

From Determinism to Agency: Narratives of Secondary Technical-Vocational Education Graduates Who Access University

Del determinismo a la agencia: relatos de estudiantes
egresados de enseñanza media técnico profesional
que acceden a la universidad

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the educational experience of graduates of technical-vocational secondary schools who study at three regional universities that belong to the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities. Their narratives show how, despite the trajectories of poverty they experience, they overcome the determinism that hangs over their social origin and manage to enter university. Methodologically, the study used a qualitative design: through 32 episodic interviews, we analyzed the experience of technical-vocational education and academic and social integration at university. The results reveal the presence of a collective narrative regarding the precariousness of the education received during high school and the pressure exerted by the family and school habitus for early entry into the labor market. Overcoming this determinism, the young people demonstrate a capacity for agency by deploying various strategies to enter and remain at university.

Keywords: Vocational education, educational inequality, curricular tracking, habitus, social and academic integration.

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Resumen

Este artículo tiene como propósito aportar a la comprensión de la experiencia educativa de egresados de la enseñanza media técnico profesional que cursan estudios en tres universidades regionales del Consejo de Rectores de Chile. A través de sus relatos, se muestra cómo, a pesar de las trayectorias de pobreza que vivencian, sortean el determinismo que pesa sobre su origen social y logran ingresar a la universidad. Metodológicamente, se recurrió a un diseño cualitativo: mediante 32 entrevistas episódicas, se indaga en la experiencia de la educación técnico profesional e integración académica y social en la universidad. Los resultados revelan la presencia de una narrativa colectiva, respecto de la precariedad de la formación recibida durante la enseñanza media y la presión que ejerce el habitus familiar y escolar por la incorporación temprana al mundo laboral. Superando el determinismo, los jóvenes exhiben una capacidad de agencia al desplegar diversas estrategias para su ingreso y permanencia en la universidad.

Palabras claves: educación técnico profesional, desigualdad educativa, tracking curricular, habitus, integración social y académica.

Introduction

In recent decades, Chile has experienced relatively stable economic growth, but with persistent inequality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015). This is expressed on a daily basis in feelings of discomfort and injustice, due to the perception that access to certain socially valued goods is unfairly distributed, undermining social relations and bonds, leading to hatred and situations of violence, which prevent social integration and cohesion (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2017). In light of these inequalities, modern societies use various mechanisms to narrow the gaps, with education being one of the most important and having the greatest social recognition.

According to liberal opinion, education is the best mechanism to promote social mobility and it plays an important role in the modification of social structures (Mauna, 2013). However, in contrast to this liberal view of education as the great equalizer, social reproduction theorists conceive of education as a mechanism for the reproduction of the dominant ideology and for the distribution of knowledge and the skills necessary to maintain the social division of labor. Meanwhile, for resistance theorists, the subject has a capacity for agency that opposes the models of the dominant culture or social reproduction imposed by educational institutions (Hirsch & Rio, 2015).

In the last 30 years, our country has prioritized education as a mechanism for social mobility and as the principal means of reducing social vulnerability (UNDP, 2017). To achieve this, it has implemented a series of policies aimed at improving the quality and equity of education through curricular changes, investment in infrastructure, inclusive access programs, increased funding for vulnerable families, and free education, among others, in order to facilitate greater access to higher education. In spite of this, there is a marked social stratification of the educational system, reflected in unequal access to quality establishments, a situation that deepens social segregation and conditions of inequality, concentrating the poorest sectors of the population in the municipal-run education sector (Larrañaga, Cabezas, & Dusallant, 2013). In addition, the final phase of secondary education is separated into two curricular modalities: scientific-humanistic (hereinafter, EMCH by the Spanish acronym) and technical-vocational education (EMTP). The latter accounts for 37% of high school enrollment and 79% of the graduates from this modality belong to the low socioeconomic level and 21% to the lower-middle level (Ministerio de Educación [MINEDUC], 2020).

