

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

GRADE RETENTION – SUBJECTIVATING, DISCIPLINARY AND AFFECTIVE FORCES:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY IN CHILEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

By

ALEJANDRA CATARINA MEYER ROMERO

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ABSTRACT

For millions of students worldwide, the end of the school year entails definitions of success and failure. In many countries, those students who do not fulfil certain requirements and academic expectations are not promoted to the following grade; this means they must do the same class once again. In theory, repeating a grade is a new opportunity for learning and developing. However, most of the research on this topic suggests that the practice has adverse academic, emotional and behavioural effects on those who are retained, promotes educational inequality, and negatively impacts overall performances. This project emerges from the apparent contradiction between the pervasiveness and persistence of grade retention and its harmful effects on students and educational systems.

The research addresses this area of concern by interrogating the productive forces that create grade retention and the forces generated by it through a post-structural, ethnographically oriented case study conducted in Chilean primary schools. Educational subjectivities, knowledge, practices, affectivities, material arrangements, relations and structures of power are examined. The theoretical contributions of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Sarah Ahmed, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – and the work of scholars who have enlivened their concepts within the educational field – are used as analytic tools to explore grade retention as a complex, heterogeneous, interactive, productive and plastic ensemble of these components and the dynamics they form.

The analysis of the evidence challenges sanctioned narratives defining grade retention as an educational strategy that safeguards students' academic

development. Instead, it argues that grade retention is a technology that protects and reinforces accepted school and educational orders and identities by defining those who are not aligned with them as legitimate objects of academic, social, affective, symbolic and physical dispossession. The negative connotations usually attributed to grade retention by research often overlook its productive force. Grade retention, with its reliance on the presumed deficit and deviation of individuals, creates a fiction in which traditional neoliberal educational discourse can continue to be enforced ignoring its inevitable conflict with the more recent introduction of progressive inclusive ideas and goals.

In this scenario, in Chile alone, thousands of young students are made impossible/abject subjects of education every year. Moreover, all children are submitted to a coercive education, in which from a very early age, joy, success and belonging are sustained by disgust, fear and pain. However, this state of things is neither necessary nor fixed. New sensibilities and political responsibilities could open a field of possibility in which primary education might seek justice and human flourishing instead of resting on the harmful distinctions of success and failure.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In 2014, living in Chile (my home country) and working in educational research, I became involved in a Comparative and Explanatory Regional Study (TERCE-UNESCO)[1.] This study aimed to measure the learning achievements of primary school students across Latin America and the Caribbean, and examine key factors associated with them. One of the study's findings caught my attention: school students who had been held back at some point during their primary education had significantly lower achievements than their peers. This was true in all countries, at all grades and in all school subjects considered in the study. Furthermore, of all the variables considered[2], after a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, grade retention had the greatest negative association to primary students' outcomes (Treviño et al., 2015). This was striking to me since retention practices are generally presented as an effective strategy for *supporting* students lagging behind their peers and *preventing* future 'educational failure' (Reschly & Christenson, 2013). Even more worrying, the same study showed that large numbers of primary school-age students across Latin America were being held back every year. In some countries, more than 30% of primary students participating in the study (in 3rd and 6th grades) had been held back at least once (Treviño et al., 2016).

1 https://es.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/llece/TERCE2013

2 The study considered: sociodemographic characteristics of students and their families/guardians; children's study habits and educational history; carers' educational expectations and their involvement with school learning; educators' features, teaching practices and available resources in the classroom; and school characteristics.

Having become interested in the topic, I started to read other relevant studies. The results from Latin America and the Caribbean were repeated in education systems around the world. Moreover, grade retention was not only ineffective for improving academic results; it also seemed to have negative emotional and social consequences for those who had been retained, as well as having a detrimental impact on wider educational equity goals. With this in mind, I started to design a study to explore why an inefficient and harmful practice was still being used and validated at system and school levels.

During the planning stages of my study, I explained to a childhood friend why this was such an important issue to me. She replied, unsurprised: “it makes sense, you are a retained student yourself”. I was staggered! I had been researching and thinking about the topic for months, completely ‘unaware’ of such an apparently obvious connection. Thirty years earlier, my pre-school teachers had convinced my parents to make me repeat Year 1[3]. I realised that my interest in this project dated back to the late eighties when I was only five years old. Still today I struggle to grasp the consequences of this early experience on my life. I can only acknowledge that these effects must have been strong enough to trigger my repression of the event and – probably - my interest in this project now.

Others who I mentioned my doctoral research plans to had serious reservations about how pertinent it could be. On the one hand, some people questioned the relevance of adding knowledge to understanding a practice that affected only a small percentage of the student population. In their view, my curiosity was superfluous. On the other hand, there were those who considered it pointless to

3 Equivalent to ‘Kinder’ in Chile.

interrogate a necessary, straightforward, and - ultimately - unquestionable matter such as grade retention. The simultaneous arguments about both the irrelevance and inevitability of grade retention seemed to point to the complexities that puzzled me in the first place. Caught between them, I started to wonder if they might have a point.

Newly arrived in England to start my PhD, and still surrounded by these doubts, I went out with a group of Chilean people living in Birmingham. I started a conversation with someone I had never met before and I never saw again and I briefly mentioned my PhD project. He declared himself as very much in favour of grade retention; in his opinion “it makes a lot of sense” and was “very important to the school”. I welcomed his opinion without passing further comment. We kept chatting with the rest of the group until, about an hour later, he suddenly addressed me again and he told me that he had almost been retained once in primary school. Although he had always been a good student, his family had had a difficult time and this had affected his grades to the point of bringing him to the edge of being held back. Fortunately, he explained, his personal problems were resolved in time to allow him to improve his grades and be promoted. However, he continued, “if I had been retained that year, it would have been like getting kicked in the face when you are already on the ground”. That was the confirmation I needed: there was something complex, unresolved, pressing, and paradoxical about the narratives and practices sustaining grade retention and generated by it. Furthermore, it was a reminder of how children’s lives were at stake, even beyond those children typically seen as ‘retained students’.

Grade retention: Grounds and prevalence

Grade retention (also called grade repetition) is the practice of requiring a student to remain in the same grade for an extra year instead of promoting them, with their peers of the same age, to the next grade. Typically, this strategy is applied when students do not perform well academically or show insufficient progress at school (usually under definitions based on examinations or qualitative school assessments). In some countries, promotion is also conditional on pupils' behaviours and/or attendance records (CEPPE, 2016; Eurydice, 2011). Generally, the rationale for this practice is that underperforming students will struggle if they keep progressing. Thus, retaking the grade is considered a second chance to learn and meet the set objectives that will help them move forward on their education path (OECD, 2020; Treviño et al., 2016). From a more punitive stance, grade promotion is also considered a prize that students should earn, and so it should be denied to those who do not 'deserve' it (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Finally, grade retention has been described as a strategy used by schools to manage students' diversity by grouping them according to their identified abilities and capacities (Villalobos & Béjares, 2017).

In almost all countries it is possible for a pupil to be retained in primary education[4]. Nevertheless, the way in which this practice is conceived, regulated, and applied varies greatly between them. To illustrate this, grade retention can be common or exceptional within an education system, and promotion decisions can depend on diverse prescribed standards/criteria or can rest on the judgement of

4 http://data.uis.unesco.org/

schools and/or local authorities. While in some countries, guardians must give consent to hold a child back, in others they are not even consulted during the decision-making process (CEPPE, 2016; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

Although according to World Bank data[5] the use of this strategy has progressively declined over the last fifty years, the incidence of grade retention has recently increased in several countries (OECD, 2020)[6]. In 2017, 3.2% of students enrolled in primary school across the world were requested to repeat a grade. In countries classified by the World Bank as the 'least developed', 'heavily indebted', and 'fragile and conflict affected', this percentage tended to be much higher[7]. Consistently, in the Latin American region the number of retained students is extraordinarily high (Gómez, 2013; Martínez, 2016; UNESCO/OREALC, 2015). Around a 25% of 3rd and 6th grade Latin-American pupils have been retained at least once. In Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, these figures are even higher (Treviño et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, grade repetition as a common and deeply rooted practice is not limited to Latin American or 'low-income' nations. PISA 2018 showed that more than 10% of 15-year-old students in OECD countries had repeated a year at least once during their school lives. In countries as diverse as Belgium, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Jordan, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Macao (China), Morocco, Netherlands,

5 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.REPT.ZS?view=chart
6 Examples of this are Austria, the Czech Republic, Korea, Lebanon, New Zealand, the Slovak Republic, and Thailand (OECD, 2020).
7 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.REPT.ZS?view=chart

Philippines, Portugal, Qatar, Spain and Switzerland, this figure exceeded 15% (OECD, 2020)[8].

In contrast, in countries such as Bulgaria, Iceland, Japan, Luxembourg, Malta, Scotland, North Macedonia, and Norway, students progress automatically across the primary school. In Austria, Cuba, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Germany, Greece, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Serbia grade retention has been limited in some primary grades (CEPPE, 2016; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). In other nations, although grade retention is not legally forbidden, it is rarely used[9].

The United Kingdom is very particular in this regard. Figures of retained students are very low across the constituent countries[10], although only in Scotland is promotion officially automatic. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the progression of primary students from one class to the next is a matter of custom and practice rather than a legal demand. Schools operate under a fundamental principle that education must suit children's age, ability, and aptitude, and the curriculum should accommodate these differences. Thus, students with different performance levels are normally taught within their own year-group. In the exceptional circumstances in which children are placed in a lower year group, guardians must give their consent (Eurydice, 2011, 2019). In practice, this means that the percentage of 15-year-old students who report having to repeat a grade in England (2.5%), Wales (3.2%) and Northern Ireland (2.3%) are very low and similar to in Scotland

8 In Latin America, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay are also within this group.
9 For example, in Baku (Azerbaijan), Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Chinese Taipei, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, less than 3% of 15-year-old students reported having been retained in PISA 2018 (OECD, 2020).
10 Only 2.5% of 15-year-old students had repeated a grade during their school lives in the United Kingdom by 2018 (OECD, 2020).

(2.9%) where grade progression is supposed to be automatic[11] (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). On the other hand, the minimal incidence of non-promotion in the United Kingdom is 'compensated' for by well-established and culturally accepted alternative practices of sorting, selection and separation that differentiate students according to logics of performance and productivity (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Ability grouping (within same age groups), tracking, and school admissions based on academic results are some examples (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

This last case highlights the gravity of customs, beliefs, and cultural consensus along with official regulations. Comparisons between countries show no linear relationship between the provision for grade retention in legislation and how it is applied in practice. Instead, what seems clear is that countries with high rates of grade retention are typically those in which there is a shared belief of the benefits of repeating a grade for pupils' learning and developing (Eurydice, 2011).

The case of Chile

Grade retention is deeply legally and culturally rooted in the Chilean educational system (CEPPE, 2016). As in most Latin American countries, holding students back has been a commonly used strategy to manage pupils' heterogeneity: their differences and learning 'delays' (Treviño et al., 2015). However, in recent years, this tradition has been contested by different educational actors in the context of broader objections to the highly market-oriented Chilean education system and its

11 This inconsistency seems to be explained by the exceptions allowed by the schooling system (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

unfavourable effects on equality and inclusion (Moyano, 2020). This has driven pioneer initiatives and new narratives on the topic, as well as resistances, setbacks, controversies, and conflict. Despite this, discussion has been limited by the lack of studies on the issue at a national level (Villalobos & Béjares, 2017); this study contributes to this debate.

