do not participate in the same programs, etc. ... The NSAS would be good if the schools were equalized first. They should be equalized in terms of their academic service and its infrastructure so any parent would feel satisfied with any school assigned.

The dilemma illustrated by Antonia and Paula's cases, which is shared by most parents, shows that, even when valuing the new admission system from an equity-driven perspective, parents are not willing to accept some inadequacy in the school assigned even if it contributes to social justice (Clayton & Stevens, 2004). This finding raises the difficulties of reconciling parents' private interests with the public or social obligation introduced by the reform. The powerful emergence of this conflict among families—irrespective of the region and social class they belong to—is illustrative of the approach to school choice as a private act aimed at satisfying individual benefits within Chilean society (Rinne et al., 2015) in both the low and middle classes (Bonal et al., 2017). This tension between the private and public dimension of the NSAS may be interpreted as ambivalence regarding the levels at which justice is to be enacted (North, 2006). Indeed, while families tend to endorse the macro justice orientation of the reform, this support does not straightforwardly translate into a micro-level justice positioning, which echoes Gewirtz's consideration of justice as level-dependent, i.e., in which "just practices" are appropriate and possible at different levels and in different contexts of action (Gewirtz, 2006). In the same vein, the dilemma raised in this component tends to be immersed in a notion of justice as context-dependent (Gewirtz, 2006). Indeed, families—at least verbally—manifest to be willing to compromise their complete freedom of choice under the condition of the existence of an equal school offer, or what Ben Porath refers to "meaningful choices" (Ben-Porath, 2010).

Dilemma 4: Social inclusion vs. "Inclusion with Filters" in the NSAS Impact

The last dilemma relates to the NSAS's impact on the school system. As it was referred to previously, the broader goal of the reform is to desegregate the school system and advance an approach to schools as democratic spaces that contrast with the distinctive communities—divided by social class—that have been prevalent in Chile, caused, in part, by selectivity in school admissions. While families value the end of selectivity based on ascriptive or arbitrary criteria and some of them endorse the ideal of socially mixed schools, in many cases, this positive view faces a conflict with their lesser agreement toward some aspects of social mixing, in which they tend to endorse a conception of inclusion with "filters" or an approach favoring a "good/right mix" of students. We illustrate this dilemma with the following cases.

Roberta lives in a mixed SES neighborhood of Rancagua, has a technical degree, and works in the educational sector. She has three children, including one in the process of applying to a school using the NSAS. When discussing her perspective on the reform, Roberta shows a strong sympathy for the inclusive approach of the NSAS prompted by the end of selectivity:

What is being said, what I understood, [is that the reform was set] for inclusion, for the opportunity to study in a school regardless of academic or economic capacities. ... E: What do you think is the purpose of inclusion? R: I think it is good because every child has the right to opportunity. ... I think we all benefit from it because we are all in the same boat.

While Roberta endorses the inclusive approach of the reform and tends to agree with its non-discriminatory policy, her vision is conflicted by her worries regarding the effects this may entail for schools, which she based on her own school trauma: "I had a terrible experience in a school

where everyone is with everyone. That's the fear I have". When scrutinizing this fear, she shows her ambivalence toward the inclusive orientation of the NSAS by foregrounding her support of schools that ensure a certain "level of children" that she describes not as a strict social class apprehension but rather as a moral one:

By children's level I don't mean discrimination. I refer to the behavior of children, not their social status or anything like that. I see it here day by day: there are children who have an excellent economic situation, but they are very aggressive children, with very difficult behaviors, who have no manners. ... It is not a problem of social status in terms of an economic issue, but it is an issue of upbringing. I want my children to grow up and be able to study, and sometimes we can't have that experience because there are children who hit, who yell, so they interrupt those who really want to learn.

Roberta's contradictory narrative of the reform exemplifies the tensioned principles in parents' approaches to the NSAS. Indeed, despite agreeing to the inclusion-based orientation of the NSAS, this vision is conflicted by the boundary they trace between acceptable or unacceptable children with whom they want or do not want their child to be educated. The following case further demonstrates this tension.