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the educational experience of young graduates of EMTP who are studying in three regional universities belonging to the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities. It therefore seeks to study the analysis that young people make of their educational and social trajectories, their subjectivities, and the constraints imposed upon them by technical-vocational education, as well as the capacity for agency that they mobilize through various actions and strategies to overcome the processes of social inclusion/exclusion in the university.

The literature describes the differentiation between EMTP and EMCH education as curricular tracking, a notion that explains how an educational system separates curriculum and teaching types, exposing students to different institutional environments, learning opportunities, peer groups, and social expectations (Sevilla, 2017; Shavit & Müller, 2000). National research (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2016; Arias, Farías, González-Velosa, Huneeus, & Rucci, 2015; Larrañaga, Cabezas, & Dussailant, 2013; Bassi & Urzúa, 2010) shows that students who choose EMTP achieve lower learning outcomes in the education quality measurement system, SIMCE 2015, obtaining 30 points fewer on reading and social sciences tests, and 50 points fewer in mathematics; meanwhile, on the University Selection Test, PSU 2015, they obtained an average of 106 points fewer than EMCH students.

Looking beyond the results, it is clear that the discourse constructed around higher education as a mechanism for social mobility is a significant reason for young graduates of EMTP to focus their efforts towards higher education (Arias et al., 2015). This is demonstrated by the increase in the percentage of EMTP graduates who entered higher education between 2008 and 2017, which rose from 21% to 44% (Ministerio de Educación, [MINEDUC], 2020). This situation may be explained by inclusive access and financing policies, such as free education.

However, there is national evidence (Farías & Carrasco, 2012; Larrañaga, Cabezas, y Dussailant, 2014) showing that EMTP graduates who enter higher education obtain an average of 30 points fewer on the university selection test (PSU), limiting their choice of quality careers and educational centers. In addition, their dropout rate is double that of EMCH students. Meanwhile, international studies show that students who opt for the technical-modality receive an education with a less demanding curriculum that is aimed exclusively at the labor market, they have teachers with low expectations, and peers of a lower socioeconomic level (Arum & Shavit, 1995).

In addition to the structural elements of educational inequality, there is evidence from the qualitative field (Canales & De los Ríos, 2009; Concha, 2009; Castillo y Cabezas, 2010; Mejía-Pérez & Worthman, 2017) that describes how young people in vulnerable situations experience social and academic integration. As Canales, Opazo, & Camps (2016) state:

The universalization of secondary education was followed by a collective strongly oriented towards tertiary education pathways. In the stage of leaving 12th grade, society promised that all of them would be tertiary students, avoiding or conjuring up the specter of the return to simple work for most of their families and neighbors (pp.102-103).

Theoretical and Conceptual Discussion

Curricular tracking refers to the differentiation of the curriculum in educational systems, organizing training trajectories, with at least one academic and another that is technical-vocational (Sevilla, 2017). Evidence shows (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005; Reay, David, & Ball, 2001; McDonough, 1988) that access to one or the other trajectory is mediated by structural and symbolic elements, including the sociodemographic characteristics, beliefs, and expectations of students and their families.

In unequal and highly segregated societies such as that in Chile, choice of the technical-vocational education modality is strongly linked to the lower socioeconomic and educational level of the families and the greater number of this type of establishment in the student's district of residence (Larrañaga et al., 2013; Raczynski, Hernández, Rejevic, & Roco, 2011, De Iruarrizaga, 2009).

National and international studies describe the relationship between curriculum tracking and social segregation in detail. Sevilla and Polesel (2020) analyze the link between the former and social inequalities in the Chilean educational system. Specifically, they reveal that the choice of the EMTP modality is influenced by the low socioeconomic level of the students, who display larger gaps in access to higher education compared with their peers who choose the EMCH modality.

In a segregated system, the student profile in schools tends to be more homogeneous: students of similar social origins who are concentrated in schools in their residential area reproduce the conditions of the social context they inhabit. Disadvantaged areas are therefore affected by the quality of services in terms of available infrastructure, prestige, school size, and the teachers who work there (Ong & Rickles, 2004; Jenkins, Micklewright, & Schnepf, 2008). In addition to this is the so-called peer effect (Bellei, 2013; Valenzuela, Bellei, & De los Ríos, 2009; Orfield, 2001), which is related to the interaction between students in the school context and how this can provide advantages or disadvantages for their learning. In this respect, Dumay and Dupriez (2008), Treviño et al. (2010), and Zimmer and Toma (2000) contend that the concentration of vulnerable populations in schools has negative effects on student learning and achievement.

