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Making poor choices? Demand rationalities and school choice in a Chilean local education market

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Abstract

Although the literature on school choice rationalities is extensive, different authors interpret the processes of school choice for poor families in different ways. Positions vary between those that consider that poor families have the same capacity to choose than middle class families and those that value structural factors as constraints for choice. The objective of this paper is to identify different school choice rationalities of low-income families in the context of a highly marketized education system such as Chile. Beyond the restrictions of a different nature that poor families face, this social group mostly expresses high levels of reflexivity and complex sets of preferences when it comes to choosing schools for their children. This paper tries to overcome the dualistic division that prevails in school choice literature between choice as an outcome of utility maximization for all, and choice as a denial for deprived groups.

Introduction: The rationalities of school choiceⁱ

The debate on the potential benefits and disadvantages of school choice is a very large and contentious one. Numerous scholars have approached this theme from multiple angles (e.g. theoretical, empirical, philosophical), and, independently of the approach adopted, there is no agreement on whether school choice is an appropriate policy approach. Generally speaking, two opposing positions can be identified in this debate. On the one hand, market advocates see school choice as a virtuous mechanism to enhance effectiveness, efficiency, and equity in education. Market advocates assume that school choice has two main advantages. First, choice is the key mechanism to boost competition between schools and therefore the best instrument to promote educational quality and innovation. Secondly, it is a way to stimulate schools to meet

the different educational preferences and demands of families. Parents, considered to be well-informed consumers with the power to choose and to switch, will look for the best school for their children. Accordingly, there will be greater demand for good schools and bad schools will be impelled to close because of lack of demand (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levinson, 1999; Hoxby, 2003). For market advocates state-centered education systems tend to maintain bad schools open as a consequence of the vested interests of teachers' unions and bureaucrats, whose political objectives are detrimental to families and children's needs. Against the state model of provision, the market delivers the necessary incentives to foster a more efficient education system. Choice is therefore the *motto* that makes the system work and triggers the necessary school competition to ensure educational efficiency.

On the other hand, critics highlight the unequal dynamics of school choice and argue that not all social groups have the same possibilities in choosing schools. These scholars show that the patterns of school choice are socially segmented (Ball, 2003, Waslander, Pater, & van der Weide, 2010; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Taylor, 2009). Highly educated parents have more choice possibilities and tend to be better informed than less educated parents. The latter manage less or poor quality information and are confronted with more choice restrictions due to price, geographical and cultural barriers. School choosers are classified as "skilled, semi-skilled or disconnected parents" on the basis of class origin (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995: 24). In addition, critics emphasize that choice is especially limited because, in a market environment, schools have incentives to select students with higher socioeconomic status (SES) who are potentially better performers. In education markets there is, therefore, a 'second order competition', meaning that schools do not compete for attracting more students in the abstract, but those student profiles that are more conducive to strengthening school performance and the school's social prestige (Jabbar, 2016; van Zanten, 2009; Gewirtz et al., 1995).

Interestingly enough, market advocates have responded to the criticisms by underlining the positive effects of market solutions in equity matters. Vulnerable social sectors are not necessarily less capable consumers and giving them more power to choose offers a unique opportunity to escape from the worst public schools to which they are normally destined (Chubb & Moe, 1990, Tooley, 1993; Ryan & Heise, 2002). As Muset points out:

“[Market advocates consider that] the main objective of making school choice options available for every student is to “level the playing field”, allowing more disadvantaged children to access high quality schools they would otherwise not be able to attend” (Muset, 2012: 7).

Overall, both positions in the school choice debate oversimplify the rationality of choosers. Market advocates assume a form of rational behavior that is highly instrumental. To them, any chooser can manage appropriate information on the quality of schools and make subsequent informed choices by calculating the costs and benefits of different options. Thus, if the system guarantees that access to information is perfectly available to citizens, we must assume that all actors behave rationally and make informed decisions. On their part, school choice critics tend to assume that lower SES groups have less access to information and more difficulties interpreting it. For these scholars, the poorer the individuals are, the higher are the barriers they face to exercise real choice (Gintis, 1995). Education inequalities are then the result of the *fallacy* of school choice. The system sets a number of rules which are supposed to apply to all potential choosers but that actually do not (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Dwyer, 2012; Hursh, 2007).

Bounded rationality (cf Ben-Porath 2009, 2012; DeJarnatt 2008; Jones 1999) could be seen as an alternative to these two opposing positions in the school choice debate, as well as a way to build bridges between them. Building on behavioral sociology and economics, Ben-Porath (2009) criticizes the understanding of freedom and autonomy embedded in normative liberal theories and advocates for a social policy that takes into account the *real* ways in which people makes their choices. Her work invites us to leave a narrow rationalistic understanding of choice aside, and to inquire into the conditions under which choice happens by taking into account the actual “limitations and challenges parents and families have in making these choices” (ibid. 538). She provides several examples of ethnographic research that shows how gender, race or class condition the process of searching for information or accessing different social networks, or how risk aversion highly conditions low-income students remaining in underperforming schools even when parents could have the opportunity to change, as in the No Child Left Behind programme (see also DeJarnatt 2008).