Gustavo—a parent in Puerto Montt, who lives in a low SES neighborhood, has secondary education, and a boy in the process of applying to schools under the NSAS—tends to agree with the broad purpose of the reform highlighting the equal opportunities it entails for children and the end of social class discrimination:

The system is made for inclusion and that the [children] have the opportunity to access the school they want. Children can have the option of being admitted in a school because ... the system does not discriminate.

However, his support of the broad goal of the system is conflicted with his worries about the impact this may have for his child, in which a conflict arises between the advantages and disadvantages he sees in the NSAS:

E: Do you see any advantage of this new system? G: Maybe, as I was saying, the inclusion will give possibilities to everyone, there won't be any exceptions for people ... but that will be, maybe, detrimental. ... I have worked in the system and when enrolling children we used to ask for their permanent record. If now it is going to be by a lottery, maybe kids who had five marks on their permanent record the year before will go with others who are smarter and quiet, and that may be. ... I am not discriminating, I repeat, haha, but it may be harmful because there are children who get influenced by that.

The dilemma illustrated by Roberta and Gustavo's perspective, which is shared by other parents interviewed, shows the complex principles in competition within families' expected impact of the NSAS. While most parents tend to endorse the inclusive purpose of the reform, this perception is tensioned by the negative consequences they anticipate this may have for their children. The emergence of this tension across the different regions and social groups is coherent with former studies that have shown the conflict between the valuation of social inclusion in parental discursive accounts (e.g., Rinne et al., 2015) and the fear of social mixing, which is spread both within middle and low social classes in Chile (Carrasco et al., 2022). From a social justice perspective, the conflict exposed tends to show the clash between principles of

justice —namely sameness and difference (North, 2006), in which parents, despite endorsing a “formal moral equality” in the admission arena, are challenged by the equality of respect and recognition approach (Lynch & Baker, 2005) that the reform demands. Therefore, despite adhering to the notion of an inclusive school, parents are still caught in practices of “denial and depreciation” towards some “culturally marginal identified as other (...) who are treated as irrelevant and/or inferior as a status group” (Lynch & Baker, 2005, pp. 142–143).

Table 3

Summary: Moral Dilemmas and Competing Conceptions of Justice in each Component of the NSAS

| Component | Dilemma | Justice Notions in the Admission Field |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Allocation criteria | Ascriptive/arbitrary vs. meritocratic admission criteria | Justice as achieving equality over involuntary aspects of inequality vs. over aspects resulting from individuals' choices and efforts (meritocratic conception of justice) |
| Preferential criteria | Equality of opportunity for all vs. priority principle of justice | Equality principle of justice vs. priority principle of justice |
| System purpose | Ensuring private vs. public interest | -Macro vs. micro-level justice conception -Justice as context-dependent (i.e., equal school offering) |
| Expected reform impact | Social inclusion vs. inclusion with filters | Justice as sameness or formal moral equality vs. justice as equality of respect and recognition |

Discussion

In the context of the worldwide demand for justice-oriented reforms, in this article we focused on a recent school reform in Chile that introduced new principles of justice in school admissions. Against this background, the article exposes the moral dilemmas that parents confront during the early enactment of the new school admission rules and the notions of justice they mobilize while assessing the reform. Based on the findings, we underscore the main conclusions and raise implications for justice-oriented reforms in Chile and elsewhere.

