

Migration, Identity, and Education in Chile: Biographical-Narrative Study in the Metropolitan Region

Migración, identidad y educación en Chile: estudio biográfico-co-narrativo en la Región Metropolitana

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Abstract

The sustained increase in migration in Chile has reshaped the country's social and educational landscape, particularly in the city of Santiago, the main destination for both international and internal flows. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study based on the biographical-narrative method, which aimed to understand how migratory processes influence identity construction and intercultural relations between adolescents attending high schools in the Metropolitan Region. Through life stories, the voices of three students—two with international migration experiences (from Colombia and Venezuela) and one of Mapuche origin, representing internal migration—are made visible, and their trajectories are analyzed within a school context that often operates under logics of cultural homogenization. The results reveal identity tensions, structural barriers, and subtle forms of exclusion, but they also highlight

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strategies of resistance and the centrality of family cultural capital as a foundation for envisioning the future. The main contribution of this study lies in showing, through biographical narratives, how internal and external migration intersect in the construction of youth identities, providing a differentiating perspective with respect to previous studies that focused exclusively on international migration. A conclusion is drawn regarding the need to transition from a multiculturalist and merely expository approach towards a paradigm of critical interculturality that transforms pedagogical practices and school cultures, ensuring the right to identity and inclusive, relevant education for all students.

Keywords: Migration, Secondary Education, Life Stories, Interculturality, Identity, Educational Exclusion, Chilean educational system

Resumen

El aumento sostenido de la migración en Chile ha transformado el paisaje social y educativo, especialmente en la ciudad de Santiago, principal destino de flujos internacionales e internos. Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación cualitativa basada en el método biográfico-narrativo, cuyo objetivo fue comprender la manera en que los procesos migratorios influyen en la construcción de la identidad y en las relaciones interculturales de adolescentes que estudian en liceos de la Región Metropolitana. A través de historias de vida, se visibilizan las voces de tres estudiantes—dos con experiencia de migración externa (Colombia y Venezuela) y uno de ascendencia mapuche, representando la migración interna—y se analizan sus trayectorias en un contexto escolar que suele operar bajo lógicas de homogeneización cultural. Los hallazgos revelan tensiones identitarias, barreras estructurales y formas de exclusión sutiles, pero también estrategias de resistencia y la centralidad del capital cultural familiar como soporte para proyectar el futuro. La principal contribución de este estudio radica en mostrar, mediante relatos biográficos, cómo la migración interna y externa se entrelazan en la construcción de identidades juveniles, aportando una mirada diferenciadora con respecto a investigaciones previas, centradas exclusivamente en la migración internacional. Se concluye sobre la necesidad de transitar desde un enfoque multiculturalista y meramente expositivo hacia un paradigma de interculturalidad crítica que transforme las prácticas pedagógicas y las culturas escolares, garantizando el derecho a la identidad y a una educación inclusiva y pertinente para todos los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: migración, educación secundaria, historias de vida, interculturalidad, identidad, exclusión educativa, sistema educativo chileno

Introduction

Human mobility, in its multiple forms and trajectories, has consolidated as one of the most defining phenomena of the 21st century. Far from being a linear or exceptional process, migration constitutes a structural condition of contemporary societies, driven by a complex network of economic, political, social, and climatic factors (Castles, 2010). In this global scenario, Latin America has emerged as a region of intense mobility, predominantly characterized by intraregional or south-south flows (Stefoni, 2018). Given its relative economic and political stability in recent decades, Chile has transformed into a significant attraction hub, leading to profound changes in its demographic and cultural profiles (Canales, 2018; Rojas and Silva, 2016).

This new migratory chapter has directly called the foundations of the Chilean society into question, particularly its education system. Today, the school, historically conceived as a cornerstone in the construction of nation-states and as a mechanism of cultural homogenization, faces the unavoidable challenge of welcoming and educating a new generation of students that features a rich diversity of cultural, linguistic, and experiential capitals.

To understand the magnitude of what the migratory phenomenon represents in Chile, we employed the last data update of the National Statistics Institute (INE) and the National Migration Service (SERMIG, 2024). As of December 2023, the foreign population residing in Chile amounted to 1 918 583, which is equivalent to 10% of the national total. The accumulated growth of said population from the beginning of 2018 to December 31st, 2023, was 46.8%. In terms of relative growth, in the 2018-2023 period, the Biobío region experienced the greatest increase, almost doubling with a 96.5% rise. This region was followed by Los Lagos, which grew by 85.8%. As of December 31st, 2023, the six leading countries of origin of the foreign population residing in Chile were concentrated in the following distribution, representing 86.1 of the total: Venezuela (38%), Peru (13.6%), Colombia (10.9%), Haiti (9.8 %), Bolivia (9.4%), and Argentina (4.3%).