The following sub-sections provide more background of the Chilean case. I start by providing a brief description of the country with a particular focus on its capital, Santiago, where this projects' evidence was collected. Then I describe the national policies on grade retention, after considering the broader characteristics of the Chilean educational system. The following section outlines the retention figures in the country. Finally, I consider recent reforms to the retention regulations.

Chile and Santiago city

Chile

Chile is a Latin-American country situated along the southwestern seaboard of the American continent. It has a population of 18 million, a GDP per capita PPP of 25,165 (constant 2017 international $), and an average life expectancy of 80 years. In recent decades, the country has experienced economic growth and improvements against standard human development measures (e.g. HCI 0.67)[12].

On the other hand, the country has been less successful in tackling inequality and socio-spatial fragmentation (López et al., 2013; Orellana, 2009). Among OECD nations, Chile is the second most unequal country (0.46 Gini 2019) after Costa

12 https://datos.bancomundial.org/pais/chile?view=chart; http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/CHL

Rica[13]. While a few families and economic groups in Chile accumulate some of the largest fortunes in the world (including the president of the nation)[14], over 20% of the population lives in conditions of multidimensional poverty – i.e. in precarious conditions in terms of health, education, labour and social security, housing and living environment, social networks, and social cohesion (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2019).

Inequality and segregation within Chilean society have been linked to processes of globalisation promoting economic liberation and capitalism, initiated by the Pinochet dictatorship in the mid-1970s and typified by market-based governance practices, commodification, individualism, competition, privatisation, efficacy, and the dismantling of the welfare state. From the 1990s, with the advent of democracy, policies and practices associated to the radical neoliberal agenda promoted under the dictatorship regime were moderate. However, the fundamental principles and the social relationships generated by it were only weakly challenged, and they largely persisted over time (Espinoza et al., 2013; Ffrench-Davis, 2014). Today, Chilean society is still organised under a neoliberal matrix of intelligibility in which social hierarchies, social reproduction, insecurity and precarity are signified as personal choices (Gillborn, 2008; Rose et al., 2006; Wright & Halse, 2014), while sociological factors tend to be removed from the equation (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016). Several social movements and massive demonstrations have emerged during the last fifteen years, reflecting the social unrest provoked by this state of affairs (Moyano, 2020). Currently, the country is in the process of writing a new Constitution with the objective of addressing the pressing social demands made visible by these social movements.

13 https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm#indicator-chart
14 https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/

Santiago

Santiago, where this research is undertaken, is the Chilean capital and its political, administrative, economic, and cultural centre (Orellana, 2009). Santiago has been described as “a large neoliberal city” (Márquez, 2011, p. 96). Although distinctive from the rest of the country in many aspects, Santiago’s intense territorial, social and symbolic segregation does reflect a generalised characteristic of the Chilean society (Márquez, 2011). Its high population density (2586 per km2) is a result of it being home to over 35% of the population (6.3 million inhabitants). While in the country as a whole, 87.8% of the population is urban, in the capital this proportion reaches almost 99%[15].

In Santiago, the implementation of a radical neoliberal system has resulted in a highly regressive income distribution, the State’s withdrawal from active participation in urban development, an intensified suburbanisation, and the privatisation of public services and spaces (Borsdorf et al., 2016; Guimarães de Mattos, 1999). Over the years, these dynamics have produced an extreme and persistent economically and ethnically hyper-segregated city (Borsdorf et al., 2016; Guimarães de Mattos, 1999; Márquez & Pérez, 2008) characterised by socially homogenous neighbourhoods and strong “fear of the Other” (Márquez, 2011, p. 88). Wealth is spatially concentrated in a relatively small portion of the city, while a significant part of the population lives in marginalised areas marked by persistent poverty, increased unemployment, insufficient or poor-quality public services, and the stigma of violence, delinquency and drug dealing (Márquez, 2011; Márquez & Perez, 2008).

15 Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, Chile. http://resultados.censo2017.cl/

The Chilean education system

The neoliberal marketisation of Chilean's public life has permeated the country educational and schooling system. For-profit entrepreneurship, widespread privatisation, school competition, family school choice, 'terrors of performativity'[16] and 'hyper-surveillance' have become the organisational engines of the educational space (Bellei et al., 2018; Falabella, 2021; OECD, 2010; Villalobos, 2016). This has led to extremely high levels of educational segregation (Bellei et al., 2018; Bellei et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 2008), and a decline of public education in terms of enrolment (Elacqua, 2012) and its symbolic and cultural significance (OECD, 2010; Villalobos, 2016). Despite significant progress made regarding overall educational attainment and coverage in the last decades, participation rates and achievements for disadvantaged students in Chile are still inadequate (OECD, 2010).

Public schools - funded and administrated by the State – are those that most usually serve students from disadvantaged groups (Elacqua, 2012; Mizala & Torche, 2012). Traditionally, they are free[17] and the least selective[18] schools (OECD, 2010). Throughout the last decades, they have gradually become stigmatised as low-quality institutions that receive students with social and behavioural problems (Bellei et al.,

16 Following Lyotard (1984), Ball (2003) uses the phrase 'terrors of performativity' to denote a neoliberal mode of state regulation embedded in the culture of measurement and accountability as a regime of truth. In it, inspection and performance management technologies inserted in everyday practices and social relationships are used to measure individual and institutional value. In this way, performativity profoundly affects educational practices and subjectivation processes within the school by generating a 'moral system' that redefine its meaning (Ball, 2013).

17 From 1993 a reform was introduced that allowed secondary public schools to charge parental fees. Very few incorporate payments and, when they did, the amounts charged tended to be very small (Mizala & Torche, 2012; Valenzuela, 2008).

18 Although public schools were mandated by law to accept all students who apply unless they were oversubscribed (Mizala & Torche, 2012), entrance selective practices have been reported (especially in highly prestigious secondary public schools) (Bellei, 2013a).

2018). Primary pupils attending this type of school are the most likely to be retained in Santiago (5.0%) and nationally (3.8%)[19].

Data from the Chilean Ministry of Education[20] shows that, by 2016, less than 25% of primary students in Santiago (and less than 40% nationally) were enrolled in public schools. Conversely, over 50% of primary students in the country and about 60% of those living in Santiago attended subsidised private schools that year.

Subsidised private schools are privately owned and administered and receive State funding through a voucher system. From their inception, these institutions were allowed to operate as for-profit organisations and select students under their own admission and expulsion policies (Bellei et al., 2018). From 1993, private subsidised schools were also authorised to charge families add-on fees to complement the government voucher[21]. By 2010, most of these schools were for-profit and charged tuition (Mizala & Torche, 2012). This triggered a tendency for price differentiation among institutions and the subsequent socioeconomic homogenisation of these schools' communities (Bellei et al., 2018; Bellei et al., 2010). Free private subsidised schools tended to serve more disadvantaged communities while those charging fees specialise in distinct 'niches of the market' (Mizala & Torche, 2012; Valenzuela, 2008). Those who remained as non-profit organisations tended to be religious, mostly Catholic, institutions (Corvalán et al., 2009). As detailed below, recent regulations have introduced important changes to the subsidised private sector landscape. In

19 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
20 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
21 Ley de Financiamiento Compartido. Law N°1924/1993. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=30614

terms of promotion, 3.6% of primary students attending these schools in Chile and 3.8% in Santiago are retained every year[22].

Finally, private schools are owned, administrated and funded privately. These organisations charge high tuition fees, are very selective (Elacqua, 2012), and tend to serve a small group of high-income families (Mizala & Torche, 2012). Only 8.4% of students in the country and 16% in Santiago are enrolled in private schools[23]. Grade retention in the primary age groups is rare (under 1%)[24].

After the reestablishment of democracy (in 1990), and especially over the last fifteen years, national social movements and different groups in civil society have criticised the detrimental effects of educational market policies and have urged to improve system's equity, inclusiveness and quality (Moyano, 2020; Valenzuela, 2008; Villalobos, 2016). In response, new policies and regulations have been passed to target these goals. For-profit schooling, co-payment, admission selective practices, and students' exclusion due to low achievement or Special Educational Needs (SEN) diagnoses have been - or are in the process of being - banned or strongly restricted [25] [26] [27]. Economically disadvantaged students and schools that concentrate these pupils have been granted additional funding[28], while State education is planned

22 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
23 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
24 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
25 Ley de Inclusión Escolar. Law N°20.845/2015. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1078172
26 Ley General de Educación or 'LEGE'. Law N°20370/2009. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1006043
27 Ley de Subvención Preferencial or 'SEP'. Law N°20248/2008. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=269001
28 Ley de Subvención Preferencial or 'SEP'. Law N°20248/2008. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=269001

to be reinforced and expanded[29]. Besides, new institutions focused on promoting and monitoring schools' quality have been created[30].

Educational inclusion has been promoted through a 'School Integration Programme' (PIE)[31] that allocates additional resources for every child diagnosed as having SEN. Officially, every class is allowed to have five students diagnosed with temporal SEN (such as specific learning disorders, specific language disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders) and two students diagnosed with permanent SEN (such as autism, severe intellectual deficits, and audio and visual impairments); these limits are often surpassed. The Programme is mandatory in public schools and voluntary in subsidised private schools. In recent years, a new regulation has challenged the focus on students with SEN diagnoses by promoting teaching diversification practices for all preschool and primary students[32] (although PIE continues operating in parallel).

These new initiatives have compensated for some of the adverse effects of market policies but have not overcome long-established educational neoliberal pressures firmly embedded in institutional and social practices (Bellei et al., 2018; Carrasco et al., 2021; Falabella, 2021; Villalobos, 2016). As reported by many research participants, both demands operate together as a 'schizoid contradiction' (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016) that request schools' communities to 'perform' equity and inclusion without addressing their complexities and implications.

An extended version of this section is available in Appendix Nº2.

29 Ley de Inclusión Escolar. Law N°20.845/2015. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1078172
30 Ley General de Educación or 'LEGE'. Law N°20370/2009. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1006043
31 Programa de Integración Escolar or 'PIE'. Decree N°170/2009. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1012570
32 Diversificación de la Enseñanza o Diseño Universal de Aprendizaje ('DUA'). Decree N°83/2015. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1074511

Promotion and retention policies within Chilean primary education

The promotion of students in Chile has been historically subjected to attendance and attainment. Traditionally, a failure to satisfy specific demands in these areas automatically precipitates grade retention. The regulations under which this project was developed (Decree Nº 511/1997[33] and the Nº 107/2003 Decree's amendments[34]) establishes, first, that in order to be promoted, primary students' attendance should be at least 85%. However, when low attendance is justified by, for example, health problems, the Headteacher (in agreement with the class teacher) is allowed to authorise a student's promotion.

In terms of academic achievements, automatic retention is associated with a mathematic formula that considers the number of subjects failed along with the students' final mark (all subjects considered)[35]. An exception is made in 1st and 3rd grade. From 1997 to 2003, students within those grades were automatically promoted, giving them two academic years to fulfil academic goals (although they were still liable to the attendance requirements, above)[36]. In 2003, this regulation was modified (Decree Nº 107/2003). Automatic promotion was limited by allowing Headteachers to retain 1st and 3rd grade students who had 'demonstrated' reading, writing and/or math delay(s) that could potentially jeopardize learning in the next grade. The Minister of Education at that time explained that this modification was

33 Reglamento de Evaluación y Promoción Escolar de Niñas y Niños de Enseñanza Básica. Decree 511/1997. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?i=71532&f=2003-03-03&p=

34 Modificación Decreto 511/1997. Decree 107/2003. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=208036&idParte=6415787&idVersion=2003-03-03

35 Students are automatically retained if they: a) fail one subject and have a general passing grade under 4,5 (scale 1-7); b) fail two subjects and have a general passing grade under 5,0; or c) fail three or more subjects.