Added to all of these elements are the expectations and appreciation of education on the part of families from disadvantaged contexts with regard to the academic future of their children, which would preferably be linked to work. This could explain why their educational choice is more oriented towards EMTP training and less towards higher education (Catalán, 2016). Given this, Dávila, Ghiardo, and Medrano (2005) state that “groups with less schooling present trajectories that are historically more oriented towards work than education, subjecting them to logics of a practical nature, with more direct pathways to the world of work than to continuing studies” (p.168).

In this scenario, students who come from contexts of poverty experience at least two tensions that affect their future educational aspirations: the social origin of their families (*habitus* of origin) and the school institution (*institutional habitus*). There is an extensive body of literature that explains the influence of families on educational trajectories. Bourdieu (1980) defines *habitus* as “systems of durable and transposable dispositions, structured structures which are predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p.88). This refers to the configuration of principles that generate practices and representations that are adopted by social groups without resistance.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1995) explain that

The reproduction of class relations is the result of a pedagogical action, which does not start from a clean slate, but is exercised on subjects who received (the so-called ‘first education’) from their families or from the arising pedagogical actions. Each pedagogical action therefore has a differentiated efficacy according to the different pre-existing cultural characterizations of the subjects, which are of a social nature. By sanctioning these differences as if they were purely scholastic, the school contributes simultaneously to reproducing and legitimizing social stratification (p.17).

Strategies of reproduction constitute a system that makes it possible to activate a set of practices through which agents, either consciously or unconsciously, conserve or increase their capital, which makes it possible to maintain or improve their position in the social structure. The authors add that the strategy most often used by families in modern society to assure the social position of their heirs is to obtain educational credentials. From

this perspective, the school where one has studied, the professions and universities one chooses, the type of work one does, and the social networks at one's disposal are all factors that make it possible to understand the objective and subjective conditions of one's position in the social space (Dávila et al., 2005).

Following these ideas, Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, and Grinstead (2008) suggest the notion of institutional habitus, which is conceived as a set of predispositions, schema of perception, and expectations through which an educational center is organized. According to these authors,

They constitute the capital embodied and incorporated in the students' collectivity, culture, way of dressing, behavior, and attitudes, particularly, their attitudes towards learning and their degree of confidence and entitlement in relation to academic knowledge (p.109).

Reay (1998) argues that every social organization has an identifiable institutional habitus that is strongly related to the cultural and socioeconomic context in which it exists, which determines the perceptions and expectations that the subject constructs in relation to the points of view of friends and teachers and through learning experiences. Therefore, the option of continuing to study in higher education will, to a large extent, be subordinated by the school effect, or the so-called institutional habitus, as Reay et al. (2001) state.

Although the habitus is a system of dispositions that creates behavioral patterns, it is not an unalterable structure that the subject internalizes without any possibility of change; on the contrary, driven by personal or collective interest, it is a set of experiences that are recorded, stored, and which combine the influence of various environments that have been successively encountered throughout a lifetime. The subject's agency over these structures will allow them to "[encounter] a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127).

Aisenson (2002) argues that, although young people are affected by the context in which they live, they are active in the signification of the events that happen to them and are capable of anticipating and responding in a personal manner to the external changes and internal conflicts of their educational transition. The school and the social relations that the subjects establish within it allow the deployment of actions over repressive structures, which vary from school to school and from neighborhood to neighborhood (Giroux, 1985), opening up room for coexistence between self-production and reproduction.