The cited report employs the definition of *boys, girls, and teenagers* (NNA) for the 0-19 age group. As of December 31st, 2023, a total of 302 306 NNA migrants in Chile was estimated. The percentage of NNA with respect to the total foreign population estimate (excluding those of unknown age) was 15.8% in 2023.

The distribution of the foreign population as of December 31st, 2023, was concentrated in the following regions. The Metropolitan Region featured the greatest proportion, with 56.8% of the total estimate (equivalent to 1 089 049 people). Meanwhile, the city of Antofagasta ranked second with 6.7% (128 744 people). Finally, Valparaíso came in third with 6.4% (122 433 people). Although the Metropolitan Region continues to harbor the greatest proportion of foreigners, its relative national weight has decreased in comparison to that in 2020, when it represented 59.9% of the estimated total.

However, the concept of *migration* in Chile cannot be merely reduced to cross-border flows. In parallel, internal migration dynamics persist which have shaped the

country's social structure throughout its history. Rural-to-urban displacement, a massive process that took place during the 20th century, led thousands of families, many of them of indigenous origin, to settle on the outskirts of large cities in search of better opportunities (Rodríguez and González, 2006). This territorial uprooting is often accompanied by forced cultural assimilation and integration, similar to that experienced due to the actions described by the Chilean Government in the *Report of the Commission for Historical Truth and New Dealings with Indigenous Peoples* (2003). These historical processes have left deep marks on the identity of subsequent generations, as is the case with the Mapurbe (urban Mapuche) youth, who have negotiated their cultural heritage in a context that has historically invisibilized and subordinated indigenous peoples (Miranda 2023; Miranda *et al.*, 2025; Pairican, 2020).

The confluence of these two migratory currents—external and internal—in the school space generates a highly complex scenario. The national academic literature has consistently documented that the experience of migrant students and of those belonging to indigenous peoples is often marked by barriers that hinder their full development and participation. Studies such as those by Pavez-Soto (2012) and Tijoux (2013, 2016) have evidenced the persistence of racist, discriminatory, and xenophobic practices in educational communities, which operate through the stigmatization of accent, skin colors, last names, or customs. These violences, often subtle and normalized, not only affect student's socioemotional well-being; they also have a negative impact on their educational trajectories (Castillo *et al.*, 2018).

This study is situated at a critical junction, based on the hypothesis that teenagers with migratory trajectories face significant identity tensions within a school system that, despite the current inclusive discourses, continues to operate under a monocultural and assimilationist paradigm. We argue that the pressure towards cultural homogenization is a trigger for *acculturative stress* (Berry, 2008; Villacieros, 2019), defined as a state of psychological tension stemming from the conflict between the culture of origin and the host society. The consequences of this stress are significant: they may include the concealment of the personal history and the loss of cultural references as well as an acute uprooting that hinders the consolidation of a healthy identity and the projection of one's own future. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that these tensions may lead individuals to construct a new identity—one that is founded on memory—in order to find place and meaning in their new sociocultural reality (Miranda and Urquieta, 2022).

Therefore, the objective of this research is to reveal and understand, through a biographical-narrative approach, the voices and experiences of three teenagers studying at schools in the city of Santiago, analyzing the way in which their migratory processes have influenced their socialization, the construction of their self-perception, and their intercultural relationships. Through their stories, we delve into their life worlds to answer the following questions: *How does the school experience in the capital permeates the identity of these young people? What forms of exclusion and inclusion do they perceive in the daily construction of their subjectivity?*

For an in-depth analysis of the migrant youngsters' experiences, it is essential to establish a dialog with the theoretical concepts that encompass the relationship between migration, education, and identity.

From Assimilation to Critical Interculturality

Historically, the response of western nation-states to cultural diversity has oscillated between different paradigms. The assimilationist model, which was hegemonic in nature for a large part of the 21st century, conceives integration as a one-way process in which minorities must abandon their cultural traits (e.g., their language, customs, or values) in order to adopt those of the dominant culture, a process that—one could argue—is not voluntary in most cases but takes shape as the action of diverse assimilation mechanisms (Gordon, 1964; Miranda, 2023).

In the realm of education, the assimilationist model emerges through a monocultural curriculum that presents a hegemonic view of history and knowledge as universal and neutral. This approximation systematically invisibilizes and delegitimizes the knowledge and experiences of subordinated groups (Miranda and Urquieta, 2024). A historical example of this policy is *chilenization*, a process aimed at both the migrant population and indigenous peoples which seeks to suppress difference in order to establish a homogenous national identity (Cádiz, 2013; Serrano *et al.*, 2012).

