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**School selection as a legitimated mechanism for socio-urban  
exclusion in Santiago de Chile**

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## **School selection as a legitimated mechanism for socio-urban exclusion in Santiago de Chile**

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Researchers in education highlight the increasing level of school segregation in the Chile. Observing those levels, public policy analysis has become focused on the structural conditions of the educational system as the major cause of social exclusion. *“Poor people study with poor people while wealthy people study with wealthy people”* resound as recurrent phrase inside public opinion. This problem, until now, has never been systematically addressed as consequences of people’s decisions. This paper analyzes school selection in Santiago de Chile as an active practice deployed by parents for their children. Through a qualitative and biographical approach, results show that school selection is not merely a way to choose schools for children but a mechanism of social delimitation and an active form to reinforce socio-urban exclusion. The analysis identifies three action’s orientations which explain the way in which parents select school for their children: i) un-anchored biographies; ii) social retraction; and iii) polarization of representations. As conclusion, I propose to study the agency capacity of individuals as accountable for the missing capacity for integration shown by the traditional socio-urban institutions - i.e. schools - during the last 40 years.

**Keywords:** School selection, Socio-urban exclusion, Agency capacity, Santiago de Chile

## Introduction

In Chile, research on school segregation has gained prominence in recent years<sup>1</sup>. It is possible to observe that segregation in the educational context is represented according to the access to and composition of different types of schools: i) private schools; ii) semi-private schools; and iii) public schools<sup>2</sup>. However, many of the reflections on school segregation are based on major social phenomena such as the neo-liberal orientation of economy, the high degree of urban segregation in Chilean cities, and the school funding system implemented by the State. Considering to this, the academic and public policy analyses of school segregation is associated with structural issues that affect the education system, thus excluding references to subjective dimension. As a result, intervention on educational issues has been almost exclusively focused on addressing the structural dimension of the problem. This is why I believe it is important to propose a different perspective of analysis based on the notion of socio-urban exclusion, which highlights the relationship between individual and institutional processes.

This paper argues that school segregation research should be considered inside the studies of socio-urban exclusion processes. From this perspective, exclusion in Chilean schools is not only the result of an education system that favors the concentration of individuals with similar socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, this situation cannot be explained in deep without considering the individual actions taken by Chilean families when it comes to considering the education of their children<sup>3</sup>. As for these decisions, exclusion has become a legitimate form to articulate not only public policies, but also the different representations made by people about their relationships with other individuals within the city context.<sup>4</sup>

This article aims to make headway on the description of the subjective strategies —both at individual and family level— underlying socio-urban exclusion in the Metropolitan Area of Santiago (MAS). This can be achieved by understanding that social institutions are the spaces that mediate between the individual decisions aiming at generating exclusion-inclusion and the socially widespread forms of exclusion-inclusion that operate in the city. The underlying assumption is that the high level of socio-urban exclusion within the MAS is largely the result of individual decisions that gradually shape the

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<sup>1</sup> Segregation refers to a structural condition based on the distance between different social groups either in the city or within the school space. On the other hand, socio-urban segregation reflects the lack of significant social contacts with different individuals; therefore, this concept is rooted at the individual level, either in the biographical or daily dimension.

<sup>2</sup> In Spanish the second type are called particular-subsidized schools (Escuelas particulares subvencionadas), and the third public-municipalized (Escuelas públicas municipalizadas)

<sup>3</sup> When this paper was concluded, two media reportages describing qualitative studies about parents' school selection were published. The first was conducted by the University of Chile "*Why it is chosen private subsidies schools*" (see: <http://www.facso.uchile.cl/noticias/107938/por-que-se-elige-particular-subvencionado/> retrieved on 03.01.2015) and the second implemented by the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and University of Helsinki "*Contrasting Dynamics in Education Politics of Extremes: school choice in Chile and Finland*" (see: <http://www.elmostrador.cl/pais/2014/12/23/los-padres-buscan-escuela%20>). Both studies show parent's representation of other people and expectation for the school environments of children as based in exclusion practices. A sort of constant mechanism of intragroup differentiations seems to regulate most of the decisions.