The *bounded* rationality approach also challenges the assumption of school choice as *a denial* for deprived groups. Bounded rationality acknowledges some forms of hierarchy in the conditions of choice that different parents face depending on their class status, but this does not make parents necessarily ‘disconnected’ or detached from the process of choice. In fact, bounded rationality considers that the abilities of free and rational choice are limited for everyone, not only for the lower class. Overall, considering bounded rationality implies the need to approach social behavior in processes of school choice empirically, and to understand the conditions that limit and challenge the process of choosing. In contrast to rationalist approaches, the bounded rationality approach invites us to look at the quality of choice *processes*, and not only at the quality of the choice *outcomes* (Simon 2000). By observing empirically how parents respond *rationally* to the limits they face, the politics of choice may become more democratic and fair (Ben-Porath 2009, 2012).

However, the question that remains open is whether any form of bounded rationality is only the result of a “limitation and challenge” that parents face when making choices or whether objective limits interact with autonomous decision making resulting from specific preferences or values – in Weber’s sense of axiological rationality (Weber 1922). That is, if we assume that there is a bounded rationality resulting from limitations and constraints, shall we assume that all parents facing the same constraints will behave in the market in a similar way? And, if they do not, which other factors intervene to understand their specific rationalities? The concept of bounded rationality applied to school choice cannot (or should not) exclude an understanding of choice as a response to specific options that choosers make not only as a result of limits but also as a result of certain preferences autonomously held. Simply put, the decisions made cannot be understood only as the result of objective constraints. Rather, they are the result of an interaction between objective constraints and specific dispositions that parents hold when choosing (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007).

This article applies these notions derived from the bounded rationality approach to a study of school choice patterns among low-income sectors in Chile. While a significant part of the research on school choice and actors’ rationalities focuses on the middle class (Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Power, Edwards, & Wigfall, 2003; Ball, 2003; Buckley & Schneider, 2003), the analyses of how low-income families choose has generated increasing interest (see Schneider et al. 2000; Weiher and Tedin, 2002; Howell and Peterson, 2002; Stewart and Wolf, 2014). Rather than treating low SES families as “disconnected”, “detached”, or even “alienated” choosers, recent research shows that low SES families can be active choosers. Stewart and Wolf (2014), for one, differentiate between attitudes of clientelism, consumerism or active citizenship of low income parents in their relationship with public agencies in school choice processes (2014: 123). Low income families might develop the necessary skills to change from

more passive attitudes of clientelism to empowered citizenship, especially when they perceive their educational opportunities threatened. School choice of low income parents tends to follow a sort of Maslow's theory of needs by establishing an ordered hierarchy of motivations that depends on whether their basic needs are satisfied.

A study of Courtney Bell (2009) shows that while low income parents follow ways of reasoning in school choice processes remarkably similar to those of the middle class, their choice set differs significantly due to differences in the perception of school quality. Poor families tend to include more failing schools within their options than middle class families do. Differences in choice sets are explained because of unequal social networks (an aspect also underlined by the work of Schneider et al. 1997), customary enrollment patterns or children's academic histories. Interestingly, Bell's study highlights that these factors act as bounds that condition the choice possibilities of the poor, but all families essentially look for the same type of qualities when searching a school. Other approaches, in contrast, assume that lower social classes are perfectly aware of what quality education is and, therefore, have the same skills than middle class choosers. In fact, since the most disadvantaged groups in society have the most limited set of choices, they are more likely to support those programs – such as vouchers- that enhance their choice possibilities (Moe, 2001; Howell and Peterson, 2002).

The debate on whether low income families develop patterns of choice exclusively constrained by objective factors or induced by different preferences is an open one. To overcome this dualism, as suggested by Ben-Porath (2009), we need to empirically observe how actors' reflexivity is developed in the process of choice, and inquire into what some authors have called "lived markets" (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995) or "markets in action" (Felouzis, Maroy, & Van Zanten, 2013).

The main aim of this article is to analyze how and to what extent poor parents develop a set of different choice rationalities within a freedom of school choice regime. On the basis of a case study conducted in Chile, the article will show how objective constraints do limit actors' choice possibilities but do not account for either the diversity of poor families' responses in the education market or their forms of reflexivity. The article is structured in four main sections. The first section describes the main characteristics of the Chilean education system, the most market-oriented in the world, as well as the main literature about school choice in this country. Section two defines the methodology of the study and describes the sample of families interviewed in a concrete local education market. Section three presents our data and main results by categorising different forms of school choice rationalities. Finally, section four discusses the results and reflects on the main policy implications of our analysis.

School choice in Chile

Unlike other education systems where school choice is limited to specific geographic areas, the Chilean education system is characterized by complete school choice. The introduction of a voucher system during the military dictatorship (1973-1990) allowed families to enrol their children in any public or private subsidized school formally without any restriction. As a result of both freedom of school choice and the voucher system, the enrolment in private schools has increased dramatically in recent decades, reaching 61% of the total enrolment in primary and secondary education (Centro de Estudios Mineduc 2015).