As a reaction to the above, the multicultural paradigm emerged, which recognizes cultural diversity but has been criticized for operating under a logic wherein the dominant culture manages tolerance without altering the existing hierarchies (Walsh, 2005). At school, this approach is often limited to folklorizing manifestations, such as ‘nation fairs’ or ephemerides, which present cultures in a static and essentialized manner (Walsh, 2007). Although multiculturalism represents an advancement with respect to the negation of diversity, its main weakness lies in its inability to question power relations and structural inequality, since, instead of transforming the systems that produce exclusion, it only manages diversity without challenging institutional racism nor the supremacy of a ‘national’ culture above the ‘others’ (Dietz, 2012).

As an alternative for overcoming these issues, the intercultural approach emerges as an ethical-political and pedagogical project that responds to the insufficiencies of previous models. Latin American critical interculturality transcends the mere recognition of diversity to promote a horizontal dialogue of knowledge, challenging the colonial and racist power structures that sustain inequality (Walsh, 2007). Its application in education implies a deep and systemic transformation that encompasses the curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training, and school culture as a whole. This process aims for the diversity of emerging identities and epistemologies to be central axes of the educational project, which is achieved by opening spaces within a territory for every individual to be considered as a full epistemological subject (Fals Borda, 1985; Gudynas, 2024). The ultimate goal is to build an environment that handles conflict as learning and educates for citizenship, social justice, and the eradication of racism (Castillo *et al.*, 2018).

Nevertheless, in the Chilean context, the implementation of an intercultural approach is still pending. Despite the existence of a regulatory framework, its application is limited, it only encompasses programs for indigenous students, and it does not permeate the rest of the education system (MINEDUC, 2018).

Identity in transit

Far from being a fixed and immutable essence, identity is a social, dynamic, and relational construct (Hall, 1996) that is forged within a continuous process of negotiation between self-perception and the other's view. This process is particularly complex in young people with migratory trajectories, who must navigate between multiple worlds: that of their family and their culture of origin, and that of the receiving society, with its own codes and expectations.

Thus, the migratory experience acts as a catalyst for that which has been dubbed *diasporic identities* (Brah, 2011). These are not defined by a pure origin, but by the capacity to articulate and make sense of dispersion, hybridization, and multiple belonging. For these youngsters, the question *where are you from?* rarely has a simple answer, since their identity is constructed within the creative tension of their families' *there* and their daily lives' *here*, between memory and future projects, between loyalty to their roots and the desire to belong in the new context (Sayad, 2010).

In this construction of identity, school is ambivalent and may serve as a space of recognition and empowerment for students to explore and affirm their identities. However, this space often becomes a place of stigmatization and symbolic violence, where the identities of many students are negated, stereotyped, or folklorized. In light of this, young people are forced to develop strategies that range from survival (hiding their origins or over-affirming their difference defensively) to active resistance (Merino and Tocornal, 2012; Pavez-Soto, 2012). It is in the latter that the revindication of identity, by means of language, surnames, rites, or peer networks, emerges as a powerful tool to oppose assimilative pressure (Merino and Tocornal, 2012).

Acculturative stress and cultural capital

The process of adapting to a new society is not merely social, but also deeply psychological. John Berry (2008) developed the concept of *acculturative stress* to describe the set of challenges and tensions experienced by individuals when coming into contact with a culture that is different from theirs. This stress can manifest in symptoms such as anxiety, depression, identity confusion, and a sense of marginality. In the case of migrant teenagers, factors such as perceived discrimination, language barriers, the yearning for their country of origin, and concerns regarding their family's situation are potent stressors that may affect their mental health and academic performance (Villacieros, 2019).

A key factor that can intervene in the negative effects of acculturative stress is students' cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This concept refers to the set of knowledge, abilities, and values that are transmitted within the family. However, in the school context, not all cultural capitals are equally valued; there is a tendency to exclusively recognize and reward the cultural capital of dominant groups, devaluing and delegitimizing the knowledge of foreign, indigenous, or other minority groups (Carrillo, 2016; Quintriqueo and Torres, 2012).

If we add to this the fact that regular Chilean schools maintain a process of social and pedagogic exclusion and suffer from a lack of training for their teachers and management teams to work with diversity (Castillo, 2021, 2022; Herrera *et al.*, 2021), the landscape for foreign students or those newly arrived from other areas becomes increasingly uphill. In this context, validating the native language, incorporating family knowledge in the curriculum, and establishing a genuine alliance with families constitute pedagogical strategies that not only improve learning but also strengthen students' self-esteem and identity, mitigating acculturative stress and promoting a more equitable and respectful integration (Jiménez and Fardella, 2015).