First, our findings highlight parents' complex approaches to the introduction of new justice principles in admissions. This complexity is rooted in the multiple values at stake in the rules that organize the distribution of school seats, and the multidimensional, multilevel, and context-dependent notions of justice parents adhere to (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002). Indeed, rather than univocal views of the reform, the evidence shows that parents confront a set of moral dilemmas and adhere to competing notions of justice in their interpretations of the new school admission rules. Summarizing the main dilemmas, we revealed the struggles between support for the principle of equality of opportunity and the predominance of a meritocratic conception of justice in which children and family efforts appear as a legitimate source of inequality in school access, as well as the lesser agreement among parents of priority principles of justice that tend to favor some groups of students over others. Additionally, we identify a conflicted positioning between an endorsement of the macro-level conception of justice set by the reform, which calls to eliminate inequality in admission for all students, and families' apprehensions towards how this affects them individually or personally in their micro-level practice of school choice. Lastly, we posit the tensions between

agreement with the justice-oriented aim of the system and the unequal school supply in which the reform is being enacted, as well as the predominance of an active boundary work among parents that goes against the broader goal of the NSAS of promoting a socially inclusive conception of schooling.

Second, our exploration of parents' dilemmas and notions of justice indicates that, in general, families tend to endorse the equal opportunity principle in school admissions by positioning themselves against former barriers to equal access (e.g. social class, family structure, special needs) that cannot be attributed to moral differences between students (Schouten & Brighouse, 2014). Nevertheless, our findings emphasize that families are less supportive of affirmative action measures, such as prioritizing the least advantaged or purposely promoting social mixing within schools. This finding anticipates a potential conflict in moving toward more exigent forms of justice in the Chilean school admission field.

Third, our results point out that—despite some subtle nuances—the core dilemmas and notions of justice that parents proclaim when discussing the new admission system are shared by most families, independent of their social class. This finding is coherent with national literature that has highlighted the ample adherence in Chilean society to neoliberal principles, such as meritocracy and choice as a private act (Rinne et al., 2017; UNPD, 2017), which lie behind the tensions found in families' discussions of the reform. Besides, the similarities found among social groups may be related to the particularities of the Chilean middle class, which—in contrast to other contexts—is characterized by its positional proximity to the working class (UNPD, 2017).

Altogether, and from a policy perspective, the evidence provided by the article contributes to rendering visible the complexity of introducing new justice principles in the education policy field from families' perspectives. Indeed, the dilemmas and notions of justice identified by our inquiry clearly underline the distance between policy intention and interpretation (Molla & Gale, 2018), and between abstract conceptualizations of justice in educational policies and what counts as just policies in families' views (Gewirtz, 2006). These distinctions are critical for understanding the difficult path that justice-oriented reforms must undergo to gain social acceptance. In this area, our study reaffirms the contribution of addressing normative philosophical questions through empirical evidence for guiding policy action (Schouten & Brighouse, 2015). We emphasize the relevance of considering the real-world justice challenges faced by stakeholders for informing the complicated endeavor of enacting just policies in education.

Finally, while our study provides original empirical evidence of the complexity involved in introducing new justice principles in education policy in underexplored contexts and from a large-scale and varied qualitative sample of families, it also reveals questions to explore further. On the one hand, we acknowledge the relevance of following up the reform to investigate families' medium- and long-term changing conceptions to the new admission system. Moreover, new studies on this topic should intentionally focus on marginalized populations or non-hegemonic groups to deepen their perspectives on the reform. In this line, there is a need to incorporate an intersectional approach that considers the critical links between class and the racial and ethnic identification of parents in their approaches to justice-oriented reforms. Lastly, additional studies may expand upon gender variables and compare multiple types of families (e.g., single parents, non-heteronormative families, etc.), which may introduce nuances in parents' views of equalizing reforms.

Policy Implications

Even though our research is based in Chile—an outlier in terms of the depth of marketization policies in education, we derive key implications for global educational policy concerned with justice-oriented reforms. Indeed, in the context of international concern about the

adverse effects of school choice policies and the concomitant claims for admissions rules to set aside selectivity to contribute to desegregation (OECD, 2019), the Chilean experience raises lessons for policymakers worldwide seeking to balance choice and equity through changing school admission rules.

Primarily, our findings situate parents as a crucial policy actor in the school admission field. In line with international organizations that consider parents as one of the three main stakeholders involved in the right to education—along with the State and the child—we underline that justice-oriented reforms require an understanding that families are not a “simple passive receptor” of education policy but rather an “active mediator” (Chiong & Lim, 2022), whose interpretations to new reforms in this area should be rendered visible and recognized in order to act upon them.