<sup>4</sup> In this line it is possible to understand the analysis conducted by Bellei (2014) on the consequences of the market-led approach adopted by the Chilean education system. This reflection provides evidence of the effect of this transformation in terms of social integration and educational equity.

capacities of social institutions to generate social integration or, conversely, turn them into mechanisms of exclusion through their redefinition.

Suggesting that individual decisions or social practices can influence and eventually give shape to some institutions does not imply that people make decisions by doing abstraction from their social, material or cultural condition – in the form of opportunities and restrictions -. It is easy to argue and accept that different individuals have unlikely capacities for choosing in different contexts. This is quite obvious in the case of the Chilean education system, which comprises a large number of private schools. In such a case the motto is simple *“who has the capacity to pay, has the power to choose”*. This situation, which can be abstractly labeled as “differential selection capacities”, reveals the difference between the concepts of “strategy” and “drift”. Strategy refers to the situation in which an individual or a group of people is capable of making instrumental choices to achieve a given purpose. On the contrary, drift describes a situation in which people or groups of people have a limited capacity to choose a given element and they have to resign themselves to the immediately available option.

Through open interviews, this paper reconstructs the experiences of parents throughout their educational and career’s paths and gives an account of the educational and social aspirations for their children. Likewise, the relationship between both dimensions — the experience of parents and the aspirations for their children — will provide information on how the selection of schools operates as a “mechanism” of socio-urban delimitation. The line of argument of this research will also reveal how the different forms of socio-urban delimitation are always present in individual and family decisions. However, only in certain cases these delimitations turn into forms of exclusion. Therefore, the analysis is focused on how and when this phenomenon takes place.

The analysis of interviews has resulted in the identification of a series of noteworthy discursive elements: i) the definition of categories related to the construction of the “own” and “other” spheres within the educational and urban space; ii) the meaning and value given to the school space in social and urban terms; and iii) the different forms in which individual action operates in the urban-school field. These dimensions make it possible to define school selection as a subjective mechanism that operates within the framework settled by both, the social structures and the territorial expression of the education system. From this perspective, I critically analyze the widespread assumption that the education system and its social orientations have been constructed without regard to individual decisions. In this sense, this paper identifies three general forms governing school selection: i) biographical un-anchored<sup>5</sup>; ii) social retraction; and iii) polarization of representations. The conclusion is that the legitimization of segregation on the part of individuals and families is responsible for undermining the integrative promise offered by the school and the city. Thus, because socio-urban institutions are both eroded and remodeled by medium- and long-term individual strategies that favor exclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> “Un-anchored” is presented as concept in the line of “detachment”; the selection of un-anchored was because of its major uses in Spanish sociological vocabulary, but its uses may not be fully precise in English.

## **Methodological considerations**

Within the study of the individual dimension of socio-urban exclusion, the biographical narratives of parents with children in school- and preschool ages are compared. The aim of this exercise is to identify continuities and discontinuities in the relationships established between individuals and families regarding school's institution. In other words, this comparison involves observing if parents actually experienced the school as an integrative institution; likewise, they refer to the experience of their children and the current status of schools, the latter being regarded as mechanisms intended for the reproduction of capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). For the purposes of this research, a total of 10 biographical interviews were conducted within the MAS between May and November 2014.