It is also possible for young people to take advantage of the opportunities that the system itself offers and which allow them to break away from linear trajectories and determinisms. One example of this is public policies, which include the desire for access and funding. Although the dominant discourses are constructed in terms of academic capabilities—meritocracy—rewarding those who have outstanding educational achievement with access, young people build their participation on the logic of the academic capability they have to manage to remain at the university in terms of social and academic integration, and the economic and social risks implied by failure (Archer & Hutchings, 2000).

Methodology

The research was carried out within a constructivist paradigm, a perspective that allows more complex forms of research that assume that realities are captured in the form of multiple mental constructions, the origins of which are based on the social experience of individuals and collectives (Guba & Lincoln, 2002). Under this paradigm, we chose a qualitative methodological strategy because of its flexible and open nature, and because this type of design allows the problems in higher education to be studied, expanding the understanding of subjectivities and examining the personal and social reflections of students, as well as their relationship with the school and

the academic world (Ashworth, 2000). We used episodic interviews as the information production technique, which allows people's experience to be collected and narrative knowledge to be generated that is linked to specific episodes, as well as semantic knowledge; that is to say, reflections, explanations, and more abstract relationships, which are organized based on such experiences (Flick, 2004). The interview script addressed the topics of (i) experience in technical-vocational education in terms of choice and valuation; (ii) adaptation to university life in the social and academic spheres, and (iii) the costs and benefits associated with remaining at university.

The interviews were conducted in three regional universities belonging to the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities, and the sampling technique was purposive. From the database provided by each university, the participants were invited according to the following selection criteria: i) student who graduated from EMTP, enrolled in one of the three universities in 2015-2017; ii) belonging to degree courses with high and low presence of EMTP graduates, and iii) willingness to participate in the research. The number of cases in the sample was in accordance with the redundancy or saturation principle, understood as the exhaustion of information or sense effects not previously known (Canales, 2006). We conducted 32 interviews during the first semester of 2019, each of which took between 50 and 90 minutes, and all of them were carried out on the premises of the universities.

Table 1
Selected study sample

Degree course	Gender		Geographical origin		Type of school of origin	
	Female	Male	Urban	Rural	Municipal	Subsidized
Commercial Engineering	1	1	1	1	1	1
Civil Engineering		1	1		1	
Industrial civil engineering		2	1	1	1	1
Computer Engineering		2	2		1	1
Construction engineering		1		1	1	
Geology	1			1	1	
Nursing	3		3		3	
Biochemistry	1		1		1	
Veterinary Medicine	1			1	1	
Medicine	1			1	1	
Biotechnology	1		1		1	
Psychology	1	2	3		2	1
Sociology		3	3		3	
Law	1		1		1	
Early Childhood Education	3		3		2	1
Physical Education	3	1	2	2	4	
Basic Pedagogy	1			1	1	
Linguistic Pedagogy	1			1	1	
Total	19	13	22	10	28	5

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The interviews were analyzed using open coding, before proceeding with axial coding, which “systematically activates the relationship that the codes and families (or subcategories and categories, respectively) have with each other” (Bonilla-García & López-Suárez, 2016, p. 308). The main categories that emerged are: i) family choice of school; ii) formative experience in high school; and iii) entrance to university and process of academic and social integration. With this material, we discussed the results and drew conclusions with respect to the objective of the study.

Results

a. Having a card up one’s sleeve

The decision to study in a technical-vocational high school can be explained according to a practical rationale, which stems from two sources. On the one hand, when assessing their precarious socioeconomic conditions, young people see technical-vocational education as a means that allows them access to economic income in the short term. On the other, parents see this educational pathway as security for the reproduction of their offspring through the acquisition of credentials that would enable their children to have a profession allowing their early entry into the labor market.

More than once, my parents told us that when we were younger, they just saw us working, having a family, a little house. That’s why, at the time of choosing a high school, they probably told us that the best option was a technical high school, because we were going to get a technical certificate that would help us find a job (I3).

The pressure from my parents, they still wanted me to have a technical certification, they said [that it was] *to have a little card up my sleeve*, so it was like having job security for later on, in case there was no chance of entering some university or [professional] institute (I4).