Despite this apparent freedom of choice, two main features of the Chilean education system do restrict choice. First, private subsidized schools can charge feesⁱⁱ, which is one of the most important limitations on freedom of choice for low-income families

(Gallego & Hernando, 2009; Raczynski, Salinas, de la Fuente, Hernández, & Lattz, 2010; Sapelli, 2010; Córdoba, 2014). Secondly, some schools usually screen students based on academic results or socioeconomic status as a way to compete in the education market (Bellei, 2007; Hsieh & Urquiola, 2003). Despite an official ban on the selection of students in primary education in 2009ⁱⁱⁱ, this practice has actually continued (Carrasco, Bogolasky, Flores, Gutiérrez, & San Martín, 2014; Verger, Bonal, & Zancajo, 2016). Contreras, Bustos, & Sepúlveda (2010) state that 31% of students in the Chilean education system have been subjected to some kind of selection process, although these selection processes are more common in subsidized private schools (56%) than in public schools (6%).

Chile has a sophisticated education quality assessment system (SIMCE, for its acronym in Spanish), based on standardised tests given to students in different grades, that aims to provide public information on schools' results and guide families in the process of school choice. The SIMCE results are delivered to parents, published periodically by the media, and can be consulted in a specific website managed by the Ministry of Education. However, the available evidence shows that information used by parents to choose a school comes from diverse sources, SIMCE results not being the most common one (Raczynski et al, 2010; Rojas Falabella, & Leyton. 2016). For example, Elacqua & Fábrega (2006) show how social networks (relatives or friends) are the most frequently used source regardless of parental education level. In the case of highly-educated parents, information delivered directly by schools is another important source of information. In contrast, what these authors categorize as 'formal' sources (such as SIMCE) are used by less than 10% of families.

The empirical evidence on the reasons for school choice reveals important differences among social groups. For example, Elacqua, Schneider & Buckley (2006), using their own survey, find differences on the choice criteria used by families from low or high

education levels. While security, safety and discipline are the most common reasons for choosing schools expressed by parents with low education levels, school ethos and values are the most important criteria given by parents with higher education levels. These same authors also find important differences between 'stated' and 'revealed' parental school preferences^{iv}. When observing the characteristics of the chosen schools, they observe that parents tend to choose schools with a students' social composition similar to theirs, a characteristic that is not usually openly 'stated' by parents. Similarly, Thieme & Treviño (2011), using both survey and focus groups, observe important differences between stated preferences and the real characteristics of the schools chosen. In their study, academic performance seems not to be a crucial criterion of choice. Parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds seem to value cost and distance, while parents with medium and high SES, value what the authors call factors of "social signalling", i.e. ownership and social composition of the school. These authors assert that the dissonance between parents' stated and revealed preferences is the consequence of information problems as parents base their preferences on those school characteristics most easily observable. In the same way, Canales, Bellei & Orellana (in press) highlight that the main reason to choose private subsidized school is social distinction. In contrast, Carnoy & McEwan (2003) affirm that parents with high educational levels use school performance data measured by national assessments as a key criterion of choice. In this line of argument, Chumacero, Gómez, & Paredes (2011) assert that despite parents valuing education quality based on performance, there is a trade-off between this attribute and distance. The authors state that parents conduct some kind of a cost-benefit analysis, valuing quality and distance, but also price, when choosing school.

Based on an ethnographic approach, Carrasco, Falabella & Mendoza (2015) emphasize that the process of school choice is not simply based on instrumental rationality. Rather, it has to be understood as a sociocultural practice for several

reasons. First, the social group families belong to influences their preferences, so school choice is a relational process. Secondly, school choice has different dimensions. The authors highlight the different expectations and symbolic implications of choice (affective dimension), the use of mediating objects such as uniforms or clothing as a source of information for decision-making (material dimension), and the different agents participating in the school choice process (hetero-agentic dimension). The conceptualization of school choice as a sociocultural practice has important consequences when it comes to analysing the criteria and rationalities developed by different social groups. Social class influences expectations related to school choice. For example, families with high SES value the implications of school choice for the social projection of their children, while for poor families' choices could simply represent a way to improve the economic conditions of their children. These differences are also observed in the case of the information used to choose schools or the agents involved during the election process.

However, the evidence on the rationalities and criteria of choice used by parents from low socioeconomic background is relatively scarce. Córdoba (2014) analyses the criteria of choice used by parents from a poor district in Santiago. She points out several interesting results. First, her study highlights how price is the main limiting factor for these parents. Secondly, parents assess the quality of schools based on a comparison of the competencies of children enrolled in subjects such as reading or basic mathematics. Thirdly, parents also value discipline, the school climate and the relationship between the school and parents. Fourth, parents' main sources of information are social networks or direct observation of schools. Finally, the main criterion to discard schools is social composition. For their part, Raczynski et al. (2010) compare the criteria used by parents from middle and low socioeconomic backgrounds. Their results show how the attributes valued by parents (quality, discipline and

facilities) do not vary significantly by social class, although economic restrictions influence the choice of parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Our case study builds on previous research on school choice conducted in Chile, but adds to it an explicit attempt to identify different school choice rationalities among parents with low SES.

Methods and data

The evidence presented in this paper is based on a case study of a neighbourhood of the city of Valparaíso, one of most populated cities in Chile. Specifically, a 'lived education market' (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995) of ten primary schools, which represent the whole school supply in the neighbourhood, was selected to analyse competitive strategies of school providers and school choice family strategies.