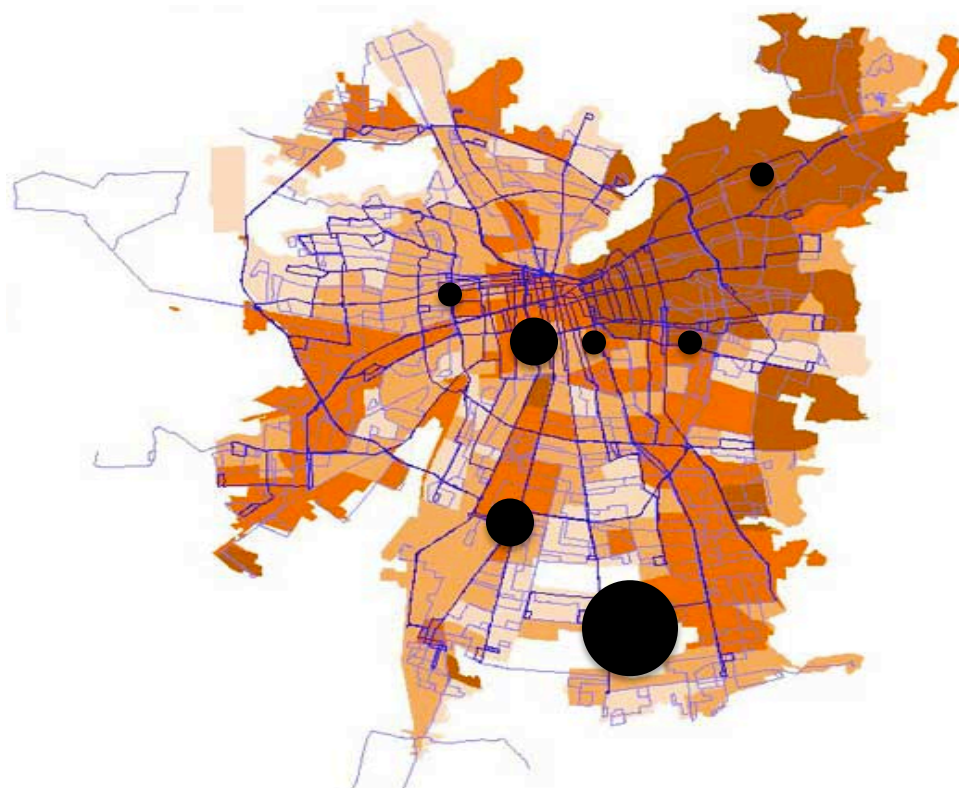
Turning to the interviews, they do not represent socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, socio-economic level or residential location. On the contrary, selection criteria were based on the saturation of significant forms of relationship between the educational paths of parents and the path they expect their children to follow. Therefore, it is not easy to non-Chilean readers realize the idea underlying the notion of “educational path”. The following paragraphs aim at providing a brief description of such a concept.

Before the 1980s, Chile —as well as other countries of the region— had a mixed education system in which the private education provided by the Catholic Church coexisted with State-run education. Within this mixed system, the public-secular/private-catholic distinction did not necessarily imply explicit social differences. Equally, there were elite public and private schools as well as public and private schools devoted to provide education for vulnerable groups. It is important to point out that in Chile, universal and compulsory primary education was established as a civil right and State duty in 1920. However, for decades, the school represented a major driving force for integration, mainly because social exclusion was the result of the lack of access to education or school dropout. It was not until the military regime period that education was liberalized. This meant that any private actor was able to generate school education projects and receive governmental support. At the same time, school provision became market-oriented (Bellei 2014). In order to promote the participation of private actors and stimulate those who were already in the market —meaning the Catholic Church—, the State created a subsidy scheme that was the direct cause of the emergence of a semi-private scheme in the 1980s. As of 2017, this model is still being used, but the current educational reform demands these schools to become fully private or totally public. This was a major claims of the student movement, which has demanded the elimination of State support for this type of schools for over the last seven years. Nowadays, still the debate about this measure remains.