Methodological framework

To address the complexity of the subjective experiences of migrant students, our research employed a qualitative approach. This perspective is particularly suitable for our object of study since it seeks a deep understanding of the meanings that stakeholders themselves ascribe to their experiences (Flick, 2007). Situating oneself in the voices and contexts of students allows going beyond figures and predefines categories to gain access to the richness and singularity of their life trajectories (Ricas, 2011). The qualitative approach invites us to adopt a posture of empathetic and reflective listening, recognizing participants not only as mere informants, but also as co-constructors of knowledge (Flick, 2007).

Within the range of qualitative designs, we selected the biographical-narrative method, which focuses on studying life stories as a privileged way to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences over time (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Narrative is not a mere recounting of facts, but an act of creation of meaning through which subjects build themselves and their relationship with the world (Bolívar, 2002). By stimulation the activation of meaningful memories and reflection upon one's own trajectory, the biographical-narrative method grants access to the intersection between the personal biography and the sociohistorical context in which it is embedded (Chárriez, 2012; Creswell, 1998). This is, therefore, a powerful tool to explore the construction of identity, life transitions, and the impact of social processes—such as migration—on people's subjectivity.

This research focused on three case studies, selected by means of an intentional sampling that applied the following criteria: 16-year-old students (a) from schools with large amounts of migrants (b) who exhibited a family history related to migration (external or internal) (c) and expressed the willingness to narrate and inquire about their life story (d).

The sample was ultimately composed of:

- Two students exhibiting external migration: one young girl from Colombia and a youngster from Venezuela.
- One student exhibiting internal migration: a youngster of Mapuche origin, whose family migrated from southern Chile to Santiago.

The participants were contacted at two educational facilities in metropolitan Santiago. One of the latter corresponded to a state-subsidized private school in the district of Puente Alto, a coeducational scientific-humanistic education center with an average enrollment of 970 students. In this context, we contacted the student of Colombian origin. The students of this school exhibited a notable diversity, with the presence of individuals from diverse municipalities and from countries such as Venezuela and Colombia. The other education institution was a technical-professional school in the district of Santiago Centro, a delegated-administration institution, also private and state-subsidized, with an average of 1101. At this school, we contacted the student of Venezuelan origin, who was attending the first year of secondary school, and the student of Mapuche ancestry, who was in the third year of secondary school.

The thematic axes for the students were as follows:

- a) Family migrant trajectories**, which sought to recall from where and when their journey began and what migratory networks they had.
- b) Inclusion and exclusion experiences in the school context**, seeking for the students to weigh whether they had lived more inclusive experiences or more discriminatory experiences within each school.
- c) Assessment of their original cultural capital** regarding festive traditions and occupations prior to migration, in order to contrast them with their relatives' current occupations.
- d) Projections and expectations about the future**, also inquiring whether they had a family member whom they admire and whose footsteps they want to follow.

In order to enrich the biographical perspective of the students, we invited a significant relative who had lived the migration process to participate in this research. We managed to conduct a phone interview with the father of the student of Mapuche ancestry, employing a script with similar axes, but especially delving into the issue of cultural capital.

As a complement, we employed two additional techniques:

- **A questionnaire about name origins.** A brief questionnaire was designed for the students to reflect, together with their families, about the history and the etymological meaning of their names and surnames. This instrument served as a 'memory activation' device prior to the interview, connecting generations with the purpose of remembering who gave the teenager their name and what it means in Mapudungun, the native language of the Mapuche people, whose ancestral memory in Chile has been preserved in subtleties such as the names of people and places, which traditionally describe the person and their lineage according to their values and physical characteristics.
- **Snowball strategy.** Once contact with the Mapuche student had been made, we used this strategy to get to his father, who was identified by the youngster as a key bearer of the family history.

In total, four in-depth interviews were carried out, three face-to-face with the students, sharing food from their schools' kiosks, and a phone interview with the Mapuche participant's father on a Saturday morning. The interviews were recorded in digital audio after obtaining the corresponding informed consent. The conversation with the father was longer and allowed complementing the information mentioned by his son.