Furthermore, the study alerts the importance of acknowledging the normative societal forces in which justice-oriented reforms are set, which is crucial to anticipate the main challenges policymakers will face in their efforts to achieve a more just education system. In this sense, a clear implication of the study is that rather than enacting school policies against an abstract standard of justice (Wilson, 2015), decision-makers should pay attention to the conceptions of justice among stakeholders and the main trade-offs they confront in their decodification of the policy to manage the distance—in this case—between families’ interests and the broader public welfare.

In addition, our findings stress that policymakers’ aim to enact justice-oriented reforms requires transcending the technical dimension of implementation and confronting the deeply ingrained beliefs among parents that negatively shape their acceptance of equalizing policies and actively engage with the dilemmas they confront in their readings of the policy. We bring attention to the need to pursue communicational and pedagogical strategies that emphasize the main justice principles sought by reforms and to actively seek to alter parents’ commonsense understandings that go against said goals. In other words, this is about mobilizing slow but durable cultural change.

Lastly, taking parents’ apprehensions seriously also means acknowledging the unequal and sometimes insufficient—in terms of magnitude and diversity—nature of the educational offer. Therefore, any policy that aims to reduce inequality should also attempt—first or simultaneously—to constitute a school supply with meaningful choice options (Ben-Porath, 2010), capable of mitigating some of the parents’ worries, especially in highly unequal schooling landscapes such as the one available in Chile.

To conclude, acknowledging the societal sensibility of justice-oriented reforms, our study urges policymakers not to set aside the intention of advancing toward just educational policies but rather to prepare the grounds for their enactment. As Gewirtz argues, “it is imperative that debates about the contestability and context-dependency of justice are used to contribute to the development of more just practices in education and not to detract from the moral and political obligation to promote justice” (Gewirtz, 2006, p. 80).

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About the Authors

Macarena Hernández

Centro de Justicia Educacional, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
mihernan@uc.cl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2564-1843>

Macarena Hernández is an associate researcher at Centro de Justicia Educacional, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. She has a Phd in Education from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, an MA in Policy Studies in Education from the Institute of Education University of London, and a BA in Sociology from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Her research interests include education markets, parental choice, and school segregation.

Alejandro Carrasco

Faculty of Education, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
alejandro.carrasco@uc.cl

Alejandro Carrasco is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC) and principal researcher at the Centre of Educational Justice, Chile. His work focuses on school choice and admission systems, and the impact of reforms based on accountability and market-driven regimes. He has published in several international journals, such as *Journal of Education Policy*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *British Educational Research Journal*, and *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

Angélica Bonilla

Universidad Alberto Hurtado – Universidad Diego Portales, Chile
maria.bonilla@mail.udp.cl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9479-1522>

Angélica Bonilla has a BA and a M.Sc. in Sociology from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and is a Ph.D. student in Education at Universidad Alberto Hurtado and Universidad Diego Portales. Her areas of study are the sociology of education and elites, civic and citizenship education, and educational policy. She is an ANID Fellow - Subdirección de Capital Humano/Doctorado Nacional/2022-21221178, and a Sponsored Student of the Center for the Study of Conflict and Social Cohesion (COES).

Ngairé Honey

Institute of Education Sciences, Universidad de O'Higgins, Chile
ngaire.honey@uoh.cl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8592-1148>

Ngairé Honey is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Education Sciences at the Universidad de O'Higgins, Rancagua, Chile. She has a PhD in Leadership and Policy Studies from Vanderbilt University, an MA in Latin American Studies from Tulane University, and a BA in Spanish and International Relations from Wartburg College. She has published in several international journals, such as *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Urban Education*, *Journal of School Choice*, and *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. Her work focuses on policy changes that shape educational access, segregation, and equity in a context of school choice with uneven geographic distributions of students and resources.

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