In general terms, private schools consolidated their position as elite institutions during the 1980s. This occurred to the detriment of the privileged status held by some “traditional”

semi-private schools and a few “flagship” public schools<sup>6</sup>. A relevant fact in this situation is that the first four presidents elected to office after the end of the military regime studied at those “flagship public schools” in Santiago. However, these presidents did not apply the same selection patterns for their children, who were educated, all of them, in elite private schools. *Flagship* public schools have been mostly affected by the changes in the way they are socially evaluated. Despite being still attractive due to their good academic performance, these schools are no longer regarded as spaces of interaction for different social groups as it was the case one or two generations ago.

Turning to selection criteria, this process has been focused on reconstructing differential school paths between parents and their children. As it was previously stated, it is quite difficult that someone who was educated in elite schools ignores this condition and prefers social integration when deciding on the education of their children. Likewise, it is also difficult for someone who was educated in public schools with low academic results enrolls their children in an elite school. Observing both scenarios above, the research privileges reconstructing the conditions under which parents who studied at traditional schools decide to educate their children in elite, therefore, segregated schools. In this sense, this research has given priority to paths that actively recompose exclusionary school’s selection. Biographical narrative is an appropriate method to explore the individual descriptions made by people about their experiences in terms of events and also valuations. This approach provides access both to the discursive and practice dimension, which are deployed with intention to stabilize certain forms of action.



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<sup>6</sup> The names given to these schools in Chile are: “colegios emblemáticos” or “colegios tradicionales”.

### Map5: Interview general location with map of Santiago de Chile Socio-Economic Level

Source: Based on Laboratorio Urbano (see. [www.geo.pu.cl](http://www.geo.pu.cl))<sup>7</sup>

Interview	Quantity
Children attending private schools or elite private schools	3
Children attending semi-private schools	4
Children attending public schools	3
Parents who attended private schools or elite private schools	2
Parents who attended semi-private schools	2
Parents who attended public schools	6

Table 2. Interviews characterization<sup>8</sup>

## Parents' School Selection Strategies<sup>9</sup>

### i) Biographical un-anchored as a selection method<sup>10</sup>

I found a variety of perspectives within those interviewed that explicitly or implicitly deny *social contact* as an aim of the educational system. Some parents cherish the school they used to attend and others clearly do not. Similarly, some believe that their former schools are at the basis for their academic discipline and professional success while others; however, think that their schools did not offer any foundations for a future successful career. Beyond these differences, there is a global mechanism that I called *biographical un-anchored* underlying. This notion describes a sort of inability for people to negotiate the biographical interpretation made over their own educational-career paths as something desirable or even acceptable for their children's life experience. In this context, the recognition made by parents of certain ability to "move forward" —crossing of social boundaries— in their own educational-career loses relevance in the context of their children. In this sense, biographical evidence it is un-

<sup>7</sup> White and light colors represent low Socio-economic level, while the opposite applies for high levels. The Black dots represent interviews approximately locations.

<sup>8</sup> Observing interviewees selected becomes clear how the school trajectory from being educated in public school, which represent the majority of the cases in parents, shift to semi-private or subsidized school in the children situation. The elite or private schools remain as a stable trajectory within the cases. I believe these conditions of my interview sample are reflecting accurately with will be observed in extended quantitative analysis.

<sup>9</sup> All interviews are translated to English with the intention to reflect the Spanish informal language used by the interviewees. Major language mistake may be present, but the closeness to the original formulation was my prevalent intention. No references and no names are given before and within the extracts, this due to privacy restriction. Every interview start with an "I", thus, points out different people speech and help the reader to differentiate between different sources.

<sup>10</sup> As it was previously mentioned, this biographical detachment process is not unrelated to the global transformations undergone by the education system. The Chilean education system adopted a market-oriented approach at the beginning of the 1980s. Therefore, it is in this context of institutional transformation that individual strategies become meaningful and important. However, this global change in the education system does not explain the effects and impacts of individual and family discourses on the education system. The idea is not to identify the proper perspective, but to reveal its crucial complementarity.

anchored and as consequence, non-relevant for future decision. Put more simply, the experience of parents is not longer relevant when building the expectations for their children. This research proposes that biographical un-anchored occurs in all processes of institutional erosion and it is a precondition for increases in socio-urban exclusion.