The information was analyzed according to the principles of thematic content analysis (Braund and Clarke, 2006). The process took place in the following three phases:

1. **Transcription.** The entirety of the recorded interviews was transcribed.
2. **Reading and familiarization.** Repeated readings of the transcriptions were carried out in order to reach a global understanding of the narratives.
3. **Codification and categorization.** We codified the data, identifying meaning units that were relevant to the objectives of this research—e.g., separating painful experiences associated with discrimination in order to distinguish them from inclusive experiences. These codes were grouped into emerging and predefined thematic categories.
4. **Definition and refining of categories.** We defined the categories of analysis, ensuring their internal coherence and mutual exclusivity. For the students, common categories included *recognition of family knowledge, migratory networks towards the capital, obstacles for normalizing their stay, multicultural educational spaces, and expectations and personal projections*.
5. **Differential categories for forms of exclusion.** We added *ignorance of their indigenous heritage* for the case involving internal migration and forms of *cultural assimilation* for the cases of external migration. In the interview with the Mapuche student's father, specific categories emerged, such as *characteristics of rural-urban migration and distance from the indigenous heritage*.
6. **Interpretation and writing of the results.** Finally, we interpreted the data in light of the theoretical framework, weaving an analytical narrative that accounts for the common findings of the three cases while seeking to answer the research questions.

Our study adhered strictly to the ethical principles of research with human beings, following the guidelines of the *Singapore statement on research integrity* (2010). We ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and the education institutions, using pseudonyms in all documents and publications. We implemented a process of informed consent and assent, clearly explaining the objectives and procedures of our work to the students and their guardians. We assured the voluntary nature of participating, explicitly stating the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The interviews were held in safe and comfortable spaces for the participants, ensuring their well-being at all times.

Results

Our analysis of the narratives of the youngsters and the participating parent allowed reconstructing a cartography of their experiences, revealing the challenges, tensions, and strengths that characterize their trajectories. Next, the main findings are presented, organized into the emerging thematic categories.

Recognition of family knowledge

This category reveals the deep link between students and their family cultural capital, which acts as a fundamental pillar in the construction of their identity and in the projection of their futures. The knowledge, crafts, and values transmitted by their elders are a source of pride and a compass to steer their own aspirations.

In the cases involving external migration, the recognition of family knowledge is closely related to the parents' work trajectories. The Colombian student expresses a great admiration for her mother, who managed to have her degree in occupational risk prevention recognized in Chile and now works at a construction company. This admiration is directly translated into her life project: "I want to study civil engineering; I like that whole construction thing, like my mom". Here, the mother's professional capital not only guarantees economic sustenance; it also constitutes a role model that inspires and legitimizes the daughter's aspirations in the new country.

Likewise, the Venezuelan student values the crafts of his family. He recognizes the resilience of his mother, who "was always a merchant and is still one here in Chile", and his stepfather, who had to reinvent himself as a construction worker. Although his personal project diverges from his parents' occupations ("I want to be a lawyer, like an uncle of mine"), his narrative is imbued with a profound respect for the effort and adaptation capabilities that his family has achieved. Beyond work-related matters, he highlights the ethics inherited from his paternal grandmother, whom he considers his primary formative figure: "she taught me to be honest, to have my own personality".

In the case involving internal migration, the recognition of family knowledge is linked to rural culture and the Mapuche heritage. The Mapuche student describes himself as a "good listener", an ability that has allowed him to become a keeper of his family's oral history. His interest in "learning about life in the countryside, how to take care of animals, how to learn gardening" emerges as a reaction to the "weariness" caused by urban life. This longing for nature and rural knowledge is shared and fostered by his father, who, despite living in an apartment, grows plants and works in gardening, bemoaning that "in Santiago, you see every day that people need nature and can't get it because they themselves don't occupy it, they don't take advantage of it, they don't use it".

A particularly valued knowledge is woodworking. The Mapuche student admires his father's ability for making handicrafts. Interestingly, his father admits having learned this craft in adulthood from a colleague in Santiago, who told him that his ancestors

had probably “passed down the talent” to him. This episode illustrates the way in which cultural identity is not a static heritage, but a process of rediscovery and reappropriation, even when far from one’s original territory. The family project of buying a plot in Loconche, a territory in southern Chile whose toponymy is directly related to this family’s surname and refers to the concept of *lonco* (‘head’ or ‘intellectual’ and ‘politically speaking’ in Mapudungun), expresses this desire to return and reconnect with their land and origin, a project that, although led by the father, resonates in the son’s interests at 16 years of age, seeking a way of life that is more in contact with nature and an ancestral culture such as that of the Mapuche.

Migratory trajectories: rupture, networks, and reunification

The accounts of migratory trajectories reveal common patterns and singularities that profoundly mark the youngsters’ experience.

As for external migration, a central element is the temporary family rupture. In both cases, it was the mothers who first migrated to Chile in search of job stability, leaving their children in the care of other relatives for some time in their home countries. This first phase, characterized by uncertainty and separation, is a common trait of contemporary migration processes (Stefoni, 2028). Family reunification was only possible once the mothers had secured an economic and housing base in Santiago de Chile.