36 Reglamento de Evaluación y Promoción Escolar de Niñas y Niños de Enseñanza Básica. Decree 511/1997. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?i=71532&f=2003-03-03&p=

based on a) the increase of retention figures in 2nd and 4th grade since the introduction of automatic promotion in 1st and 3rd grade, b) the decrease of national percentages of grade retention in recent years, and c) educators' requests to have greater autonomy in promotion decisions (El Mercurio, 2003).

After this change, there were no limitations on the grades, or the number of times students could be held back. Regarding their permanence in the school, pupils have the right to remain in the same school after been retained once. If they repeat a second time (between 1st and 8th grades), the school is allowed to expel them (provided that they can be enrolled in another institution within the local area).

Figures of grade retention in Chile

In spite of grade retention being a well-established and institutionalised practice across the Chilean schooling system (CEPPE, 2016), the country has followed the worldwide tendency of a general decline in grade retention rates in primary education in recent decades. While in the seventies around ten percent of primary students were retained every year, from the nineties this rate went down to under 5%, and in 2017, less than 3% of primary students experienced retention[37]. It must be noted, however, that the reduction in retention rates in Chile over the last fifty years has not been stable. Rapid changes in promotion figures were experienced over this period[38] (Martínez, 2016). For example, in the late nineties there was a notorious decline in grade retention rates[39] after the introduction of automatic

37 data.uis.unesco.org
38 https://es.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/projects/llece/bases
39 data.uis.unesco.org

promotion in 1st and 3rd grade[40]. After the measure was revoked in 2003[41] the cases increased again. While in 2002 less than 2% of primary students were retained, eight years later this figure reached 4.8% (INNEd, 2015). Variations in educational policies and regulations - along with cultural assumptions and beliefs - have influenced how this practice has been understood and exercised.

The next table breakdowns grade retention as a percentage of gender and grade in 2017. It is evident that these factors are not trivial in relation to grade retention. Boys and 1st grade students are the most likely to be held back in the primary school. These trends have tended to remain stable over time and to be independent of the type of school (Ministerio de Educación, 2018a).

Table 1. Total Figures of Non-Promoted Primary Students in Chile in 2017, by Grade and Gender

Primary School Grades	1°	2°	3°	4°	5°	6°	Total
% Female Retained Students	3.1%	2.2%	1.7%	1.1%	1.9%	2.3%	2.1%
% Male Retained Students	4.9%	3.5%	3.0%	2.2%	3.8%	4.0%	3.6%
Total	4.0% (11,501)	2.8% (7,870)	2.3% (5,924)	1.7% (4,397)	2.9% (7,406)	3.2% (8,362)	**2.8% (45,460)**

Elaborated with information from Unesco Institute for Statistics (data.uis.unesco.org)

Although the percentages above may seem small (especially compared to figures in previous decades), when considered together they mean that between first and sixth grade more than 45,000 children were retained in Chile just in 2017 (more than 10,000 only in Santiago). These numbers accumulate over time. In PISA 2018,

40 Reglamento de Evaluación y Promoción Escolar de Niñas y Niños de Enseñanza Básica. Decree 511/1997. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?i=71532&f=2003-03-03&p=

41 Decree 107/2003. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=208036&idParte=6415787&idVersion=2003-03-03

over 23% of 15-year-old students in the country were reported to have repeated a year at least once during their school life. Although this figure is conservative within the Latin American region, it is well above the average for OECD countries (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, and beyond these numbers, thousands of students are 'at risk' of retention every year and many others are disciplined under non-promotion logics regardless of whether they are actually retained or not at the end of the school year.

Recent changes in promotion policies

The normative framework of primary school promotion in Chile experienced modifications during the development of this research project.

In 2018, a new regulation[42] redefined grade retention changing it from an automatic decision made based on grades and/or attendance, to a pedagogical decision informed by a comprehensive case by case analysis made by professionals involved with children's learning. The new norm established an expectation that a broader range of issues would be considered, including pupils' academic progress, learning gaps and the potential future repercussions of these, as well as socio-affective factors and the views of the student and their guardians.

Students "*who do not fulfil the promotion requisites previously specified* [same than former decree] *or those who get a qualification that endangers student's learning in the next grade in any subject*"[43] are now considered for retention. This has

42 Normas Mínimas Nacionales Sobre Evaluación, Calificación Y Promoción (Deroga Los Decretos N° 511 de 1997, N° 112 de 1999 y N° 83 de 2001). Decree 067/2018. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1127255

43 My translation from original Spanish: "…aquellos alumnos que no cumplan con los requisitos de promoción antes mencionados o que presenten una calificación de alguna asignatura que ponga en riesgo la continuidad de su aprendizaje en el curso siguiente".

been interpreted to mean that only students who would have been automatically retained under the previous system should be scrutinised. However, the ambiguity and openness (potentially) embedded here leaves schools with the option of retaining a student whose grades in one subject are considered inconvenient for that child's further learning.

Attendance requirements - and possibilities of exemption – were not modified by the new law. The opportunity to expel students if they repeated twice in primary school also remained unchanged. This means that, despite new legislation banning students' exclusions for academic reasons (Ley de Inclusión), retained students can still be legally excluded from school.

When the new law was announced, spokespersons from the Chilean Ministry of Education declared retention to be 'not a good pedagogical strategy' (Ministerio de Educación, 2018b) and suggested it be considered only as an 'exceptional measure' (El Mercurio, 2018). After the announcement, the press highlighted positive reactions from the academic community (Cooperative, 2018; La Tercera, 2018). The Chilean National Teachers Association ('Colegio de Profesores'), on the other hand, appreciated the greater autonomy given to educators by the new regulation (Publimetro, 2018), but suggested that portraying grade retention as always detrimental was wrong (La Tercera, 2018) and asked not to 'over demonize' retention practices (El Mostrador, 2018).

It should be noted that the evidence analysed in this project was collected under the (former) regulation of automatic retention (in 2017 and 2018). The new decree was supposed to be enforced by 2019. However, its execution was delayed by one year. Then, the anomalous circumstances in which Chilean schools

functioned under the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 hindered opportunities for implementing new practices under ordinary conditions (and conducting more extensive follow-up fieldwork as part of this project).

Still, the promised changes to promotion regulations were explored with the participants in 2018 and again in 2020. Although the modifications made seem substantial on paper, a majority of the participants did not consider it as such. Across schools, different staff members explained that grade promotion was already a decision made and managed by the school. In this vein, they suggested that the new ordinance only formalises and adds some paperwork to an already installed practice in most primary schools. The implications of the modifications to promotion regulations remain to be seen.

Research on grade retention

Research in Chile

As mentioned above, there is limited research on grade retention in Chile (Villalobos & Béjares, 2017). Much of what is known comes from international endeavours (from the OECD, for example) that include Chile with other territories. On a national level, the topic is usually addressed as a secondary or complementary element within research on school dropout or other educational variables. Studies incorporating a qualitative component are rare.

The available research mainly aims to answer three questions: a) What characterises those who are retained?, b) In which school contexts are students at

higher risk of experiencing grade retention?, and c) What are the consequences of grade retention?

An obvious answer to the first question refers to the correlation - established in Chilean promotion regulations - between grade retention, academic achievements (Raczynski et al., 2011) and school attendance (Meriño-Montero, 2021; Richards, 2017). Although research on the topic has reaffirmed these associations, it has also suggested a more complex picture regarding who is retained.

Across educational levels, socio-economically disadvantaged students appear to be more likely to repeat a grade (Gómez, 2013; OECD, 2016a; Román, 2013). Valenzuela et al. (2013) found that grade retention and school withdraw in Chilean primary schools is eight to ten times more frequent among students from the first income decile than those from the wealthier 10% of the population. This disparity has been associated with social representations (Richards, 2017) – and even to academic positions that have attributed inherent learning difficulties to disadvantaged children normalising educational failure within their educational trajectories (e.g., Jadue, 1996, 2002).

Gender has also been associated with the likelihood of repeating a grade. In Latin American countries, including Chile, boys tend to repeat more frequently than girls both in primary and secondary education (Gómez, 2013; Román, 2009; Willms & Somers, 2001).

Being identified by the school as having behaviour problems (Meriño-Montero, 2021; Richards, 2017) or special educational needs (Meriño-Montero, 2021) has been linked to grade retention in primary and secondary school. Parental dimensions have also been explored. Some evidence has suggested that retained students'

carers tend to have lower parent-teacher meetings' attendance (Meriño-Montero, 2021) and are less likely to read regularly to their primary school kids (Willms & Somers, 2001). Secondary students who were retained at some point in their educational trajectories generally had fewer books at home and were described as less motivated to read than their non-retained classmates (Gómez, 2013). Although some scholars assume these dimensions to be causes of grade retention (e.g., Meriño-Montero, 2011; Willms & Somers, 2001), the cross-sectional nature of these studies (exploring differences between repeaters and non-repeaters) precludes explorations or answers with greater depth.

Some scholars have argued that educational failure is constructed by the school and, in the process, many children become convinced of their inability to succeed and fulfil social and academic expectations (García-Huidobro, 2010; Richards, 2017; Román, 2013). Schools' characteristics seem significant when considering the question of who is retained (OECD, 2016a). The socioeconomic dimension (Gómez, 2013) as well as the relevance of the educational provision to the needs of the young people (Richards, 2017) have been identified as important factors. Despite this, school staff tend to attribute the causes of academic failure to students and their families or other outside school contextual factors (Román, 2009, 2013). Certainly, schools do not operate in a vacuum; they are embedded in an educational system and cultural definitions that condition legitimate trajectories and students' opportunities (OECD, 2016a; García-Huidobro, 2000). Nevertheless, this does not suggest that local contexts are irrelevant, but points to the complexity and imbricated levels of the problem.

Regarding the consequences of having repeated a grade, the evidence suggests that this experience negatively affects educational trajectories. Studies using international assessment systems indicate that in Chile – as in most countries analysed – having repeated a grade at some point during the educational trajectory has the second strongest association with low performance after socio-economic disadvantage (Gómez, 2013; OECD, 2016a; Treviño et al., 2015). PISA results show that, at fifteen years old, secondary-education repeaters perform better than primary-education repeaters, suggesting the negative long-term effects of early retentions (Ikeda & García, 2014). This 'chronic' negative effect has also been identified when exploring differences between repeaters and non-repeaters on the Chilean National Assessment System (SIMCE). Research has found that the negative academic effects of having repeated before the 4th grade (9 years old) persist - and may even increase - in secondary school (Valenzuela et al., 2013).

These results might be associated with the impact of retention on students' engagement with school. Studies suggest that repeaters tend to have less academic self-confidence, place less value on the impact of education on their future lives, and have more negative attitudes towards the school in general (Ikeda & García, 2014; OECD, 2016a; Richards, 2017). Furthermore, Raczynski and colleagues' (2011) qualitative study of students' transitions from primary to secondary education concludes that the mere possibility of facing retention demotivates learners to study and stay in the school.