**Ia:** “The school was very demanding. You must have a strong discipline. Discipline, which regards to such a things as formal appearance –external discipline- but also, self-discipline concerned with learning –internal discipline<sup>11</sup>. I do not remember to study for college or university as much as I did during school time. I stay very late at night just to achieve a 5.0<sup>12</sup> The school was very, very demanding and very, very large, 600 students by level and more than 4.500 students in total. Thus, there was a high degree of in impersonality”.

### **And how you experience the socio-economic level of your classmates?**

**Ia:** “It was well varied and you have the opportunity to interact with people from different socio-economic background. The school was a real space offering equal opportunities, beside the social origins of students. The most respected on the class was usually the smartest, which one was, many time, the son of the “nana”<sup>13</sup> [...]we all knew that the “Instituto Nacional” was a real opportunity for social improvement”.

### **But then why you would not chose this school for your kids?**

**Ia:** “Because I want something different for my kids, I want what I did not have. For example, a small school, not such an impersonal organization in which nobody remembers your name. [regarding language skills] We live as a family a year in Australia and for me was very hard to cope with the language. I don’t want my daughter have this experience, if I can do something against it”.

The interview extract shows this an-anchored condition presented in the school selection of parents. Somebody who studies in one of the most traditional public schools of Santiago, under no situation will replay this selection to their own kids. This lead me to propose that the biographical situation, related to the social background of parents, does not provide evidence of who they are today. In this sense, un-anchored is coextensive with a sort of social retraction regarding the social condition of parents when they were young. In other words, this biographical un-anchored coexists with two situations that are

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<sup>11</sup> Mandatorily in Chile, student must wear uniforms. Chilean school systems is very much conservative in terms of clothes and behaviors.

<sup>12</sup> In Chilean scale 1.0 is the lowest and 7.0 the highest qualification. 5.0 is approved but not good.

<sup>13</sup> Domestic work or service



worth analyzing. On the one hand, this un-anchored is based on the widespread idea of providing a better life experience for children. Discourses such as “*we want to offer the best for our children*” or “*we do not experiment with their lives of our children*” are common ways of legitimizing the social exclusion strategies that parents create. In other words, it is essential to highlight the *classist sense* that lies behind these discourses since “delivering the best for our children” has always been, for the Chilean case, a strategy based on upwards social relationships that refuse social contact with individuals from lower socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, there are biographical accounts in which there is no biographical un-anchored. Thus is, especially, the case of people who did not complete the formal education. For these parents, their troubles to find or keep a job become clear evidence of the relevance of education. These parents they use their experience as a way to understand the future of their children. In their discourses, they do whatever it takes to ensure that their children complete formal education.

**Ia:** “I have the chance, because of *the Mrs.*<sup>14</sup>, that my son attends the school where she was the director. This was a great opportunity. I wanted, by every mean, that my child finish the education. For me has been always important that he ends up with a title and he gets a better job”.

The biography of parents provides proof of what they expect for their children. By extrapolating the abovementioned case, it can be argued that un-anchored and anchored are not always excluding categories inside discourses and practices. These selective anchorage processes may emerge in any kind of decision. However, from a global perspective, In Chile parents do not believe children should be educated in the same socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts experience by them. The stability of this type of decision in the medium- and long-term is at the basis of the consolidation of strong segment-oriented schools in Chile.<sup>15</sup>

## **ii) Social retraction as a form of exclusion**

Apart from biographical un-anchored, there is another form intended to reduce social contact among different individuals within the Chilean education system. In this case the strategy has been labeled *social retraction or social contraction*. Both concepts refer to the willingness of families to coexist with individuals from the same socio-economic or socio-cultural backgrounds.