The young people are aware of the socioeconomic precariousness of their homes and the limited educational options they have, perceiving that their families do not have a real scope of choice. This experience is accompanied by feelings of risk if they opt for scientific-humanistic education, because they consider that the investment is high and might not yield benefits in the short term. Thus, the curricular tracking of these young people would respond to the structure of available opportunities, affecting their formative trajectories, the perception of academic segregation, and the formation of subjective and social identities that express the discomfort of inequality (Sevilla et al., 2017; Shavit & Müller, 2000). However, it is clear that these young people undergo a reflective process and, analyzing the limitations of the context of their daily lives, plan alternatives to improve their capabilities and reduce future risks.

I studied electricity. I didn’t like it, but I did it because I had to. Besides ... I studied at the industrial high school because it was the best option for me (I7).

I didn’t know if I’d be able to continue at a university, so if I risked going to a scientific-humanistic school I could leave with nothing, so instead of taking the risk I preferred to go to a technical-vocational school, because at least I’d leave with a certification (I10).

In recognizing a structural inequality, the young people construct restricted educational expectations which, in most cases, do not initially contemplate a university education. In addition, families do not have a habitus that is related to the social space of the university and its practices. Therefore, educational expectations are built on previous survival experiences and socialization in other professional life projects. The influence of the family’s cultural capital on the educational trajectories of their children has been noted in the literature (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005).

I'd never thought about going to university, I always thought that going to university wasn't so necessary to get on. It wasn't that important, because none of my relatives had a university degree. I thought 'why am I going to go to university if I don't want to be a lawyer, I don't want to be a doctor and, besides, it's very expensive and it's so difficult to get in' (I7).

My parents didn't finish high school. They got to 10th grade, around there. My uncles were agricultural technicians. We saw that they were doing well, so technician was like the expectation. And I chose the technical-vocational school (I22).

b. My high school was a disaster ...

The students describe their experience in the technical high school based on the socioeconomic context of the establishment, the relations with their teachers and classmates, the quality of the training, and the teachers' expectations. Their collective discourse reveals the situation of social segregation that they experience on a daily basis, expressed in behaviors of opposition and resistance to the teaching process, perceiving the school reality as chaotic, uncertain, and unsafe.

Social relations in public schools take place in an atmosphere of tension between the teachers' educational proposal and the students' lack of interest. There is resistance on the part of young people to the forms of domination expressed by the curriculum, which do not represent their daily lives, and much less their interests. The habitus of origin clashes with the institutional habitus, affecting learning, social interactions, and the quality of the school environments (Dumay & Dupriez, 2008; Treviño et al., 2010; Zimmer & Toma, 2000).

My high school was a disaster. It had a very bad cultural reputation The people who went there really did so because they had no other option in life ... they aren't interested in learning or they have other priorities. Many of them are first-time parents, at 16, 15, so they're worried about other things (I11).

The kids at the industrial school are a real pain. They spend a lot of time attacking the teachers; not physically, but verbally, or despise them, because they don't like the subject they teach, so, of course, in the end they get bored and don't do their part either, so the student and the teacher go hand in hand (I13).

Students in subsidized religious schools have an educational experience with greater security. These spaces are characterized by being quieter and more familiar, providing the student with an experience that protects them among equals.

We were an all-girls school, so there wasn't much relationship with males There were excellent relations, I was never bullied, nor did I see any bullying. It was a very calm environment. I got along very well with the teachers. As you've been there since you were small, they've known you practically all your life, so essentially they're like half teachers and half family (I4).

In terms of the quality of the educational processes, they are generally seen as deficient. It is mentioned that the teachers, just like the average student, are not interested in the teaching processes and are perceived as task-doers or administrators. In this context, these students acknowledge that they are advantaged in terms of their academic performance, although they point out that they invest little time and effort, which is limited to paying attention in class, creating few study habits.

I kept my notebook organized, but I didn't study much at home. I used to pay attention in class. In high school they didn't teach us to organize ourselves or anything, and since the demands were low, there was no need to study too much (I44).

They gave us very few exercises at school; they were very basic, that is, looking at logarithms. With luck I think we looked at the basics. If you were to compare it with high school mathematics, it was like eighth grade (I26).