Along with this, there is consistent evidence linking grade retention to dropout among Chilean students. Those who have been retained – either in primary or secondary school – are more likely to leave the school early (Díaz et al., 2016;

Espínola et al., 2011; Richards, 2017; Román, 2013). Indeed, schools with high grade retention figures - where the practice is conceived as necessary and convenient by school leaders - tend to have lower completion rates (Espínola et al., 2011; Román, 2009).

Additionally, grade retention has been associated with juvenile crime. There is evidence to suggest that having repeated a grade between 4th and 8th grade (9 to 14 years old) increases the chances of engaging in illegal activities independent of the drop-out effect (Díaz et al., 2016).

Beyond the consequences of grade retention over individual students, research suggests that this practice has a negative aggregated effect on the school and the educational system. Although traditionally, grade retention has been understood as a strategy to promote educational quality, evidence contradicts this (García-Huidobro, 2000). Non-retained students in classrooms and schools where retention is more frequently used tend to achieve lower results (Bellei, 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2013). In the same vein, Latin American educational systems with higher grade retention rates tend to perform less well in international tests (Willms & Somers, 2001). In fact, increases in PISA results in Chile have been attributed to the diminishing use of grade retention in recent years (Valenzuela & Sevilla, 2011 as cited in Valenzuela et al., 2013).

The previously noted link between socioeconomic disadvantage and grade retention highlights its association with inequalities among the educational system. The likelihood of being a student who, despite socioeconomic constraints, obtains good academic results in PISA (called ‘academic resilience’) significantly decreases among those who have repeated a grade (Gómez et at., 2012). Moreover,

performance differences (in PISA 2009) between repeaters and non-repeaters are greater for socio-economically advantaged students than for those from vulnerable backgrounds (Ikeda & García, 2014). This suggests that while for the first group retention is more strongly determined by 'academic performance', for socio-economically disadvantaged students repeating a grade is determined by other factors in addition to their academic proficiency. Furthermore, grade retention has been identified as one of the main obstacles to achieving the universalisation of secondary education, which primarily affects the more disadvantaged portion of the population in Chile and Latin America (Bellei, 2013b).

Finally, studies have highlighted how the high cost of providing an additional school year to those who are retained affects the educational systems' overall efficiency (Gómez, 2013; OECD, 2016a).

International research

International research on promotion policies and related issues is mainly concentrated in countries identified as developed nations, particularly in the United States. Similar to Chile, research in the area has been dominated by a positivist perspective. Qualitative studies and those exploring the topic from educational sociology (beyond policy evaluation) are scarce. Research questions and findings also tend to coincide with those previously described in the Chilean case.

Across the world, the likelihood of being retained seems not only related to achievement and school attendance, but to students' personal and social characteristics. Socio-economic disadvantage (Agasisti & Cordero, 2014; Ferrão, et

al., 2017; Frey, 2005; OECD, 2013, 2020; Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019; Yang et al., 2018), immigrant background (Amuedo-Dorantes & Lopez, 2015; Klapproth & Schaltz, 2015; Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019) and belonging to racial or ethnic minorities are linked to higher rates of retention (R. Anderson, 2013; Frey, 2005; Tingle et al., 2012). Being a boy (Frey, 2005; Klapproth & Schaltz, 2015; Tingle et al., 2012), having been diagnosed with special education needs (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019) or chronic illnesses (McKinley & Cantrell, 2019), being perceived by educators as inappropriately behaved or disengaged from the school (Mattison et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2018), and having repeated a grade before (Ferrão, et al., 2017) are additional factors that have been associated to an increased chance of being held back. Young people whose parents are reportedly less involved in educational activities and their children's school also appear to be at higher risk of retention (Amani et al., 2020; Locke & Sparks, 2019).

School contexts also seem to be involved in who gets retained. Pupils attending schools with a high proportion of poor students (Agasisti & Cordero, 2014; Ferrão, et al., 2017) and those from schools located in more disadvantaged districts (Klapproth & Schaltz, 2015) have been identified as at higher risk of experiencing grade retention. At the same time, studies from Argentina, Brazil, Iran and Switzerland have argued that the likelihood of being retained is conditioned by educators' expectations, their perceptions on the causes of the student's academic difficulties, their beliefs in the impact of repetition as a remedial strategy, their own teaching abilities/methods, and the amount of responsibility they assume over making a student repeat a year (Amani et al., 2020; Bonvin, 2003; Sá Earp, 2009; Villalonga, 2011). Non-promotion logics and practices appear to be entrenched in

teaching philosophies and cultural principles that, for example, understand failure and success as products of individual moral character (Anagnostopoulos, 2006) or that some students are less able to learn than others (Sá Earp, 2009). It is not unusual for teachers to attribute academic failure to students' personal characteristics or their families (Bonvin, 2003; Guimarães de Mattos, 2005; Sá Earp, 2009). On the other hand, educators who recognize the influence of internal school aspects and their own pedagogical practices in students' learning processes seem more likely to oppose students' retention (Bonvin, 2003; Smith & Shepard, 1988; Villalonga, 2011).

Concerning the individual consequences of having repeated a grade, there is consistent evidence indicating that this practice does not benefit academic performances (Im et al., 2013) and indeed, tends to be detrimental (Anastasiou et al., 2017; Muelle, 2016; OECD, 2020; Tingle et al., 2012). As mentioned above, the academic achievements of those who repeat in primary school seem particularly compromised (Jimerson, 1999; García-Pérez et al., 2014). Longitudinal studies have claimed that this negative effect remains (Hong & Yu, 2007; Manacorda, 2012; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004) and even increases (Goos et al., 2013) over time. Although some studies have found a short-term boost to students' achievements after experiencing retention, these gains appear to fade (Allen et al., 2009; Schwerdt & Martin, 2012) or reverse (Alet et al., 2013) over the ensuing years.

Studies focused on exploring the socio-emotional impact of grade repetition have suggested that it is a very stressful event that can lead to low academic self-esteem (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Kretschmann et al., 2019; A. Martin, 2011; Robles-Pina, et al., 2008), low academic motivation (Kretschmann et al., 2019; A. Martin, 2011), and psychosocial difficulties or diminished abilities (Anastasiou et al., 2017;

Goos et al., 2013; Robles-Piña, et al., 2008). Sixth grade pupils in the United States rated grade retention as the most stressful life event they could experience, even over losing a parent or going blind (G. Anderson et al., 2005). Fuelling educational debate, this evidence has been contested by research suggesting a neutral (Im et al., 2013) and even positive effect of the practice on retained students' psychosocial wellbeing (Marsh, 2016; Rathmann et al., 2020) and behavioural outcomes (Martorell & Mariano, 2018).

Along with this, having repeated a grade has been linked to early school leaving (Guevremont et al., 2007; Jimerson, et al., 2002), fewer postsecondary opportunities and lower wages in young adulthood (Frey, 2005; Jimerson, 1999). Qualitative research on retained students who dropped out from school suggests that this relationship is connected to the stigmatisation these students experience from peers and teachers and the consequent resentment, disillusionment, exasperation, and discouragement they start to feel about the school (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

Beyond individual consequences, evidence indicates that retention functions as a segregating mechanism that promotes continued inequality in the education system (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Ferrão, et al., 2017; OECD, 2013, 2020) and has a detrimental effect on overall performances (OECD, 2011, 2020). Research in areas in which grade retention has been re-implemented after a period of restriction shows that an enhanced threat of grade retention does not lead to better academic outcomes in general or among the population segments most at risk of experiencing retention (Belot & Vandenberghe, 2014). Qualitative research has suggested that pedagogical resources and educators' commitment tend to be withdrawn from retained students that are socially and culturally portrayed as undeserving of them

(Anagnostopoulos, 2006). In parallel, when considering the educational system as a whole, providing additional years to hold back students has proved to be a financial burden on education budgets worldwide (Bacchetto, 2016; Eurydice, 2020; OECD, 2011, 2013).

Persistence and pervasiveness

National and international evidence pointing to the deleterious implications of grade retention is not new. Its individual and systemic negative consequences have been reported consistently for a long time (Abidin et al., 1971; Goodlad, 1954; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001). More than twenty years ago, in a UNICEF Seminar, Juan Eduardo García-Huidobro (a recognised Chilean scholar) urged progress towards automatic promotion, arguing that as long as grade retention existed – even if its use was reduced – success for all would not be possible (García-Huidobro, 2000). Over the last two decades several scholars in Chile (Bellei, 2013b; Gómez et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2013), Latin America (Gómez, 2013; OECD, 2016a; Treviño et al., 2015; Willms & Somers, 2001) and beyond (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Jimerson et al., 2006; OECD 2016a) have joined García-Huidobro in appealing for the limitation or even the elimination of grade retention practices.

On the other hand, many pre-service teachers, teachers, principals and parents retain a favourable view of non-promotion policies (Anastasiou et al., 2017; Okpala, 2007; Range et al., 2012; Range et al., 2011; Smith & Shepard, 1988; Witmer et al., 2004). The intractability of this issue across the world suggests a similar picture regarding policymakers, governmental agencies, politicians, and

stakeholders in general. While research on the phenomenon has provided some answers regarding retained students' characteristics and non-promotion effects, the explanation on its persistence and pervasiveness (in spite of all the evidence) remains elusive.

Guiding questions

Studies on grade retention policies and practices have typically focused on identifying intrinsic personal characteristics that increase the likelihood of retention and examining its consequences for those who are retained. An additional field of inquiry has explored schooling environments that foment grade retention practices and the academic, economic and equity consequences of its use within educational systems.

While such research has provided relevant information, it has failed to explore the complexity of the phenomenon. Many questions regarding how grade retention logics and practices affect the educational milieu beyond those who are retained remain unanswered. This includes non-retained students, classroom environments, relationships and exchanges within the educational community, the educational and schooling system, and the way in which primary students are constituted by the school. Similarly, the position and configuration of retained students' identities in relation to the broad educational field within which they are judged to have failed has also often been overlooked. I would like to suggest that this restriction to the scope of studies is probably a relevant factor in the failure to address grade retention's

persistence over time and across countries despite evidence against its use provided by substantial educational research.

Through the research reported here, I will seek to facilitate a more complex and richer understanding of the place grade retention occupies in the educational field and its diverse implications. Specifically, and guided by a range of critical conceptual tools, this study will approach grade retention as productive and as formed by productive forces – forces that are heterogeneous and include discursive as well as material and affective components.

The overarching question guiding this research is:

- **What productive forces make and sustain grade retention and what is produced by it?**

Underpinned by secondary questions:

- **How is grade retention involved in the processes that make primary education and make 'the primary student' in everyday life?**
- **How are students 'from the retained spectrum' (those who have been retained and also those who are/have been at risk of retention) constituted by the school?**
- **What subjectivities, knowledges, institutional practices, and affective intensities are enabled or constrained by grade retention logics and practices? And,**
- **How is this connected to the structure and discursive formation of the educational system?**

In addressing these questions, I will explore how this 'thing' called grade retention is made and remade within the Chilean educational milieu, and what it is doing in the primary school beyond what is typically acknowledged. I aim to question how it functions, what its capacities are, and how it interacts with other educational arrangements that shape it and are shaped by it. Within this perspective, I will consider retention's entanglements to relations of power, discipline and normalisation, affective economies, and processes of subjectivation and, through that, to the legitimation of inequality, exclusion, and violence within the primary school.