Parents interviewed may come from wealthy or poor families; however, they always relate their social condition with the current social situation, thereby losing track of the individual and family biographies, which may inform about lower social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. This is the first form of social contraction identified during the interviews. Therein, it is possible to note how social retraction operates in conjunction

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<sup>14</sup> In Spanish “*la Señora*”, informal language to refer to the employers by domestic workers

<sup>15</sup> In parallel to the emergence of the aforementioned market-oriented approach, it can be observed that schools aim at particular groups. In this sense, the term segment-oriented school is used to refer to those institutions that deliver education to specific target groups according their needs and their capacity to pay.

with biographical un-anchored. Consequently, it is easy to argue that schools reflect the social expectations of parents, thus becoming consumption products aimed at specific socio-economic and socio-cultural groups. Irrespective of the fact that parents may come from families led by professionals, non-professionals, workers, employees or parents working on a casual basis, the socio-economic level is always defined by the current socio-economic status. In this sense, only those life paths similar to the parents ones are valued.

**Ia:** “You know, I came from a very poor family. Now I have my profession, I study in Chile and Spain, I can live by my own and pay for me and for my daughter, but my father, he lived, and he still lives, in extreme conditions of poorness [...] I came from a very poor neighborhood<sup>16</sup> [...] for me was important to live in the center (downtown) because then I was able to live with my daughter alone, and I would not have to relay on my mam or my grandmother to take care of her. I wanted to have our own life. This was one of the reason to chose an school here close to our house”

**And how are the kids and the parents in the school. I mean their social or economic condition [...] You have relations with people like you?**

**Ia:** Yes, we relate to people like us. The other parents in the school have similar life histories. They come from poor families and with their studies are now better”.

**Then your daughter share and interact in the school with peers?**

“Yes, people that live here in the center (downtown); children go from one house to the other, and the houses they visit are all similar to ours. There are no major differences”.

**Ib:** “My son attends an school here in the neighborhood, close to our house [...] I came from the country side, in the south of Chile. I was in a rural school. I did not finish all the classes [...] I will not like that my kid is in an school only with immigrants<sup>17</sup>, but I don’t know if I would like that he goes to a school with very rich people”

**Why not?**

“I work in “San Carlos de Apoquindo” in this very rich neighborhood as

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<sup>16</sup> The notion in Chile is “población”

<sup>17</sup> In the case of this neighborhood in Santiago de Chile, immigrants are mainly Peruvian and Colombian.

domestic services. I work with a very nice family, the kids are also very nice and fond [...] but children in the school, they can be very cruel. I will not like that other kids laugh on my son, because of my work”.

Both interviews shows how people seek to establish contact with peers within a growing retraction of previous social spaces for interaction, rejecting those, which embrace social and cultural differences. In this context, it comes as no surprise that schools increasingly lost their integrative role. In some senses, “social retraction” always operates on the basis of searching for “peers” and the construction of an undesired “other”. The notion of frontier is a very meaningful expression and this by many reasons i) parents have just crossed social boundaries and are not looking back but for new social peers; ii) parents crossed social boundaries and are looking for people who did the same to share with; iii) parents have not crossed these boundaries and because of that, they do not want to interact with people from lower backgrounds. In any of these cases, I want to highlight a double frontier that refers to the upper and lower limits that separate these individuals from those they do not want to be with.

All parents place a high value on what they could not obtain in their former school; for example, bilingual education. This goods becomes the central element when it comes to selecting the school for their children. A selection criteria like that reinforces the segment-oriented nature of schools in a market-oriented context. Virtually, all of the interviewees operate in order to obtain the maximal amount of educational benefits for their children and they look with suspicion and fear on those individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds who try to do the same. At this moment emerge the idea of “living separated from marginalized people”.

### **iii) Polarization as the image of social contact**

Finally, the third exclusionary strategy in school selection processes is related to reject the interaction of people from other social, economical, or cultural background. In this way, social differences with lower groups are not considered - in any social discourse - as a source of benefits. Regardless of the economic status of parents, they always want their children to study with people from the same or higher backgrounds.