Finally, we can identify that the technical-vocational option is oriented towards students with weak educational trajectories and who have academic deficits, since the demands and expectations of the school environment are low, limiting future educational projections. For Reay et al. (2001), schools have identifiable institutional habituses and they are closely related to the cultural and socioeconomic context, determining the perceptions and expectations that the subject builds over time.

In high school, we technicians were always the lowest in terms of the student and academic level. In fact, I had a teacher who always told us that we were never going to be anyone in life because we studied at a technical school (I5).

In reality, the teachers, although they did their job of teaching the practical and theoretical subjects, it wasn't like we were going to go to university; in reality, they focused on delivering all the information needed to perform in this job (I23).

c. Not everything is rosy at university

For the young people interviewed, integration at university is related to the possibilities of students to connect with peers and lecturers in extracurricular spaces, their results and commitment to their studies, the development of socioemotional skills, and how their efforts correspond to the expectations of their lecturers. Therefore, they experience their arrival at university with uncertainty; technical-vocational education did not prepare them with knowledge, the administration and organization of time, or with the autonomy required to handle the academic demands, a situation that is considered to be a significant source of stress. In addition to this are feelings of frustration, due to the fact that in their high schools they were the best performers and therefore lacked experiences of academic failure. This requires both the deployment of agency and skills to advance in their process of adaptation, which ensure that they remain and progress at the university.

At university not everything is rosy ... there are things that they don't tell you. For example... I came in 12th grade, you see the university students who managed to make it here; they're superior in a certain way. They can opt for a better future, and then you enter the uni. I have to make an effort, but you realize that, despite all the effort you put in, there are things that don't work out (I25).

My first year was horrible. I had no study habits. Everything for me was practical. I would go into a workshop, prepare things, and they would give me notes. Here I had to read a lot, a lot.... I hadn't read for a long time. I had good grades at school, and at university it was very difficult. I failed classes and I'd never failed a course before. I'd never had a grade average below 5.0 [equivalent to a B], and here I've received a 2.0 [equivalent to an F]. It was a traumatic experience, university (I8).

In addition to this, they question a high school education that fails to prepare them for entering university. However, these initial differences are counteracted by personal attitudes associated with responsibility and perseverance, and, as a consequence, a strong commitment to university studies. This demonstrates the presence of a subject with a capacity for agency in light of the challenges of integration. As Aisenson (2002) states, although

young people are affected by the context in which they live, they are capable of anticipating and responding in a personal way to external changes and internal conflicts of their educational transition, showing mastery of anticipatory operations and planning of action, overcoming determinisms.

In the curricular tracking the students identify technical-vocational education as a factor that prevents them from having a better starting point to address the academic demands at university. This is accompanied by institutional habituses that could favor or hinder integration. Their narratives reveal the difficulties they have in communicating with lecturers, understanding the assessment process, and dealing with failing assignments. In short, they demonstrate the difficulties that they have to overcome in order to cope with the codes of the academic world.

I failed a course [and] the lecturer told me, 'You should've learned this before. I'm not teaching it to you now'. I looked for him in the office, he was never available, he never gave back the tests, like 'look, you made a mistake on this, this, and this'. The grades appeared magically. That was a terrible experience I had (I18).

Individualism is common in teachers. You go to ask them something and if he wants to, he does, and if not then it's simply, 'no, I have a meeting, I'm leaving', or you send them emails and they don't respond, or you ask them a question in class and he says 'no, I'll answer you later' (I7).

Based on their recognition of the difficulties endured in the first year, and in order to ensure they remain at the university, the narratives identify the importance of the first-year lecturer's profile, which is considered a key factor that can facilitate academic integration. Although personal attitudes help support integration processes, the students value the proximity of the teaching staff and pedagogical competencies in the process of professional training.

First-year teachers shouldn't be so hard, that is, they should be demanding just the same, but have a little more understanding of these students who come from different places, because many of them are just leaving home. Facing teachers who are too much like 'they can bite your head off', telling you that if you don't study, you'll do badly, like those kinds of threats (I8).