At the same time, it must be noted that this study's interest reaches beyond the sphere of grade retention policies in primary education and its deployment within the Chilean educational system. The framework that articulates this project is considered, rather, as a vehicle to explore how educational regulations and policies – in a much broader sense – are entangled with who the people of the school and especially children can be, how they can feel, where they can be situated, what they can do, and what can be done to them within the educational context.

Educational policies as discursive and assembled[44]

To explore these questions this project distances itself from the tendency to see grade retention *simply* as an 'educational policy' in the most traditional sense of the term. I am referring here to a positivistic approach in which public policy is understood instrumentally as scientific problem-solving rationality or as 'policy

44 I acknowledge that some concepts included in this section are sometimes somewhat obscure. I ask the reader to spare me from providing a more nuanced account of them here since that is the work of the next chapter.

sciences' (Webb & Gulson, 2015). This endeavour also rejects simplistic understandings of retention policies and practices as fixed, defined and predictable entities/realities where there is no mediation between how they are conceived on paper and how they are enacted in the school.

This instrumental perspective is, however, just one angle from which educational policies can be understood. In 1993 Stephen Ball wrote a thought-provoking text[45] in which he proposed that policies can be considered '*as text*' and '*as discourse*'. Policy as text sees policy as statements encoded and decoded in complex ways; it highlights the processes through which educational actors' intentions and agency interpret and enact policy. Local translations from text to practice mediated by those interacting with the policy become the main focus in this approach. Some enquires into grade retention, especially those using qualitative, interpretive frameworks, have incorporated this perspective. An issue raised by Ball (1993, 1994) of using this focus as the exclusive ground for understanding policy is the danger of neglecting the implicit knowledge and assumptions upon which individuals represent and respond to policy statements. Since these dimensions are central to this project's research questions, a 'policy as text' perspective is revealed as a tool with limited value here. Nevertheless, such a stance reminds us that, behind socio-educational phenomenon (such as grade retention), there are individuals whose influence has relevance for the way policies are enacted even as they may also be transformed by their engagement with the policy (Ball 1993, 1994).

The second meaning of policy distinguished by Ball (1993, 1994) is the idea of 'policy as discourse'. This notion draws on Foucauldian and post-structural

45 Ball, S. J. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes, *Discourse, 13*(2), 10-17.

conceptualisations of power, truth and knowledge allowing us to consider retention policies as productive forces (further accounts of theoretical concepts are given in the next chapter). From this viewpoint, agents and intentions lose relevance while the conditions (structures and rules) and dynamics (historical interactions, power) that form and make social arrangements possible acquire importance. Policies can be considered not only *as texts* but also *in discourse* and *as discourse*. From Ball's Foucauldian perspective this means that, on the one hand, policies *enter* power relations (are discursively constructed) and, on the other hand, they *affect* power relations (produce truth and knowledge) (Ball, 1993, 2015).

This last dimension has been explored by different scholars interested in the role of policies as an instrument of power (e.g. Bradbury, 2013; Gillborn, 2008; Harvey & Ringrose, 2016; Harwood & Allan, 2014; Wright & Halse, 2014; Youdell, 2006a, 2011). As discursive strategies, every policy engenders different sets of truths that delimit educational rationalities, common sense and purposes; regulate practices; and produce 'the student', 'the teacher' and other subjectivities populating the school (Ball, 2015; Ball et al., 2012; Bradbury, 2013; Falabella, 2020; MacLure et al., 2012; Youdell, 2006a, 2011). Together, they produce 'discursive formations' (Foucault, 1972) in accordance to which schooling practices are exercised and educational spaces are modelled (Ball et al., 2012).

> Policy is very much a 'certain economy of discourse of truth' (Foucault 1980: 93) which becomes invested in the day-to-day existence of schools, the bodies of teachers and students and in forms of social relationships. (Ball et al., 2012, pp. 8-9)

In this sense, policies make educators who they are, what they value and what they do within the school (Ball et al., 2012). In a broad sense, being a good

‘professional’ is linked to the level of commitment to school policies (Ball, 1990). Policies are also relevant to the way in which the school staff perceive and evaluate students. Images of the ‘normal’ and the ‘ideal’ student, as well as the way in which ‘good’ and ‘bad’ learners are defined, are related to school policies, especially those of examination and differentiation (in which grade retention can be situated) (Bradbury, 2013; Matus, 2019). Research exploring assessment policies ‘as discourse’, have pointed to their implications in the political construction of failure and the concomitant legitimisation/reproduction of inequality and marginalisation within minoritised social groups (Ball, 2013; Gillborn, 2008; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Harvey & Ringrose, 2016; Youdell 2006a, 2011).

The policies framing the notion of ‘special educational needs’ are a compelling example of these operations. Although they formally claim to designate difference without a negative connotation, in practice they generate a specific frame of deficit and abnormality, which in turn trigger novel inscriptions of normal childhood as well as technologies of reparation of the identified deviations from it (Ball, 2013; Youdell, 2006a). Policies, in this way, are conceived as implicated in the subjectivation process that defines the terms of recognition within the educational context and the exclusion and systematic disadvantage of some students (Bradbury, 2013; Gillborn, 2008; Youdell, 2006a, 2011). Taking distance from a more traditional comprehension of public policies, this point of view opens compelling routes to understand retention as an educational policy that establishes conditions under which certain statements are considered to be truths and, through this process, it is involved in the production of knowledge, power and subjectivation within the educational context.

At the same time, policies - and the practices that derive from them – can be viewed as discursively constructed (they exist *in discourse*). They should be submitted to rules of intelligibility in order to be recognisable in their contexts (Bradbury, 2013) and, in this sense, they are culturally and historically specific. Often, they refer to granted ideas and values, and contextual problem-solving beliefs (Österlind & Wright, 2014). Continuing with the example of 'special education' policies, it must be noted that they are not only productive but are also produced within the delimited framework of neo-liberal contemporary education. Several scholars have claimed that diagnoses and treatments related to special education are more informative of the educational system in which they take place than of those who they designate and pretend to 'help' (Harwood & Allan, 2014; Youdell, 2006a). This understanding highlights the irrelevance of seeking better ways to identify or support these 'special students' without start by asking why they exist in the first place and what kind of education need a 'special version' of it.

In the case of grade retention, its position within dominant educational discourses of performativity, neoliberalism, developmental psychology, special education, and inclusion exposes its entanglement and dependence to power and knowledge. Thinking about promotion arrangements as 'policies in discourse' helps us to approach the phenomena through the lens of the circulating power, the frameworks of meaning and the productive forces involved in its formulation and results.

As helpful as this understanding of policies might appear, its use in educational studies is not common. In a rereading of the original text in which this distinction between different approaches to policy were made, Ball (2015) asserts

that the notion of ‘policy as discourse’ has not been extensively or successfully addressed. He argues that policy research has remained predominantly superficial and limited to the comprehension of policy as text and language. Furthermore, he notices that even studies claiming to have incorporated a Foucauldian discursive approach, miss the substantial implications of the term to research.

Here I attempt to incorporate the notion of policies *in* and *as discourse* in the analysis of the production and productivity of grade retention, as a resource to make sense of this circumscribed rule of schooling progressions through the notions of discourse, knowledge, power and subjectivation. I also aim, by this movement, to distance myself from understandings of educational policy research which focus on the quantifiable effects of regulations and the description of visible characteristics of their targets but leave us unable to address the guiding questions asked in this project. My hope is that, in this endeavour, I will be able to avoid the misunderstandings that Ball suggests many studies have encountered.

At the same time that I acknowledge discourse as a powerful analytic tool for addressing the phenomena of grade retention as a policy, I recognise that approaching this enquiry utterly through discourse might make it hard to explore the complex and interconnected symbolic, material and affective forces involved in its production/productivity. Firmly anchored in the sphere of the subjects and the subjectivation process forming it, the Foucauldian concept of discourse usually appears placing material and affective components as secondary. Endeavours that incorporate them in a primary position seem mainly those in which materialities take anthropological forms (Foucault, 1990). This is part of Ball’s critique of the persistence of textual/linguistic understandings of policy even within studies that use

(or claim to be using) a Foucauldian perspective on discourse. Although scholars who have used a Foucauldian approach to educational research have warned against the mistake of reducing the operation of discourse to linguistic, textual and speech manifestations – and have drawn attention to organisations, architectures, technologies, bodies, images, and adornments, among other elements, as expressions of the 'materiality of discourse' (Ball, 2013; Youdell, 2006a) – in practice, materiality, multiplicity and interaction have been challenging to reach through 'discourse'.

In their book 'How Schools Do Policy', Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) attempt to overcome this difficulty when examining policy enactments. The authors highlight material and psychosocial dimensions of the process. The *discursive* element is seen as one of a triad of constituent facets of policy work and policy process, in which *material* and *interpretive* components have a corresponding crucial role. They also emphasise that policies do not occur in isolation, but are tied to an amalgam of historical, spatial, professional, material, emotional and symbolic commitments. While, on the one hand, these arguments show that *policy as discourse* is much more than text and language, on the other hand they expose limitations of the use of the term. Material factors are often portrayed as a manifestation of policies and less as a core part of them. Besides, extra discursive aspects frequently seem to refer to the background context in which policies are deployed rather than pieces of a heterogeneous and synergetic dynamic. In terms of the incorporation of potentiality and multiplicity, the focus of the interaction between components is primarily related to competing or contributing policies.

In the context of these limitations, this project complements the discursive approach to educational policies with an understanding based on the idea of ‘assemblage’ (de St Croix, et al., 2020; Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; McGimpsey & Youdell, 2018; Youdell & McGimspey, 2015). This considers policies within a mobile field of production in which there are no whole or fixed essences but an open and extensive field of productive interactions between autonomous parts in which material elements play a pivotal role (conceptual terms are address in detail in the next chapter). The primacy of subjects and representations cedes its privileged position in the understanding of politics to incorporate a myriad of additional interactive components including affects, embodied things, non-human agency and ‘real-life’ operations. This materialistic emphasis also underscores the dynamism of continuously emergent ‘policy realities.’ In opposition to orientations looking for scientific objectivity, neat descriptions and efficiently packed problem solutions, the framework from which policy is conceived from this approach is deliberately indeterminate, unpredictable and incomplete. In this way, getting lost rather than certainty becomes the way of knowing. Instead of being a hindrance, this lack of foundations is enabling as it signals new possibilities. The potentiality (‘becomings’) of educational policies and the subjects interacting with them becomes central to the analysis (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Webb & Gulson, 2015).

It is important to note that this perspective does not refute a contingent suppression of difference and potentiality. Rather, it acknowledges that the regulatory forms that define policymaking are entangled with the operation of power in distinctive ways. The government of social production is considered as framed by a ‘regime’ that temporarily constrain the openness and potentiality of the assemblage

by selecting some material, discursive and subjective lines and excluding others (Deleuze, 1992). In terms of subjectivation, public policies and services are conceived as entangled forces that regulate the variability of subjectivities and, in this way, their possibilities of 'becoming otherwise'. Nevertheless, these forces are not totalised or comprehensible unities but part of interactive flows that configure the dynamic, associative and mobile arrangements that shape and are shaped by educational policies in a field of immanent variance and positivity (McGimpsey, 2017).

Considering 'policies as assemblages' enables to extend considerations of grade retention to a) integrate materiality and affective economies when analysing the phenomenon, and b) stress the potentiality and dynamism contingent to the productive interaction between discursive, subjectivating, affective and material forces.