Middle- and lower-middle-income families are afraid of marginality within disadvantaged sectors and the exclusion that they may experience in better-off places of the city. Most of people act according to radical representations or simplistic abstractions in which there is only contact with individuals at the top and/or at the bottom ends of social scale, represented by people living in extreme marginality and individuals living in the opulence, respectively. These images do not help to elaborate realistic representations where the socio-economic level may be understood as a difference but not an unbridgeable difference. In a large city such as Santiago there are few spaces where the contact with marginality and opulence is granted. Therefore, these “images” are not a realistic condition within the education system.

**Ia:** “The neighborhood where we live is not the best, there are some problems, not all the people finish the school, not many are working, there are a lot of parties and stuff [...] my son has the good chances to study in a school out of this place. At the beginning was not easy, he has not the basis from the previous school”.

**Ib:** “ I don’t know, I think I will not have a problem that my daughter goes to my own school. It was very good, I did not have problems with learning at the University, but I feel the different with languages. It was very clear at the university, who attend which type of school seeing their English level [...] It is weird, I will not bring my daughter to a “población” but I also would not bring her to a very elite or alternative school. I think both cases are parts of the cities, in which I will not feel my self comfortable”

The two extracts show the idea of social polarized representation, which are not only socially but also urban rooted. In this narration deviant people in the top or the bottom of the society are clearly located. From this perspective, interviewees constantly talk about places of the city and schools that they do not want for their kids. In these narratives always appears marginality or opulence. No body seems to be aware that the socio-urban range of schools options is much more diverse. In this diversity, there are schools that promote interaction between different peoples, while other are becomes peers enclaves.

## **Conclusions**

This paper discussed the selection of schools on the part of parents as one of the most significant phenomena in the study of socio-urban exclusion in Chile nowadays. The agency capability of families serves as the methodological key to understand social dynamics within the school system. In this way, the analysis of educational policies is complemented with an urban-territorial perspective, thus enhancing the structural orientation, which dominates the approaches to education. On the other side, the urban-territorial approach is addressed by highlighting the action and discourses driving by individuals and families in the school institutions, what represents an improvement.

School selection emerges as a social practice that has important consequences on the reorganization of the socio-urban space, thus through its influence on institutions, which are transformed to re-produce new forms of social binding. These specific forms of social interaction — as well as the lack of them — should be the objects of future research focused on socio-urban institutions. The loss of the few spaces for social mixing within the education system; the school as the exclusive place for interaction among social peers; the strong delimitation of neighborhood and school are the three socio-urban processes related to the transformation of our city. These modifications are based on three representation and actions strategies at individual-family level, which I called biographical un-anchored; social retraction; and polarization of representations.

This double narrative, which describes changes in the socio-urban institutions and subjective orientation for action at school level, enables access to new sociological perspectives in the framework of socio-urban studies. The analysis of interviews revealed that the changes in the school institution and the individual's strategies for school selection, both act in the form of limitation as well as resources for the strengthen of agency capabilities. This interpretation has been achieved because transformations in the school institution and in the individual strategies of school selection are both acting together in hindering the emergence of sociability, inclusion, and integration. In this line, inclusion and exclusion cannot be regarded as phenomena derived from structural changes affecting contemporary city. Conversely, they should be analyzed by different studies focused on providing a double description of the changes within socio-urban institutional environment and the transformation in the individual motivation for action.

The re-reading of school selection within the historical context, through the reconstruction of a complex chain of events and interests behind recurrent forms of social exclusion, it is key element for the analysis of the urban reality. This novel analysis implies a series of methodological and theoretical challenges. Also, its reveals the dynamic condition of the socio-urban conditions by highlighting the importance of motivation, decisions, and actions taken by families in the middle- and long-term.

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