In the first year, I think that students should be encouraged a bit more, because you arrive lost, basically, like in the desert. They kind of send you to battle, you know what I mean? In that sense, I think they have to be closer to the students (I24).

Making use of the devices provided by the institution, in encounters with their peers, and by deploying their own personal resources, students gradually manage to understand the formative space and adapt to it. This experience that students have, as part of their social integration, is conditioned by the institutional habitus and, essentially, by the recognition that the institution shows towards the cultural characteristics of this type of student. One key aspect that has a direct impact on the prospects of higher education students is the quality and quantity of professional orientation provided by the institutions that admit them, which translates into diverse practices and experiences (Reay et al., 2001).

To study the basics things of mathematics I was kind of lost. I studied from books and YouTube, tutorials... 'Uncle Julio'¹, he really helps. I found out about him here. In high school I didn't even watch him. And the books and lots of exercises more than anything (I27).

I never had to study so many subjects in my life; it was too much and, of course, I left everything to the last minute, like I did before, and I didn't have time. It didn't work at all. I tried to change later. Getting used to a habit is a bit difficult at first, because you're 18 years old and you've had a habit of studying in a different way all your life (I14).

1. A YouTube channel that provides mathematics tutorials.

The interviewees mention that their arrival at the university obliges them to mobilize personal competencies aimed at ensuring their social integration, since they realize that the requirements of their degree courses and the training process itself demand it. All of the narratives emphasize that this learning is difficult, stresses them, takes time, and involves trial and error and decision-making. However, in these same narratives, the young people recognize their capacity to meet the demands and move forward despite the difficulties, managing their learning processes.

Joining a group was also chaotic, because at the beginning it's more or less trial and error, doing the work with the first person who speaks, and little by little you get to know what the people are like. It took me a semester, working with people who were a bit disorganized, who didn't work at my pace, who weren't very similar in their ways of thinking, of organizing ourselves ... and the next semester you start to choose (I28).

I'm quite shy, so at the beginning I had this fear of approaching anyone, but I thought that if I was already at university, I had to form a group or a network of contacts, so I made an effort to talk to the group I found. Suddenly I started changing until I arrived at my core group of friends (I23).

d. You become aware of the real world ...

The permanence of technical-vocational students at university is resolved from the academic and social point of view with costs (personal and family) and benefits. The costs entail the deterioration in the quality of life and the loss of personal and family time. They are also expressed in the fact that continuing to study and postponing their entry into the labor market puts them in a comparatively disadvantageous position to their high school peers.

Well, distancing myself a little from my social life, because before I was in a process of having lots of friends. The family the same, not seeing them every day, the fact of coming to live [in another place] is another cost and leaving activities aside (I12).

The costs were to not continue working, working full-time, to generate cash, maybe I'd get a subsidy, a house, to be able to contribute more to the home, in a certain way, to have more wealth. My high school classmates, many of them are working, they have a car, they have a house, they all have technical certifications. You ask yourself, why didn't I do it that way? (I15).

On the other hand, the students evaluate the loss of spaces of socialization, due to the time invested in travelling to the educational center and the high academic efforts to pass the subjects. Associated with the idea of cost is the realization that every project involves a difficulty that has to be recognized in order to begin to deploy actions to ensure one remains on the degree course.

Lots of stress, because when you work or when you finish high school, you kind of live for the day and you don't think much about what's coming, but when you're at university the stress is permanent, because there's a test or a research task coming up (I19).

You become aware of the real world and that drags you down. It's a cost as well. You realize that things aren't easy, but you also didn't think they were going to be that hard. Despite having the benefit of free tuition, in the end that's small potatoes, paying or not paying, it's been more difficult to stay here. It's been hard (I26).

The reference to time as one of the costs felt most by the students, in terms of personal space to connect with others and the development of activities other than academic ones is interesting. They question the adult-centric view of duty that neglects aspects of daily life and social and emotional development.