Overall, the main point here is to underscore the ways in which this project departures from traditional positivistic stances towards educational policy from which grade retention is conceived as a 'simple school reality'. Instead, the ground from which grade retention's productivity will be explored is based on an understanding of educational policy as circulating within a framework of meaning and power relationships; regulating practices that are productive of knowledge; implicated in subjectivating operations and recognition; engaged in a vital, undetermined, incomplete and unpredictable field of production; contingent and mobile; and shaped by entangled discursive, subjective, material and affective forces.

In this way, this project leans on a British tradition of educational justice scholarships that have combined diverse post-structuralist approaches and

ethnographic strategies to critically explore educational policies and disentangled the mechanisms through which they produce inequalities and exclusions (e.g. Ball, 1994; Bradbury, 2013; Kenway & Youdell, 2011; McGimpsey & Youdell, 2018; Teague, 2015, 2018; Youdell 2006a, 2010a, 2011; Youdell & Ian McGimpsey, 2015) and those who have taken these devices further within the Latin American context (e.g. Bocchio et al., 2016; Grinberg, 2011, 2019; Matus, 2019; Matus et al., 2020).

Organisation of the thesis

In this opening chapter, I have introduced my thesis by presenting the experiences, concerns and academic scholarships that inspired this project. I have also provided an account of the prevalent perspectives and knowledge that typically define grade retention's field of study, and I have outlined the divergences that my research questions have with them. Along with this, I have outlined the social and educational context in which the evidenced used in this thesis is embedded.

Chapter Two examines the theoretical ideas and conceptual devices that have influenced the research approach and have illuminated the analytic process. In the final section - and informed by the previous discussion - I introduce the concept of 'grade retention ensemble', and I reflect on its implications for this project.

Chapter Three takes the reader into the journey that shaped the methodological approach that guided this research. Throughout this chapter, I expose the methods, analytic strategies, fieldwork sites, positionalities, conceptual engagements, research traditions, ethical concerns, struggles, learnings, and processes of becoming that, taken together, enabled this project.

Chapters Four to Six contain the analysis of the evidence generated through the ethnographic case study undertaken in Chilean primary schools. Chapters Four considers the discursive configurations and mechanisms of subjectivation implicated in the constitution of primary students from the retained spectrum, and their distinctive effects. Chapter Five explores disciplinary processes entangled with grade retention's practices and logics, questioning the educational landscape in which those arrangements 'make sense'. The final analytic chapter, Chapter Six, reflects on the affective economies in which the arrangements considered in the previous chapters are inscribed.

Lastly, Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by bringing together the arguments and reflections of the preceding chapters and examining the potentiality open by them.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

As I outlined in the previous chapter, this project understands educational policies as discursive and assembled. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the conceptual roots of such a theoretical position, incorporating additional ideas informing the research approach and the analytic process. I intend to expose how different concepts and frames of understanding contribute to illuminating different aspects of this research and emphasising the dynamic and intertwined fashion in which they are used and useful to the analytical endeavour. Considering that the ambition of this project was to expand instead of reduce complexity, the following is not a neat presentation of concepts that comprehensively contain the problem but rather a display of various ideas whose flexible and intricate interactions and tensions have been found productive for thinking about the questions that frame this project.

I begin by presenting Michel Foucault's conceptual devices that provide the ground to this research approach and are the basis from which new understandings have been made necessary. The ideas contained in the Foucauldian definitions of discourse, power, subjectivation and discipline have been vital tools for thinking about the productivity and production of grade retention. Judith Butler's theoretical approach – and especially the notions of performativity and dispossession – has been incorporated as an additional asset critical to this task. Building on the basis of this research understanding of subjectivation processes, a third section explores

identity categories of recognition within the school context and sets out distinctions that are taken further and ‘brought alive’ throughout the analytic chapters. This is followed by an examination of the possibilities and limitations of Foucauldian and Butlerian notions of resistance, agency and change. The work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is then considered to step beyond some of these limitations and, mainly, to incorporate additional resources adding richness and depth to this analytic project. In a final section, I propose an integration of the conceptual tools previously addressed through the notion of a ‘grade retention ensemble’.

Foucault - Discourse, power, subjectivation and discipline

Foucault’s theory was my entry point to poststructuralist thought and critical reflection during this project. An exploration of the underlying connections uniting everyday practices and rationalities with the construction of identities, the institutional structures, and the limits of the possible has been influenced and illuminated by Foucault’s work. From this perspective, grade retention is considered as embroiled in the productive power relations that configure it and are simultaneously configured by it. Further, the research itself is understood to be immersed in these dynamic forces. Below, I outline the articulating concepts that frame this theoretical stance.

Discourse

A discourse, in Foucauldian terms, can be defined as a distinct knowledge that circulates within texts, institutions, techniques and practices in a particular context and establishes a frame of meaning (Foucault, 1972).

Foucault (1972) characterises discourse in terms of ‘statements’. These statements – or elemental unities of discourse – are defined through a function supported by a group of signs whose operation requires a ‘referential’ principle of differentiation and possibility; a subjective position; a shared field of coexistence and coordination with other statements; and a materiality - understood as the ground of the articulation as well as status, transcription norms, and possibilities of use – that configure the statement as an object that can be used, manipulated and transformed. Thus, ‘statements’ are not utterances or speech acts but rules of possibility and significance. Some statements are grouped around a particular function which, tied to a historical context, achieves a certain level of autonomy and distinctive identity. Those alliances that contain truth claims and are capable of repetition can be considered *discourse* in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1972).

In their claim to truth, such statements emerge as objective and unassailable descriptions of a *real* world. In his analysis of different social phenomena (madness, criminality, sexuality), Foucault (2006, 1991, 1990) asserts that, although discourses regulate the world as if they were true, there is not such a thing as a truth in any ultimate sense. Instead, there are multiple truths – each of them subjective, partial, contradictory and politically charged – competing for positions of privilege (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Mac Naughton, 2005). Overall, discourse does not reflect nature;

that is, it does not provide a faithful description of the world. Instead, it conveys contingent relations of power inscribed in meaning systems (Foucault, 1970).

A second illusion under which discourses operate (in close relation to the previous one) relates to their apparent fixity and permanence over time. Although they seem to be continuous and timeless unities, discourses are historical categories. Far from a transcendental status, they are 'formed by' and 'operate through' plural and contingent sets of interacting practices (Foucault, 1972). Discourses elude the stability, unity, and mechanical causality of structure[46], to embrace principles of incompleteness, emergency, complexity, contingency and precariousness (Foucault, 1981, as cited in Olssen, 2014). Thus, discourses are historically and contextually located and, therefore, contingent, and dispensable, susceptible to being challenged and changed (Foucault, 1970, 1972). Discourses can be, in this way, accepted, contested, or even dismissed depending on the place and time they are deployed.

A common misunderstanding is to equate discourse and language. Instead, language is only part of discourse; language is enabled and constrained by it (Foucault, 1972). Speech and text can be considered practices of discourse - forms of operation and circulation of discourses - as they inscribe the systems of meanings that contribute to constituting the domain of the knowable (as well as the unknowable) (Youdell, 2006a). Besides, there is not a sovereign or transcendental subject, nor a collective consciousness to whom discourse can be attributed. The

46 I refer here to the traditional structuralist approach to the term in which social structures are conceived as constraining and impersonal forces characterised by a structure-agency dualism. I acknowledge contemporary reconceptualisations of this notion that have attempted to overcome this division by placing social interaction – and hence emergence – at the core of the 'structure' (Shilling, 1992).

enunciative domain is rather an aggregation of anonymous rules constituted as the field of possibility of the speaking subjectivity[47] (Foucault, 1972).

Furthermore, discourse does not only manifest in language, nor just in culture or thought; the materiality of the discursive order is also acknowledged in Foucault's work. Methods, practices, social institutions, economic and political processes, architectures, images, gestures, bodies and subjects are platforms and expressions of discourse (Foucault 1970, 1972; Foucault, 1989, as cited in Olssen, 2014). What all discursive elements have in common is, first, an implication in the operations through which meaning is inscribed and, second, a configuration that depends on time and space and is, therefore, contingent and open to infinite articulations (Foucault 1972).

In his work, Foucault utilizes two key concepts to expose the contingent production of knowledge through discourse: discursive frameworks/formations (Foucault, 1972) and discursive practices (Foucault, 1977a). Although both emphasise the productive force of discourse and overlapping points can be found between them, they also have differential emphases. While the first focuses on the way in which a multiplicity of discourses can converge to produce bodies of formal knowledge or beliefs, the last addresses the functional operations and deployments of discourse beyond delimited domains of knowledge.

47 At this point, it seems useful to draw an early distinction between the concepts of 'subject', 'subjectivation' and 'subjectivity' (the first two will be considered in rather more detail in this chapter). First, the 'subject' is not the same as the 'individual'. Individuals emerge as subjects when they are established in language and subjected to power, this is, when becoming the being of the interpellation (Butler, 1997b). The notion of 'subject', in this sense, is understood here as a discursive category. Subjectivation, for its part, indicates the technological process by which this subject is made and remade as such (Foucault, 1991). Lastly, subjectivity refers to subjects' sense of their own and others' subject-hood; it is the discursive means by which individuals articulate and constitute themselves as meaningful in and to the social world (Youdell, 2011).

First, the idea of discursive formations/frameworks alludes to dispersions that are made singular by defined rules of formation that configure objects, strategies, statements, and theories, determining a complex group of relations between heterogeneous elements such as institutions, techniques, perceptions, concepts and discourses. They function as an imperative of the mode in which a defined set of statements is institutionalised, used, combined and appropriated as an instrument to a strategy. In this way, a discursive formation can be delimited as a concert of contributing discourses that form an order of particular correlations, positions, and operations that defines meaning within a delimited space and time and converges into practices and institutions. Any field of activity can be an example of a discursive framework. 'The school' - as constitutive of 'the student', 'the teacher' and 'the objectives of education' – can be characterised in this way. It is important to note, however, that despite discursive formations' emphasis in the singularisation of rules that determine relations among elements, this is not a totalising phenomenon. Although they can give the impression of being stable frameworks of meaning, discursive formations are limited, uncertain and contingent arrangements which are constantly transformed through use over time (Foucault, 1972).

Discursive practices, on the other hand, refer to historical sets of regularities or rules of relationships that – being simultaneously constituted in discourse and constituting it – 'capture' a field of objects. They prescribe a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, rules of conceptual and theoretical production, and norms that define what is chosen and what is barred. Even though they might temporarily coincide with what is ordinarily considered a discipline or science, a discursive practice usually crosses several of them or corresponds to a conjunction that

regroups them in a novel unity. Although the expression of these delimitations can be found in individual forms, they are independent of particular agents, existing across collective arrangements. They are embodied in institutions, technical processes, communications, and patterns of conduct that reach a myriad of individuals. At the same time, discursive practices are not stable a-temporal structures. The way in which they fix knowledge and inscribe meaning is – as with discursive formations – provisional and susceptible to regular alterations (Foucault, 1977a).