In this process, the creation of support networks was fundamental. The mother of the Colombian student established a romantic relationship with a Chilean citizen, which facilitated their settling. On the other hand, the mother of the Venezuelan student initially relied on a network of compatriots that provided her with informal housing. These networks, whether family, romantic, or compatriot networks, act as a crucial ‘social capital’ that mitigates initial difficulties and facilitates insertion into the new society (Margarit *et al.*, 2022).

The internal migration trajectory exhibits a diverse temporality. The Mapuche student was born in Santiago, so he did not experience the migration personally. His knowledge of the process is vicarious, reconstructed based on the father, the mother, and the maternal grandfather’s narratives. His parents’ migration from the Ríos Region to Santiago in the 1990s was driven by a job offer by the maternal grandfather. This detail reveals the importance of family networks as catalysts for internal migration.

The Mapuche father’s narrative is loaded with nostalgia and pain due to the uprooting that he initially lived: “when I got to Santiago, I used to cry, I tell you, because I missed my roots, I missed my family, I missed my dog, my cat, the air”. This expression of the *emotional cost* of migration (Martín-Hernández *et al.*, 2007) evidences that displacement, even within the national borders, implies a profound experience of loss and grief.

Obstacles to normalizing one's stay: discrimination and precariousness

Arriving and settling in Santiago was not without difficulties in the three studied cases. The narratives of the youngsters' and their narratives account for material and symbolic barriers that marked their 'stressful transition' (Martín-Hernández *et al.*, 2007).

Regarding external migration, students experienced discrimination and harassment by their peers at school. The Colombian student said that she was picked on because of her freshly assigned RUN (unique national role) number, telling her she was "adopted". While she handled it with a certain naturalness, this episode reveals how immigration bureaucracy becomes a marker of difference, serving to exclude. The Venezuelan student was harassed more explicitly because of her accent and manner of speaking. These daily microaggressions, often invisibilized by adults, constitute a form of symbolic violence that undermines the migrant students' self-esteem and sense of belonging (Pavez-Soto, 2012).

In material terms, the Venezuelan family endured housing precariousness. After being evicted from the place where they were being hosted, the four family members had to live in a single room for two years, while the parents struggled to find a stable job. This experience of overcrowding and vulnerability is commonplace among migrant families freshly arrived in major Chilean cities (Margarit *et al.*, 2022).

The family that experienced internal migration also faced severe difficulties related to housing. The Mapuche student starkly describes the conditions of the rooms that he had to rent after the family business failed: "it wasn't a real house, I tell you. It was not a house for me; it was only a chicken coop, with a couple of planks, and, during winter, a cold came in that came right through you".

His large residential mobility trajectory through different districts of the capital, going through La Pitana, San Miguel, and Cerro Navia, reflects an unceasing search for stability, where work and housing were closely linked. In his two first jobs, housing was part of the contract, a survival strategy that sustained him in a situation of dependence and vulnerability.

Multicultural educational spaces: between folklorization and invisibilization

When inquiring about the way in which the school works with cultural diversity, a disheartening landscape emerges. The experiences of the three students coincide in indicating that institutional initiatives, if any, tend towards a multiculturalist and folklorizing focus rather than a critical and transformative interculturality.

Two of the students recall having participated in 'multicultural fairs' during their basic education. The Colombian student's class was told to investigate and set up a stand about Peru in commemoration of the Meeting of the Worlds.

In the case of the Mapuche student, the school organized an activity about her people, assigning the task exclusively to whom the teachers identified as being of Mapuche origin. However, according to his own account, his surname was not re-

cognized as Mapuche by the teachers, so he was excluded from the activity. This episode is doubly problematic: on the one hand, it evidences the teachers' profound lack of knowledge regarding the cultural diversity in their classroom (Quintriqueo and Torres, 2012), causing the student to remain "on the margins of self-recognition" as a result of this initial exclusion.

These practices reinforce the static and stereotyped vision of cultures, which precludes the promotion of genuine dialogue or the questioning of power relations (Walsh, 2007). In this context, culture becomes a mere object of folklorization, a costume or a typical dish, but it is not transversally integrated into curricular interpretation or into the school's daily life.

The case of the Venezuelan student is even more worrying, as he does not recall having participated in any activity of this type (i.e., focused on cultural appreciation). For him, 'inclusion' was limited to the fact that, over time, the arrival of more foreign classmates reduced the mockery of his accent. However, the participant denounced a serious structural fault: when he arrived in Chile mid-year, no leveling test was conducted, and a class was assigned to him without considering his prior knowledge. The lack of pedagogical support from the institution, despite his family's efforts, led him to repeat the year. This experience illustrates how the school system's negligence, under an apparent neutrality, can operate as a potent mechanism for educational exclusion that disproportionately affects migrant students (Carrillo, 2016).