Sixty-one in-depth interviews with parents from the ten selected schools were conducted to explore the rationales behind their choices. The sample of families was selected randomly from the population of students enrolled in grade 1 of primary education. We selected families from students in grade 1 because they were the ones that chose school most recently¹. The number of families interviewed in each school varied between 5 and 10 depending on the number of students enrolled in grade 1 of primary education².

¹ Although some of the schools of the sample offered pre-school education, the selection of families was based on the students of first grade of primary education to ensure the comparability between schools about the sample selected.

² Based on this sampling criterion the expected sample was of 65 interviews, therefore the response rate was around 94%. It was not possible to interview 4 families due to scheduling problems but they were not characterized by any specific trait that could induce bias in the results obtained.

Based on the occupational status of parents, the final sample selected for the purpose of this analysis was composed of 47 interviews to parents with low SES (including unemployed adults, casual workers and skilled manual workers). From the initial sample of 61 families, 14 cases were not included in the analysis because their level of SES, considering the highest to the higher occupational status of parents, was not considered low. Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the families included in the analysis. As can be observed, unskilled manual workers with primary or secondary education level are the most representative group of the sample. Furthermore, the socioeconomic characteristics of those students attending public or private subsidized schools are remarkably similar.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The interviews were structured in four different sections: mechanisms and rationalities of choice, educational expectations, socioeconomic background, and general opinions about the Chilean education system. Each interview aimed to identify the preferences expressed by parents in the process of school choice but also the economic, social or academic restrictions that might condition their final options. The interviews also inquired into the knowledge and use of the different sources of information managed by parents when choosing a school. The analysis of the interviews was structured in the five dimensions that we describe in Table 2 together with analytical categories and the interviews coding system.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Following Maxwell, our research design responds to an 'interactive model', in which the choice of the research methods and their validity are clearly interconnected with the research questions and goals and with the conceptual framework on school choice of

low income families in Chile (Maxwell, 2012: 81). Validity controls were established in the research process, regarding questions of potential researcher biases (Chilean local researchers collaborated as interviewers, research team discussions after interviews) and reactivity (pilot interviews were carried out and potential influences were discussed in among researchers) (Maxwell, 2012).

According to Stake (2003), our case study can be considered a 'Instrumental' one (rather than an intrinsic one), since it will provide insights into the theoretical debate on patterns of school choice in low income contexts. However, as Stake points out, as researchers we have a combined interest in the general and particular aspects of school choice of low-income families. The particularities of the highly marketised Chilean education system provide an extreme scenario in which to analyse actors' reflexivity in the school choice process. This combined interest has been taken into account in the overall research design and to assess the reliability and validity of our data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

School choice rationalities in socially vulnerable contexts

This section presents the typologies of school choice identified from our interviews of parents with low SES. Parents were classified mainly based on the restrictions and choice criteria expressed, and complementarily taking into account the discard criteria. Using these criteria of classification five different typologies were identified: utility oriented parents (27.5%); parents searching for the most appropriate school for children with special needs (12.5%); critical acceptance and accommodation (7.5%); parents searching for security and protection (32.5%); and absence of choice (20%).

Utility oriented parents: choosing a school for social mobility

A significant number of low-income parents are especially active in searching for a school that can guarantee the best possible future for their children. These are well-informed parents that evaluate different options and possibilities before choosing. Parents in this typology are active choosers in the educational market, convinced that they need to check different options before making the best investment for their children's future.

A common feature in the discourse of these parents is an explicit rejection of public schools for being spaces of social conflict and for the absence of learning opportunities. Since what guides parents' rationalities is an active attitude towards social mobility, the public school is seen as a space that "restricts children's opportunities and doesn't take advantage of all children's potentialities" (Mother, private subsidised). Parents also avoid public schools as a way to distinguish themselves from the families and children attending them.

"For example, the children that go to public schools have very few resources and the education of their parents is not the best, so children also behave in a different way"
(Mother, Private subsidised).

Compared with other parents, these parents are relatively active in accessing and managing different information sources about different possible schools. Most of them check SIMCE scores and compare how different schools perform.

"I know education is good here. I checked SIMCE results. And I have compared the school content with other schools and realised that here education is more advanced and children are required to do more things than they are in other schools (Mother, Public school)

Interestingly, this form of access to “cold knowledge”, and this attitude of self-confidence in searching for the information needed to make the right decision is combined with more informal strategies to get access to information, such as the “hot knowledge” coming from relatives or neighbours. In some cases, even the emulation of middle class decisions was identified.