Discursive practices uphold the 'regime of truth' of a defined social order. This refers to the political, economic, and institutional reign of the production of truth (Foucault, 1984, as cited in Mac Naughton, 2005) formed by dominant, stated and officially sanctioned discourses and practices (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Mac Naughton, 2005). The most significant feature of a regime of truth is that it defines what is valorised and self-evident to the extent that it becomes impossible to think outside its terms (Foucault, 1990). It stands as a broad and comprehensive scheme of truth inscription. The concept can be assimilated to the idea of 'episteme' in that it provides the framework (codes and rules) within which a statement can be claimed to be "within the true" (Ball, 2013, p. 21). As they define and institutionalise 'normal' and desirable ways to think, feel and act towards ourselves and others, regimes of truth produce relations of domination (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Mac Naughton, 2005). Far from understanding this process from a repressive perspective, Foucault considers it a positive and creative mechanism insofar as it produces knowledge, multiplies discourse, and generates power (Foucault, 1990).

From this standpoint, education can be conceived as a discursive formation ingrained in a defined, contingent regime of truth. Likewise, and like any other field of

knowledge, education is composed of a number of diverse and interactive discourses that determinate what/who is thinkable and what/who is dismissed and in this way, the ‘reality’ of the school is produced (Youdell, 2011). From this perspective, the existence and persistence of grade retention within the schooling system must be thought of as necessarily linked to this terrain of possibilities. Neoliberalism, developmental psychology, and educational special needs are among the contributing discourses and discursive formations from which retention is made. At the same time, as part of the educational field, non-promotion policies, practices and understandings can be conceived as platforms of meaning implicated in the regularities that forge ‘schooling discourse’.

Incorporating the logic of discourse to this inquiry implies an immediate departure from an understanding in which grade retention can be neatly comprehended and studied as a defined piece of school assessment isolated from other practices, meanings, and relations of power, and whose effects touch only individual trajectories. Rather, this view allows us to consider the productive interactions between retention and promotion arrangements and the rules of viability that ‘make’ the school and their members.

Finally, it is important to note that although I am considering ‘discourse’ as a crucial entry point to think about the guiding research questions, I also suggest the need to go beyond discourse to consider non-discursive forces implicated in grade retention’s productivity.

Power

A Foucauldian perspective considers discourse, knowledge and power as immanent in one another (Foucault, 1990). For him, all knowledge is an expression of particular power relations (Foucault, 1972). Systems of knowledge mentioned previously are the support to the practices and techniques of power (Ball, 2013). The exercise of power operates through a concealed extraction, seizure and management of knowledge that masks its own operation and allows it to remain hidden and, therefore, effective. This notion of power is rather different from the traditional perspective of a repressive and negative 'sovereign power' embedded in the rule of law, held by the state or the monarch, and imposed over subjugated, powerless bodies through obedience. From a Foucauldian perspective, these are only terminal and overt crystallisations of more subtle micro-dynamics identified with the idea of disciplinary power. Within this understanding, power is not a unitary and discontinuous structure or institution but a specific transient situation; a productive and formative circulation of forces that become the condition of possibility of social forms and subjectivities (Foucault, 1990). This conceptual movement shifts the traditional focus on the nature or the source of power to highlight its relational functioning. It questions how power works, how it is exercised, how it happens, and its effects. In this way, Foucault's understanding of power provides an alternative (as well as a complementary) form to comprehend social forces and hegemonic processes.

Foucauldian power comes from everywhere and goes everywhere. It is simultaneously local and omnipresent. While it affects the whole social body, it is

deployed through individual actions, small-scale interactions, limited groups and daily institutional practices within historically contingent circumstances. Together, 'local centres of power-knowledge' compose more general social patterns or strategies. There is continuity but independence between the microphysics of power and over-all strategies; they uphold each other without this meaning replication (Foucault, 1990).

As with 'discourse', power is not only invisible but also non-subjective. Just as power escapes being apprehended, there is essentially no one to attribute it to – there is no identifiable ground or source from which it originates. This does not mean, however, that power is fortuitous. Foucault (1990) states that "there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives" (p. 95). The intention immanent to power - its logic and goals - can usually be apprehended through its local forms. Their interrelationships form comprehensive systems that operate without referring to a creator or founding structures or operations (Foucault, 1990).

Modern institutions - such as the school, the clinic, or the prison - are the most distinctive spaces in which discursive frameworks emerge to render the subject into relations of power (Foucault, 1991; Youdell, 2006b). Such fields can be conceived as 'practices of power' in the sense that, as much as they are shaped within systems of knowledge, they also produce frameworks of knowledge and possible beings (Ball, 2013).

If we consider that promotion operations are involved in the inscription of knowledge and meaning, we must think of them as also involved in the definition of productive power relationships. Such entanglements go beyond the 'kind of power' which is circumscribed by its coercive potential, rather, they allude to power as non-subjective forces implicated in conditions of possibility. Exploring non-promotion from

a negative viewpoint of power can, I suggest, make it hard to understand the positive attachment that those in the educational field display towards grade retention regulations and practices. Rather, we can interrogate the generative operation of grade retention over educational systems, schools, classrooms, and participants of educational communities. From this stance we can look beyond ideas of dominance and constraint to explore retention practices as implicated in educational meaning, relationships, worth, drive, gratification, certitude, and knowledge. Ultimately, we can question what is enabled as well as what is prevented by grade retention in the educational milieu.

Subjectivation

The non-subjective quality of discourse and power does not imply individuals' independence from them, on the contrary, they are 'constituted' through them. While sovereign power is imposed on the subject, disciplinary power produces the subject. Subjectivation is the term used by Foucault to describe a subject who has been made through relations of power that are enacted in and through discourse (Youdell, 2006a). As subjects exist in an 'interior relationship' with power, they are radically dependent on it (Foucault, 1990). This perspective builds on Althusser's (1971, as cited in Youdell, 2011) idea of individuals who are externally 'named' or 'interpellated' and who only 'become a subject' when accepting and turning to such call. From that constitutive moment, 'subject-hood' hangs from the recognition of the terms from which we have been hailed in the first place. This understanding of human beings rejects the idea of unified subjects that precede discourse and discipline. Instead,

they are constituted within the possibilities that their culture, society and social group present to them (Foucault, 1997, as cited in Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003). In this way, the subject becomes historical and contingent (Ball, 2013).

As much as the subject is an 'object of power', it is also a means through which power is exerted (Usher & Edwards, 1994). Even that which we recognise as the most personal and private aspects of our existence – dreams, fantasies, desires and beliefs – are artefacts of power, and as expressions of power, they reinforce it (Ball, 2013).

Subjectivities at the school are constituted and negotiated within these operations of power. Members of the school community can only be so in accordance with the limitations and permissions that the discourses that circulate within the school context offer to them. In the case of children, what they *can be* in a school, as learners and students, is a contingent production of what their educational institutions and educators *allow* them to be (Youdell, 2006a, 2011).

If we understand promotion practices as being embedded and imbricated into schooling discourses, they must also be involved in subjectivation processes. From this stance, grade retention is not only a rule or a pedagogical practice but an 'interpellation' creating categories and defining the viability of some students in the school according to their 'attachment' to such 'call'. Furthermore, as these mechanisms do not operate in local isolation but in a broader social (and in this case educational) field, non-promotion subjectivating forms not only operate on held back students but also on the desires, fantasies and aspirations of the entire school community.

Governmentality

The process of subjectivation through disciplinary power has profound effects on the means through which domination is exercised by the state, its agents and institutions. The concept of governmentality refers to the strategies, procedures and techniques through which the modern liberal state administers and acts upon its citizens at the micro level of daily life through the capture of knowledge and aspirations (Ball, 2013; Youdell, 2011). In his book “Governing the Soul”, Nikolas Rose (1999) discusses the means through which the goals of the state institutions are aligned to individual ideals and desires extensively. On that basis, domination is exercised through obligations of self-realisation and freedom, which need to be deployed in particular ways that we believe are our own but that come from forces alien to those of the individual.

> The external constraint of police was to be translated into an internal constraint upon the conduct of the self, the formation of subjects who were prepared to take responsibility for their actions and for whom the ethic of discipline was part of their very mental fabric. (Rose, 1999, p. 227)

Individuals, in this way, are not (just) governed by the force of central and omnipotent state apparatus acting upon them over their will. Rather, government operates by aligning “the varied ambitions of political, scientific, philanthropic, and professional authorities” with “the self each of us want to be” (Rose, 1999, p. 217). The self - and the subjectivating process involved in its constitution - becomes a central element in circuits of power (Rose, 1999). This operation does not necessarily make external enforcement redundant. Governing people, suggests Foucault, is a

dynamic equilibrium between processes of construction and modification of the self and more traditional coercive techniques (Foucault, 1993, as cited in Ball et al., 2012).

From its outset, the school has contributed to the government's management of populations. The seizure of knowledge and human inclinations as well as the transmission of the ethic of discipline are at the core of contemporary educational endeavours. A central aspect of these operations is the transmission of normality. Within the social space, normality is an instrument of power and governmentality. The norm is not only an aspiration/expectation but a moral code and a 'regime of truth' from which bodies are disciplined and managed. 'Normality' is equivalent of 'good', while 'abnormality' represents what is 'bad' and needs to be corrected (Ball, 2013; Foucault, 1991). In the context of the school, the education regulatory function works by linking normality to the productiveness and docility of bodies. Schooling measurements, judgments and comparisons are critical instruments in this operation. 'Abnormality', as its binary opposite, is conceived as the enemy of health and purity; its rejection is therefore desirable (Ball, 2013). Although abnormality can easily be conceived of as an exceptional transgression from an original 'normal' state of things, scholars like Rose (1999) have claimed that the conception of a 'normal childhood' is extrapolated from a primary understanding of the pathological child. From this perspective, the last is not a deviance but the foundation of the categorising process. In the same vein, Deborah Youdell (2011) argues that mainstream/'normal' educational contexts, pedagogies, practices and identities only make sense in relation to their opposites.

The exploration of grade retention's productive forces involves the examination of 'deviant' and excluded educational identities. If we understand them as constitutive of schooling's ideals and norms, and as an expression of disciplinary enforcements, the 'abnormal, retained student' becomes a fruitful avenue through which to glimpse the processes of subjectivation that constitute and govern all the subjects of the school.

Technologies of disciplinary power

Foucauldian power operates through 'technologies of disciplinary power', that is, regulatory techniques and strategies that normalise and control human bodies and their activity through uninterrupted processes of supervision and coercion. They constitute and actualise power's aims (Foucault, 1990, 1991). The strict partition of time and space, the imposition of rhythms, the enforcement of regulations, and the continual monitoring and recording are fundamental components of these dynamics (DeLanda, 2006). Normalisation, hierarchy, categorisation and individualisation processes emanate from them and, most importantly, self-surveillance fabrications that end up sealing and ensuring the docility of the bodies involved (Youdell, 2006b). Thus, bodies are transformed into a mechanics of power subject to enhancement and usefulness (Horrocks & Jevtic, 2013).

Modern institutions are the conventional spaces in which discursive frameworks and disciplinary technologies emerge to render the subject into relations of power (Youdell, 2006b). Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon Prison, a place where constant but uncertain observation is assumed, is its archetypal figure (Foucault, 1991). Schools have been identified as paradigmatic cases of disciplinary institutions

(Youdell, 2011). They have proved to have an enormous capacity to break down subjects, locations, times, actions and operations into visible units susceptible to inspection, measurement, calculation, comparison, classification, and correction (Ball, 2013). As “machines for registration of human differences” (Rose, 1999, p. 136), schools provide differentiation, moral training, punishment, and exclusion to the younger population (Ball 2013; Rose, 1999). These machines are composed of disciplinary technologies of power that in many cases correspond to educational policies; the regulations and practices involved in assessment and standardisation processes are part of them (Ball, 2015; Ball et al., 2012).