Discussion

The assimilationist approach and the negation of identity

The results confirm the prevalence of a tacit assimilationist approach in everyday school practices, often masked by superficial multicultural initiatives. The 'nation fairs' or expository activities described by students are a clear example of what Dietz (2012) describes as *folklorizing multiculturalism*. These practices, far from fostering a critical interculturality, reduce diversity to an exotic spectacle and do not alter the monocultural matrix of the curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment (Walsh, 2005).

This superficiality translates into a 'color-blindness' that, under a discourse of equality, invisibilizes cultural particularities and reproduces exclusion (Tijoux, 2016). The experience of the Venezuelan student, who was subjected to a process of academic 'fresh start', with no recognition of his prior knowledge, and that of the Mapuche student, whose surname was not recognized as being of ethnic origin, are compelling evidence of this logic. In this sense, the school does not act as a bridge, but as a cultural customs office demanding that students leave their baggage at the door in order to be authorized entry.

Biopolitics and uprooting

This institutional logic aggravates the uprooting that migration already implies. As indicated by Achotegui (2022), this process generates a multiple grief due to the loss of cultural, affective, and community references. Tizón (2004) and Butler (2006)

highlight that this grief demands a constant psychic reelaboration, wherein the school could and should play a determining role.

However, instead of offering support, school practices contribute to the forms of governmentality that regulate and produced subordinate subjectivities (Veiga-Neto, 2013). Integration discourses serve as biopolitical technologies that define which forms are acceptable and which should be corrected or invisibilized, normalizing difference and maintaining disciplinary power over individuals.

This tension is problematic because identity is always relational and situated, while institutions tend to reproduce essentialist images that disregard this dynamic complexity. The above openly contradicts the principles of intercultural education, which, according to Walsh (2007), must be a political project to transform structures.

Resistance and identity safeguarding

Faced with this homogenizing pressure, the youngsters' narratives reveal the emergence of resistance and identity negotiation. Unlike the initial hypothesis regarding passive concealment, an active process of reaffirmation and resignification of the participants' origins is observed. The youngsters do not renounce their heritage; they integrate and mobilize them as resources to construct their identity in the new context, configuring what Brah (2011) calls *diasporic identities*.

The Colombian student articulates her professional future while drawing inspiration from her mother's model. The Venezuelan student maintains a strong emotional attachment to his grandmother in Venezuela and relies on a network of peers to withstand the teasing. The Mapuche student has appropriated his heritage by means of rural knowledge and oral family history, transforming historic memory into a source of pride. These strategies demonstrate that young people are not passive receivers but active agents who, as pointed out by Hall (19996), are in a constant *process of identity construction*, negotiation the subject positions assigned to them (Miranda and Urquieta, 2022). Identity safeguarding mechanisms are activated by means of cultural affirmation strategies that, sadly, rarely find a legitimate space within social institutions (Miranda and Urquieta, 2022).

The role of family cultural capital

This research underscores the irreplaceable role of family cultural capital as a factor of resilience and protection in the face of acculturative stress. In the three cases, family emerges as the main space for recognition, valuation, and the transmission of fundamental knowledge for self-esteem and well-being. Crafts, values, stories, and family projects act as a counterweight to the invisibilization suffered by the participants at school.

This finding dialogues critically with Bourdieu's theory (1986), demonstrating that the cultural capital of migrant and indigenous families, although devalued by the school system, is a resource of immense value for students' survival and development (Valdés, 2019). When the school fails in its welcoming role, it is the family that

assumes the role of identity 'scaffolding'. Therefore, these youngsters' resilience is not an individual attribute, but the result of a web of family and community relationships that sustains them.

Understanding the role of the family in identity formation implies recognizing it as a space where fundamental moral and affective frameworks are configured. It is in the daily interaction with significant others where ethical guidelines and ways of being are elaborated which influence life trajectories (Echavarría, 2003). This structural influence, however, leads to viewing the family through logics of surveillance and normalization, defining which practices are considered legitimate, which in turn affects the way in which the school interprets its participation. This underscores the urgent need to build an effective alliance between school and family, based on mutual recognition and the dialogue of knowledge (Jiménez and Fardella, 2015), in order to allow the household's cultural capital to be mobilized as school capital as well.