“I work in different houses, with Germans, Italians, and I always observe them, and I told myself I will put my daughter in this school when she is the appropriate age”
(Mother, Private subsidised)

The social aspirations of this group of parents make them very aware and reflexive regarding what the “right” decisions are to make. Understandably, observing how middle class families invest in the education of their children or trying to gain social capital by enrolling their children in schools with higher social status becomes a reasonable strategy. In some cases, this logic of social mobility even leads to some parents to leave their children in schools where they may suffer from clear adaptation problems. This mother essentially asks her daughters to accept a teacher stigmatising them due to their social origin:

“There is a teacher who annoys my daughters, and my daughters’ crying told me that they had enough. I talked with the teacher, I talked to the nuns, but there is no change... And I say ‘girls you have to do your part, you must understand what the teacher dislikes about you’, but she doesn’t change and my daughters feel discriminated against”
(Mother, Private subsidised)

The desire to maintain children in a school that can foster future possibilities for them may even be stronger than the feelings of discrimination or mistreatment suffered in the school. Interestingly, this takes place among a group of parents that are openly aware of their *exit* capacity (which, in fact, is higher than their *voice* capacity). Actually,

changing school is a common practice among Chilean families, even among low-income families. However, utility oriented parents from poor backgrounds would rather exit the school when they perceive something is wrong with the quality of the education. It is education quality – and not factors that have to do with the adaptation of the child to the school- that is a real red line for them.

“[I would leave the school if] the quality of education went down, if I observe that teachers are teaching the same thing for months and there is no progress in content. If this were to happen, I would think of changing the school. Also if I see that the score in the SIMCE goes down, I would consider a change” (Mother, Private subsidised)

For these parents distance is not a constraint either. Some parents invest more than 30 minutes walking everyday to go to the desired school, a fact that questions the taken for granted idea that low income parents mainly choose schools based on proximity. Some mothers even wait until the end of the school day before returning home because of the distance or the cost of public transport, while others opt for residing near their desired school: “I came to live here because of the school” (Mother, Private subsidised). The only restriction these families face is the cost of the fees of certain “forbidden” schools. However, poor parents of this group seem very conscious of the market segment in which they move. And some of them have even rationalized that the most expensive school is not always the best one.

“It’s not worth it [to send the child to a fully private school], the upgrade is not much, and besides the quality is in the household. If I want my daughter to go to college it is not enough to send her to a school with better teachers. What really matters is the support of the family.” (Mother, Private subsidised).

The most appropriate school for children with special needs

How is choice process for socially disadvantaged families with children with special needs? The perception of education quality and the parameters used to identify a “good school” differ substantially for such parents from what can be considered a “standard choice”. In the Chilean education market, socially disadvantaged families with children with special needs (behavioural problems, sensorial problems, autism, etc.) face substantial difficulties finding the most appropriate school. Interestingly, the supposed diversity and open character of the education market are substantially reduced when parents aim to enrol children with special needs.

Indeed, parents included in this typology are very active in the market. Usually, after exploring more than one possibility, they end up choosing a small size school that might provide the type of individualized attention that they think their children need.

“I rejected other schools because I did not get very good references for them. And, because of the number of students enrolled. These were schools with more than one group per course. I needed a smaller school because of my child’s conditions.” (Mother, Public school).

Frequently, the reason for exploring and considering more than one school (and not relying on only one option) has to do with the rejection they previously suffered in other schools. In fact, these parents are critical of schools’ exclusionary practices, which lead them to question some of the presumed virtues of the free school choice model in Chile.

- “Of course, what happened is that my child went to a language school, and then school D placed a lot of obstacles to accepting him, because he went to a language school. And then we came here.
- Did you pass any selection process at school D?
- No, not even that.” (Mother, Private subsidised school)

“We went to check out that school and told them that he has Asperger’s and was in a special education school before, and they suggested many drawbacks, so we did not...”.

(Mother, Public school)

In a very open and diverse market, a significant number of these parents end up choosing the school where their children are accepted *by default*. However, this does not mean that they are dissatisfied with their choice, since this is usually a school where they feel that their children can receive warm and adequate attention. Despite a relative perception of enjoying choice possibilities, the restriction imposed on children with special needs becomes what really matters.

“What I like most about this school is that they have integrated him very well. He is not discriminated against at all.” (Mother, Private subsidised)

Parents get access to information through visiting schools and getting references from friends and relatives. SIMCE is almost ignored and not used at all as a basis for choice.

- “And did you check SIMCE, do you know what SIMCE is?”

- Yes, I know what SIMCE is, but what for?” (Mother, Private subsidised)

Minimising SIMCE results is indicative of a completely different conception of education quality. What matters for these parents is whether and how their children are accepted in the school and how teachers and schoolmates welcome them. They clearly consider academic performance as secondary because their priority is their children’s welfare.

Critical acceptance and accommodation

The third group in our typology includes parents that have enrolled their children in a school that was not their first option. Their aspirations in the education market have been altered for some reason, mainly because of costs or because the selection process has denied their children the possibility of attending the school they desired. Their initial logic of investment and their aspirations are ultimately detached from their final school "choice". Reasons of a different nature (e.g. academic, economic or religious) have conditioned their final choice.

- "Was this your first school choice?

- No, my children (3) studied in another school, in a private subsidised one. I had to change them because the school did not belong to the SEP system^v, and I could not afford the cost. I had the option to come to this school that is free" (Mother, Private subsidised).

"Actually we wanted to go to school A, because I went to that school. But since we were not married in the Catholic Church we could not take them there. It is a requisite."
(Mother, Private subsidised)

The change in parents' initial expectations produces two types of reactions. While some parents adapt to the new situation more easily, others are not resigned to it. On the one hand, parents that adapt tend to be critical of their previous choices, especially if their exclusion was due to some exclusionary practice of the initially chosen school. Nonetheless, once they find a sufficiently satisfactory place, they do not seem to want to go through a selection and adaptation process in a new school again.