Well, I missed practically my son's whole childhood because there were times when he was doing new things and I was never there. I was lucky enough to be there when he took his first steps; it was pure coincidence. In my family life too, you spend a lot of time at university, so you miss a lot (I29).

I live in Quepe, on the way to Huichahue, it's a rural area, which is 5 kilometers [3 miles] from where the bus goes, and I have to walk to take the bus to university ... in winter, in the rain, wind, cold, frost, fog, everything. It takes me a long time to get to university. I think it takes three or four hours (I6).

In terms of the benefits, the students identify access to better future opportunities associated with the notion of social mobility, which, rather than the economic benefits, is represented as freedom of choice and access to new lifestyles. In this context, and based on the set of social and material constrictions of origin, young people see university education as the strategy to achieve their desired life project.

I'll have a stable job, I'll be able to give my son the opportunity to grow up in an environment where he knows he'll be able to do what he wants, to be who he wants, the security that he'll be able to study, be able to choose. Maybe it'll motivate him to learn about certain things that I didn't do when I started studying (I7).

A different view of the world; in reality, with all this new information I've received, I can help my family to see the world in a different way (I28).

Conclusions

We have presented the results of a study that shows the capacity for agency of young graduates from the technical-vocational modality of secondary education who, overcoming their social origins, enter higher education, coexisting with or confronting their individual habituses with the institutional habituses, which can either facilitate or hinder their academic and social integration.

From the analysis of the results, we can conclude that access to the technical-vocational modality of education for these young people is mediated by the conditions of poverty and the expectations of their family group, which result in socioeconomic segregation between educational modalities. There is a collective narrative among these students regarding the precariousness of the education received; the school experience revolves around the condition of deficit and lack of future expectations, establishing a notion of risk and uncertainty and, with that, the quest for a more secure future. However, there is a diversity of expressions, depending on the territoriality and dependence of the educational establishment. Young people from rural high schools recognize a precarious structure of educational opportunities, in which there is no possibility of choice due to the reduced educational offer. Meanwhile, young people in urban high schools face conditions of high segregation and higher levels of conflict in school spaces. As a consequence, there is strong resistance to the teachers' curricular project and their institutional practices. This condition is different in subsidized religious schools, where the students appreciate the socio-emotional support provided for their development of life projects.

Valuation of the experience of technical-vocational education is perceived as complex and tense. On the one hand, it constitutes an imposition for the poorest students and, on the other, it represents an opportunity to obtain credentials for early entry into the labor market. These young people warn that, although curricular tracking excludes them from higher education, there are currently various opportunities to enter tertiary education, such as inclusive access programs or free access, among others, which provide opportunities for students with successful educational trajectories. However, the notion of meritocracy contained within these public policies

is questionable, as it can be considered to be exclusive and it is necessary to advance towards an educational system that operates under the logic of recognition, that is more inclusive, and which offers quality educational opportunities for all. This should be possible to resolve considering that, in the Chilean school system, technical-vocational education involves training that is oriented towards the development of skills to continue studying, either in the field of job training or in technical or academic higher education.

The transition to higher education is a new challenge for these students, since their academic and social integration at university is colored by situations of social discrimination, lack of academic preparation, and lack of teacher support. During this stage, there is clear development of a reflective awareness of the structural inequalities in which the students have been immersed during their educational trajectory. In this context, the challenge for universities is to support these processes, giving them greater formative content and meaning, so that these experiences can be seen as spaces for social transformation and not as spaces of conflict.

These young people acknowledge that the institutional habitus, expressed in the organizational and personal practices of university teachers, is a key factor to expand the structures of opportunity and provide sensitive responses to the demands of academic and social integration. It is therefore recommended that universities recognize the specificity of student of technical-vocational origin and be aware of the implications that the institutional habitus has in these processes (Concha, Sánchez, & Schilling, 2019), with the aim of facilitating the processes of integration.

Finally, the growing incorporation of graduates of technical-vocational secondary education into higher education means it is essential for the bidirectional relationships between universities and high schools to be intensified in order to recognize the profile of these students and to focus on the importance of induction and remediation processes and initial behaviors, thus facilitating their post-secondary education transition.

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