Conclusions

Through the biographical-narrative method, this research granted us access to the richness and complexity of the experiences of three youngsters with migratory trajectories in Santiago de Chile's school system. The results led us to nuance our initial hypothesis: rather than a deliberate concealment of identity in order to assimilate, what we found was a structural silencing by education institutions, which, by action or omission, fail to create the conditions for cultural diversity to be recognized, valued, and integrated as a pedagogical resource. In light of this barrier, students develop resilient forms of maintaining and resignifying their cultural particularities, deeply rooted in the cultural and affective capital of their families.

We detected a certain identity duality, wherein young people construct a sense of belonging to their destination without renouncing their roots. Far from being an irresolvable conflict, this dual belonging is experienced as a source of richness that enables navigation between different cultural worlds. Coexistence with peers of similar backgrounds emerges as a key protective factor that allows students to resist assimilative pressure and maintain, for example, their idioms and accents.

As teachers and researchers, this conclusion directly challenges us. The organization of instances of cultural knowledge must move beyond folklorization and the imposition of content. It is imperative to create dialogic pedagogical spaces where students themselves can investigate, select, and share their knowledge and that of their communities, within the framework of a process that fosters self-knowledge and mutual respect. Techniques such as biographical interviews can be powerful pedagogical tools for visibilizing, recognizing, and valuing diversity, thereby transforming the school experience into a process of co-research and cultural revitalization.

Although situated in the Chilean context, the findings of this study resonate with the realities of many other countries in Latin America that have become receiving societies. Growing intraregional mobility poses common challenges for states and their education systems, which were designed under the homogenous state-nation logic and are currently strained by an inescapably diverse reality.

The main challenge is to transition from migratory policies focused on border control and national security towards a human rights approach. This implies recognizing migration as a fundamental human right and ensuring that all people, regardless of their migration status, have effective access to basic rights such as healthcare, housing, and—crucially—education. States have the obligation, enshrined in multiple international treaties, to ensure public, free, inclusive, and quality education for all children and youth inhabiting their territories.

This, in turn, requires a profound reform of education systems in order to make them genuinely intercultural. Compensatory or isolated programs are not enough; what is needed is a systemic transformation that permeates the curriculum, initial and continuous teacher training, didactic materials, and school management and leadership. It is urgent to educate new generations in intercultural civic competencies that allow them to value diversity as a source of richness, develop empathy and critical thinking, and actively combat racism and xenophobia.

In the Chilean case, a concrete improvement involves the contextualized implementation of teacher training programs focused on intercultural education for local territories, including content on the history and culture of indigenous peoples and cultural information about migrant communities, as well as participatory methodologies that allow students and their families to play a leading role in curriculum construction. Thus, public schools can become spaces of encounter and mutual recognition, capable of transforming diversity into a pedagogical and civic resource.

The experience of the young people who participated in this study teaches us that integration cannot come in the form of forced assimilation. True inclusion is only possible when the right to one's own identity is guaranteed. For Latin American states, the challenge lies in building societies where diversity is not seen as a threat, but as a fundamental pillar for the development of more just, plural, and creative democracies.

Here, public schools have a historical responsibility and a unique opportunity to become the laboratory where future citizenships are forged, citizenships that are capable of conjugating the verb *to belong* in first person plural, without the need for anyone to leave their history or dreams at the front door.

Finally, as this is an exploratory study, it is necessary to propose lines of continuity that allow deepening and validating our findings. Among them, we suggest the following:

- Longitudinal studies that follow migrant and indigenous students along their school trajectory, in order to observe how the construction of identity and belonging evolves at different educational levels. This is one of the benefits of working with the reconstruction of life histories, as young people express their biographical account from their present. In this vein, considering the passage of time would be valuable, for example, to interpret the changes or continuities regar-

ding the valuation of cultural capital.

- Comparative research studies between urban and rural schools, or between different Chilean territories, that allow identifying variations in inclusion and cultural recognition practices.
- Analyses of educational policies that evaluate the implementation of intercultural programs in the Chilean school system, contrasting the official discourse with the real practices lived by teachers or students in the classroom.
- Studies centered on families and communities as educational agents, exploring the way in which they transmit knowledge, languages, and cultural practices in contexts of internal migration.
- Participative studies involving students as co-researchers, using narrative and biographical methodologies to visibilize their voices and experiences.

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Author contributions

Autor 1: conceptualization, methodology, writing (original draft).

Autor 2: conceptualization and data curation.

Autor 3: data collection, investigation.

Autor 4: data collection, investigation. All authors: writing (review and editing).

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose regarding the publication and dissemination of this article.

Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

During the elaboration of this work, the authors used Gemini Pro to review the wording and coherence of the theoretical framework, with the aim of avoiding the duplication of ideas or redundancy. Subsequently, the authors reviewed and edited the document and therefore assume full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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