- "Did you think about a change?

- No, it's the other way around. I have to move, but I won't change the kids. I will come every day to bring them. I talked to the teachers, because my children are very well adapted here now, I don't want to change." (Mother, Private subsidised).

On the other hand, other parents, although they are not necessarily completely unhappy with their children's current school, have carefully planned their exit from the school to attend a more desired one at some time in the future. They are frustrated with the school choice process because it has not placed their children in the school they think they deserve, and they openly manifest this.

- "And once she is here, have you planned to change the school?"

- Yes, because... getting back to a more demanding atmosphere, because you need a good middle school to form the basis to go to university." (Mother, Private subsidised)

- "Have you thought about moving to another school?"

- Yes. Because their father wants to take them where he studied. It is in the city centre. Maybe later on. Since we have three children this is going to be very expensive."
(Mother, Private subsidised)

In comparison with families from the first typology, none of these families checked SIMCE as an indicator of school quality or a school choice criterion. However, ignoring SIMCE does not convert these parents into passive choosers. Actually, these are parents that are active in the education market and gather data on different aspects of the school because they value different dimensions of education quality. In addition, once their children are in the school they tend to be involved in the parent association and are active in the school dynamic, although usually with a critical and vigilant attitude toward the school.

"I am very meticulous, and I didn't like the way the school gave the information. Almost [all the information is given] via internet, I didn't like that." (Mother, Private subsidised)

“Regarding the education process there is enough information, but information is never 100% about the school.” (Mother, Private Subsidised)

Searching for security and protection

An important number of parents give priority to security and protection in making their school choice. These choice criteria predominate among numerous low-income families that see schooling as a way to protect their children from violence, drugs, and other criminal activities. These families are aware of the fact that these social problems are very much present in some of the schools located in their district, a reason why they focus on looking for better alternatives for their children.

Thus, in general, the families that look for security and protection in school are proactive when it comes to exercising school choice. The chosen schools are not necessarily the most effective and demanding academically, but are those that offer a sense of community, protection and refuge to the families and their children.

“The most satisfactory aspect of the school is its good atmosphere and care. Up to now he has had no problem with bullying, which is something I am always aware of, and this keeps me calm and confident, knowing he is in a school which has a good atmosphere.”
(Mother, Private subsidised)

These are parents that do not focus on academic performance as their main school choice criterion. They usually know about SIMCE but do not use the SIMCE data when choosing a school.

- “Did you check SIMCE results when you were looking for a school?”

- No, I didn't care about SIMCE actually. I really looked for security for my son, the type of teachers and a space in which he could be comfortable."

(Mother, Private subsidised)

"I know that my daughter should be in another school with better SIMCE results, because we received the SIMCE letter results and the truth is it is quite low in this school, but there is a risk of violence... because my daughter is too quiet, then very quiet children don't fit in this kind of violent, aggressive, upset time that we are living in today." (Mother, Private subsidised)

Instead of SIMCE, these parents rely on their social network (mainly relatives, but also neighbors and friends) when it comes to obtaining information about their different school options. It is also quite common that the parents themselves studied in the chosen school, which is something that clearly reinforces the connection, trust and commitment between the family and the school.

The parents greatly value that in the selected schools there are not conflicts, that the schools are small enough and that the relationship between families and the school is close and personal. The parents "know the teachers well" and this is an important aspect of their satisfaction with the school. Usually, they refer to teachers as affectionate and caring, and as persons that really care for the welfare of their children.

"I liked it first because the facilities look pretty, not dangerous. And the other thing is that, being a small school, teachers are more concerned about children [...] Teachers are very good, very supportive, and I also like the discipline of the school, because whatever happens they call me and let me know." (Mother, Public school)

Many parents in this group also appreciate the school being close to their home. However, here distance is not a matter of comfort or transportation costs, but of security (a controlled and safe journey for their kids).

When selecting a school, these parents discarded other schools that did not fit the mentioned criteria of a calm and safe environment. They tried to avoid schools with a “bad reputation”. They use a broad range of proxies to identify inappropriate schools that range from the presence of physical violence to an appearance of informality or insecurity. In relation to the latter, one of the mothers interviewed discarded one of the schools because, when she visited it, the door was opened by one of the children rather than school staff. Other mothers express other types of worries:

“I'm afraid to enroll him in another school; the school that is here, in the hills, which I'm not going to name, I'm afraid of bullying, students that go with knives, they beat them, sexual abuse. However in this school I feel safe and the nuns give me more security.”
(Mother, Private subsidised)

Finally, from the interviews, we also observe that these are parents that are very loyal to the schools their children are enrolled in because of their familiarity with them. Accordingly, they do not consider leaving the school unless forced to by changing circumstances, such as having to move to a different city.

- “Have you ever thought of changing school?
- No because this school suits me, I know the teachers; I'm used to come from home to school every day.” (Mother, Private subsidised)

Absence of choice

A final group of parents do not exercise school choice in an active way. This absence of choice is linked, to a great extent, to a low level of educational aspirations for their

children. The combination of lack of choice and low educational aspirations, together with serious economic restrictions is, in fact, what differentiates this group from the previous categories. These are usually very low-income families without an explicit discourse about what is a good quality or a desirable school option for their children. To them, at the time of selecting a school, the most important thing is to look for one that accepts their children; they do not look for particular features in the schools.

The families in this category do not invest a lot of time and energy in the school choice process, and do not seem to be worried about whether one alternative could be better than another for their children, or could provide them with better or worse future opportunities. As a result, these families' children end up attending schools that are close to their homes and that do not charge fees.

"I chose this school because it is cheap and because I asked in other schools and all were expensive. In contrast here, I don't pay fees and I found it, how to say... I found it tidy and clean, this was my first impression." (Mother, Private subsidised)

The interviewed parents do not talk much about the quality of education in the schools their children attend. Quite frequently, they respond to questions by simply saying that the education in the school in question "is good". These parents do not link quality education either to a very demanding academic environment or to a particular educational approach. They define their satisfaction with the school in very general terms. For them, it is enough to perceive that the school takes care of their children.

"Teaching is good, this school is very devoted to the child." (Mother, Private subsidised)

Nonetheless, parental satisfaction with the school is not usually high and it is not common that the parents praise schools for their intrinsic characteristics. They basically

focus on the fact that the school is free and close to home. In some cases, the parents even complain about aspects of the school, which is unusual in the other choice typologies explored above. Parents that fall under the absence of choice category rarely refer to having a close connection with the school and its teachers.

Discussion

The empirical analysis of the choice patterns of low SES families in a highly marketised education system has revealed the need to problematize “the poor” as a homogeneous or monolithic category in the context of the school choice debate. In contrast to those critical approaches that qualify poor parents as “alienated” or “disconnected” choosers (thus, almost assuming their forced exclusion from the process of choosing a school), our interviews reveal high levels of reflexivity among parents from this social group. Poor parents value and manage several school options in almost all the identified typologies (except in the ‘absence of choice’ one). During the school choice process they are guided by predefined sets of preferences, establish their priorities, reject certain schools, and reflect on their final choices, usually in an elaborated manner.

A pro-school choice regime, such as the Chilean one, increases the need for families to explore the education market and to consider a significant number of schools before the “correct” decision is made. However, the existence of several options does not necessarily lead to better educational opportunities for the poor, and even less, to greater education equity, as market advocates defend (cf. Chubb & Moe, 1990; Tooley, 1996). The high level of segmentation and hierarchisation of the Chilean education system restricts the potential choice options of low-income families and as a

consequence increases school segregation. As other studies have also shown (Gallego & Hernando, 2008; Bellei, 2007; Zancajo, Bonal, & Verger, 2014), our analysis reveals that the capacity of poor families to choose is certainly limited due to school fees and schools' selection of students. Most interviews confirm that parents are aware of these restrictions and that they adapt their decisions to a universe of schools that is notably smaller than the one they could have access to if they had a different social status. Sometimes they express this as an objective limitation ("I would have loved my child to go to this school but I couldn't afford it") and sometimes as a less relevant constriction ("The most expensive school is not necessarily the best one"). In any case, they know which schools belong to their particular market segment and which ones do not.

However, the existence of restrictions, and even their recognition, does not fully determine the school choice rationalities of low-income parents. In other words, a bounded choice cannot be immediately translated into a bounded rationality. Somewhat paradoxically, the limits to choice imposed by the high level of segmentation of the education market promotes higher levels of reflexivity among those parents that feel that have more at stake when choosing a school than among parents that face fewer choice restrictions. Being poor in a highly unequal education system converts the act of choice into a crucial decision. A poor choice for a child from a family with few economic resources, but high educational expectations could be fatal in terms of future educational, employment and social mobility opportunities.

Most of the parents interviewed, despite exercising their choice in a restricted market, manage several options and articulate very elaborate arguments to discard or choose specific schools. Nonetheless, far from reflecting the same patterns of choice, they have different criteria and preferences on schooling matters. Aspirations of social mobility, appropriate schools to respond to the special needs of their children, social

distinction, children's security or school discipline are examples of priorities and choice criteria revealed in the interviews. The preferences of these parents are constructed in a context of social and economic restrictions, and to be feasible they must be consonant with the market available to them. In most cases, preferences and restrictions are aligned, that is to say, parental preferences do not go beyond their real choice possibilities. There are, however, some cases of dissonance. These are, for instance, cases of parents that underestimate some of the restrictions of the school market and end up resigned to a secondary school option. We have also identified cases of parents that do not accept the social limits of the educational market and that chose a higher status school despite, as they admit, is generating problems of adaptation for their children.

However, the diversity of preference sets observed among poor parents also has certain specificities in relation to other social groups. The comparison with other studies focused on more socioeconomic advantaged families shows that lower class parents' preferences are not constructed in the same way as middle or upper class parents' preferences, all of which are contingent on the *habitus* – understood as socially structured dispositions (cf. Bourdieu, 1972) - of different social groups. For example, as Bell (2009) has noticed, low SES parents value quality education differently from more highly educated parents. In many of our interviews, parents evaluate education quality in terms of how early children start reading or counting, or how much homework they have. They rarely refer to educational and pedagogical approaches, or to the details of a school's philosophy as often as middle class parents do. Likewise, there are specific forms in which vulnerable families find and manage the information that is considered relevant to choosing a school.

As other researchers have shown before (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Schenider *et al.* 1997; Elacqua & Fábrega, 2006; Rojas et al., 2016), working class parents make much more

use of “hot knowledge” than they do of objective indicators on school performance. Again, our interviews are full of references to the importance given to the information on school quality provided by relatives or neighbours. Additionally, most parents interviewed do not consider school performance on standardised tests (SIMCE) when choosing a school, and do not think these kinds of indicators are a good proxy for school quality. Finally, due to the climate of insecurity in some poor areas, parents living there may focus on security and protection more than middle class parents. Overall, a school choice rationality that is valid for a particular social group and/or social context might not be so valid for another group-context configuration.

Nonetheless, despite these differences between middle class and lower class parents’ choice patterns, the most fundamental objectives and priorities of choice are not necessarily so different. In general, similar logics of social mobility can be found among both middle class and low income parents- although the level of the aspirations of these groups might be different in the sense that they depart from very different positions in the social structure.

In short, while restrictions of a different nature frame and bound the potential choices of low-income families, these restrictions do not account for a reality that, as we have seen, is much more complex and rich. In a highly marketised education system, such as the Chilean one, most poor families develop different school choice rationalities that are not only explained by the limits they face in choosing. They are also the result of specific expectations and preferences –structured but not restricted to a particular class habitus- in a context of a limited and classist education market.

What are the political implications of this analysis? Of course, the regulation of school choice has generated extensive debates and different political alternatives, discussion of which is outside the scope of this article. We only want to point out two main

considerations in this respect. The first consideration refers to the diverse forms of rationality that poor social groups develop when choosing a school. If this is the case, as our article suggests, then the resulting inequalities in school choice processes have little to do with so-called “information asymmetries”. That is, giving more information to the “principal” (parents) does not necessarily compensate for inequalities in the market place. When governments launch campaigns to make school results more public or to improve their information systems, it is very unlikely that low-income parents will make use of this information in making their decisions. As we have seen, the patterns of choice of these parents are different from those assumed by dominant education policy frameworks. Assuming that, in all cases, educational demand will be aligned with decisions based on information on school performance provided in informational tables is essentially naïve.

The second consideration refers to the limits of school choice as a possible source of equality of opportunities. Both the most fervent advocates of free school-choice and those aspiring to regulate choice do not seem to take the impact of market segmentation and hierarchisation resulting from selection practices and price sufficiently into account. Choice as a potential equalizer assumes that in a market situation power lies on the side of demand. However, in real education markets, incentives of selection and risk aversion are powerful enough to transfer power to the supply side. The capacity to exclude certain sectors of society largely restricts the choice capacity of the poorest and reduces their possible choices. The paradox is that, as most of our interviews show, parents value school choice as something intrinsically good and desirable, despite the more or less hidden school discrimination practices that arguably restrict their power to choose.

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ii Since 1993 (Law of Shared Financing) private subsidized schools are allowed to charge fees to families.

iii *Ley General de Educación* (Law 20370)

iv The authors distinguish between the criteria expressed by parents (stated preferences) and the characteristics of the schools that they finally consider when enrolling their children (revealed preferences).

v The SEP (*Preferential School Subsidy*) system transfers funding (on top of the voucher) to those schools willing to enroll students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 1

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	Categories	Frequency	%	Type of School			
				Public		Private subsidized	
				Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Highest education level of parents	Primary	11	23.4	2	20.0	9	24.3
	Secondary	31	66.0	8	80.0	23	62.2
	Tertiary	5	10.6	0	0.0	5	13.5
Highest Occupation Status of Parents	Skilled manual workers	19	40.4	4	40.0	15	40.5
	Unskilled manual workers	27	57.4	6	60.0	21	56.8
	Casual or non-working	1	2.1	0	0.0	1	2.7
Type of School	Public	10	21.3				
	Private subsidized	37	78.7				

Table 2

MAIN ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS, CATEGORIES AND INTERVIEW CODES

Dimensions	Categories	Interview codes
Socioeconomic characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Household characteristics• Occupation• Educational level• Income.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family members• Family monthly income• Mother occupation• Father occupation• Mother educational level• Father educational level• Other members
School choice process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choice set,• Restrictions of choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of schools considered• School size• School type (public, private subsidised, private)• Economic restrictions• Student with special needs• Academic selection restrictions• System values restrictions
Choice criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Geographical• Academic performance• School ethos• Security/discipline• System values• Social• Special needs• Information• School facilities• Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Distance to school• School fee• Social composition• Attention to student special needs• Academic level (SIMCE)• Security• Discipline• School religious values• Teacher quality

Discard criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical • Academic performance • School ethos • Security/discipline • System values • Social • Special needs • Information • School facilities • Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance to school • School fee • Social composition • Attention to student special needs • Academic level (SIMCE) • Security • Discipline • School religious values • Teacher quality
Information sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official information • SIMCE • Previous experience, • Social network • School. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check SIMCE • Access to school webpages • Hot knowledge • School interviews • Information from relatives • Other

Source: authors.