Although students’ qualities and identities are *created* within examination practices, assessment outcomes appear to be *measuring* and *revealing* individuals’ inherent attributes (Ball, 2013; Usher & Edwards, 1994). The fictitious character[48] of these social constructions – in the sense that they create the illusion of normality and deviation - does not make them any less efficient in terms of their social and individual effects. By acting both internally and externally, they effectively enforce social control on the individual (Nagle & Piero, 2016). Categorisations and normalisation are at the centre of these processes. Accountability logics and assessment practices inform students, teachers and schools who/what they need to be in order to accomplish excellence or acceptability (Youdell, 2011).

In parallel they identify what/who step outside those boundaries. Not every child can be conceived as a ‘good’ student within the circulating discourse of the school (Bradbury, 2013). The norm operates through exclusion; it needs a field of

48 When using the terms ‘fiction’ and ‘illusion’, I do not claim a prior truth or reality that is being masked. Rather, I draw on Butler’s (1990) uses of these terms when exploring identity and gendered bodies to mean that what it appears (and deceives us) as a prior reality or an essential truth is just a construction which is performatively generated and constantly actualized through social practices, with “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (p. 185).

variation and difference to work: some must fulfil the standards and others, not (Usher & Edwards, 1994). In an environment highly defined by the 'terrors of performativity' (Lyotard, 1984, as cited in Ball, 2003), in which assessment has become a key institutional morality and a pillar of the authority structure, academic failure (unsuccessful examination results) can be seen as transgressive. Those who fail to meet the expectations not only activate reformatory measures and disciplinary modulations directed to improve, normalise and correct their deviation but also the school condemns such forms of disobedience and defiance (as would any other social organisation with an authority structure) (DeLanda, 2006). Practices of exclusion and punishment - along with remedial endeavours as a disciplinary expertise - prosper within these "local economies of student worth" (Ball, 2013, p. 109).

Contemporary schools are loaded with micro-sanctions for micro-violations, where 'sovereign' public displays of castigation increasingly coexist with reformatory and therapeutic practices (Ball, 2013). Although schools have followed a tendency to replace (direct) physical punishment with more refined disciplinary methods, educational transgressions still trigger overt punitive demonstrations of a 'monarchical style' (ceremonial exhibition of the vast and disproportioned strength of a sovereign over the defiant subject/body). Examination, and its power to monitor, describe, record and compare, is a critical element in making these punishment technologies possible (Foucault, 1991).

Michel Foucault's (1991) analysis of the historical transformations of the Western penal system and its various corrective forms provides compelling ideas to consider when examining transgressions and their condemnation within the school

context. He proposes that, while in the 18th century, a monarchic penalty system was designed to subjugate human bodies, its modern version (with the massification of the carceral system and the emergency of institutions of a similar constitution) has aimed to correct and improve human 'souls' – souls that are, at the same time, productions of the modern disciplinary processes. More than the criminal action, the condemned fault is an internal quality of whoever commits it. Power loses corporeality and gains subjectivity. Bodies remain objects of concern, not to be directly lacerated but to be supervised, arranged and normalised (Foucault, 1991). However, although this individually directed goal of disciplinary reformation is generally the most salient, it is not the most significant.

The primary function of corrective mechanisms within the prison – as within any disciplinary institution - is social. The carceral system reorganises knowledge about crime and 'makes' the delinquent. Punishment becomes a mechanism of crime and abjection production that is not restricted to the control of inmates but reaches the whole social field (Foucault, 1991). On the one hand, convictions are productive of what is considered to be wrong in the first place. It is the condemnation of a crime (and not the crime itself) which makes it recognisable as such (Durkheim, 2013). In this way crimes, as well as the mechanisms of punishment associated with them, are part of the cultural regulatory fictions 'offered by' and 'productive of' discursive practices (Butler, 1990). On the other hand, punishment defines an abnormal constitution distinguished and separated from 'the normal/moral' body and by this operation becomes a representation of public morality (Foucault, 1980). Far from being a 'humanistic' turn, the shift from torture to prison is a motion towards greater effectiveness of social control (Foucault, 1991). At the same time, the disciplinary

social function of the prison system sets its failure in reducing offences. According to Foucault (1991), its success is not to eradicate crime or reform delinquency, but to create and sustain them in order to serve the exercise of control and power.

Foucault's exploration of methods of correction and the distinctive forms in which systems of power relate to punishment/restoration, body/soul, and individual/society, is a useful tool to consider when examining grade retention. Furthermore, a viewpoint in which the failure of a social mechanism's manifest purpose entails the success of other interests, is a relevant stance when trying to make sense of the persistence of grade retention despite its recognised inefficacy at the individual level. The question over grade retention productivity incorporates an interrogation of what this regulation/practice does to the school and how it is positioned within the educational system beyond the explicit remedial function it seems to point to but does not fulfil.

By its entanglements with assessment logics and practices in the school, non-promotion can be located at the centre of performative categorisation processes that assess, differentiate, compare, rank, normalise, homogenise, correct and exclude students. Grade retention is produced in the context of these technologies and, at the same time, is part of them. Holding a student back can be seen as a decisive corrective, normalising, punitive and exclusionary fabrication within a myriad of evaluation method intended to supervise, control and coerce. In many ways, grade retention seems to *function* as a disciplinary technology and, although this idea cannot fully address its complex implications and productive power, it is a valuable and useful angle from which to reflect on the place of retention within the primary school.

Butler – Performativity and dispossession

Judith Butler's critical reflection on the mechanisms configuring identity within the frames of discursive practices – and their effects – has been generative for the analysis I develop about the primary school, educational relationships, and the place grade retention has in them. Notions of performativity and dispossession have been critical to thinking about the constitutive fragility of categorisations based on the idea of grade retention, as well as in their overreaching power.

Performativity

Following Foucault, Butler understands power as productive and subjectivating. The radical dependence of the subject to discourse and power is also pivotal for Butler's understanding of the social and the individual. One of her main concerns is to explore the means by which regimes of power define subjects' intelligibility, recognisability and desirability (Butler, 1990). An essential step in this direction is an understanding of power as defining "the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all" (Butler, 1997a, p. 133). Butler (1997b) elaborates the psychic mechanisms behind individuals' production and subordination to power based on psychoanalytic formulations of infants' attachments to their carers as a means of subsistence. These theories propose that, originally, our desire to survive is intertwined with a state of dependency on a world of fixed meaning that is absolutely external to us. We have no choice about being passionately attached to our subordination.

> Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. In other words, within subjection the price of existence is subordination. Precisely at the moment in which choice is impossible, the subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence. This pursuit is not choice, but neither is it necessity. Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere; it marks a primary vulnerability to the Other in order to be. (Butler, 1997b, p. 20-21)

In order to be, individuals must accept the terms of their own subjugation (Butler, 1990). At the same time, a denial of the emergence of subjects through subordination is required. From being their condition of existence, power is interiorized by the individual as their 'own' agency and being. Through this mechanism, the subject is constrained to 'freely' become a reiteration and expression of power. On the one hand, this ensures both power and subject persistence, on the other hand, the productive nature of this mechanism implies that there is space for alteration through the subjective reiteration of power (Butler, 1997a, 1997b).

Butler challenges the idea of a coherent, continuous and unitary individual. Far from being a description of inner nature, identity is seen as a socially constructed norm of intelligibility. There is not an original self over which power acts, nor is there a natural or essential identity to refer to. The essence that the hegemonic discourses rely on as unitary truths or prototypes are just illusions functioning to fix meaning where there is no more than limitless possibility. Butler (1990) denies any possibility of essence - or ontological material reality prior to cultural signification – apart from the regulatory practices that maintain the illusion of interiority and substantial identities.

The development of the concept of 'performativity' is essential for understanding this perspective. As a general definition, performativity refers to the practice of enacting or creating by naming:

> Discursive performativity appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make. (…) Generally speaking, a performative functions to produce that which it declares. (Butler, 1993, p. 107)

This understanding entails rejecting the idea of an individual existing behind 'performances' (Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003[49]) and challenges the common belief that substantial identities lead to certain definitions and categories and give way to certain actions. Interpellations and acts then are not considered expressions of pre-existing attributes or the chosen performances of sovereign subjects who act according to themselves. Instead, the idea of performativity establishes that fictive essences are generated through repeated discursive practices framed by determined sociocultural temporalities. In this sense, identities do not *happen* but are *consistently done* (Butler, 1990). We are constituted again and again through the designations that seem to decipher our substance but are rather external frames of possibility and obligation which creates the illusion of it (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2011). In order to function these performative citations must make sense, that is, they should be recognisable within the discourses and institutions in which are deployed. When identities step outside these boundaries, they lose their place in the plane of existence and significance (Butler, 1990, 1997a).

Butler's ideas and conceptual notions provide a fertile ground from which to examine the subjectivating processes implicated in the circuits of power and

49 This distinction, drawn by Rasmussen and Harwood, follows Butler's propositions made in 1994 in the context of an interview called "Gender as performance" (*Radical Philosophy*).

dependence that define grade retention and are defined by it. Grade retention is constitutive of students' identities, not only for those who are retained but every child and all young people whose 'studenthoods' are defined by and tied to their promotion status. 'Intelligibility' and 'recognition' are notions that can help us to uncover and reflect on the mechanisms holding these identity constructions. Furthermore, Butler's performativity provides a significant analytic device to consider the frameworks of meaning through which students behaviours are interpreted and identities are 'produced' within schooling discursive practices.

Dispossession and deprivation

From a perspective in which human intelligibility is conditioned to discursive regimes, a rejection of such definitions entails losing ground on the terrain on which individuals' lives and bodies have a meaningful existence. A compelling conceptual tool to reflect on this process is the Butlerian notion of 'dispossession'. Again, this idea is linked to an initial and fundamental site of vulnerability, dependence, submission and obedience from which our social and material existence hang. As we are all inaugurated by a primary form of dispossession (*being dispossessed*), we live in a world of psychological and physical mutual dependency and vulnerability (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). As Butler (2003) asserts, "we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well" (p. 14).

There are further losses that follow this constitutive dimension. They refer to the distribution of vulnerability and precarity, and the formation of social identities of non-being/non-having (*becoming dispossessed*). Conditions of having been disowned or having lost belonging to the world such as forced migrations,

occupation, conquest, poverty, homelessness, and unemployment are examples of lives outside the norms of recognisability that are objects of this second form of systematic dispossession. Our primary constitution as dispossessed beings is consistently used to legitimise and deny political responsibility for these conditions of existence (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013).

Rules and categories of recognisability can trigger or increase precarity within individuals or groups. Just as they establish what lives are worthy, they also define those which are not. There are those who only have a social existence within a space of total vulnerability. No grievance or vindication are possible within the social space that they inhabit. For them to even retain a position of injurious recognisability, they must remain within the regulatory framework that renders them objects of violation. Demanding a place of rights and value for themselves is out of the established norms of intelligibility. Following an exit path away from these norms of intelligibility means exposure to the loss of conditions of subsistence and to major or uncertain conditions of violation and brutality. Only injustice and violence seem possible within this spectrum of possibility (Butler, 2003; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013).

Butler (2003) argues that when a life is denied, so too are the transgressions and violence directed towards it. She suggests that “[i]f violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated” (p. 22). The non-existent cannot be lost or inflicted and neither can be mourned. This ungrievability is connected with the violence and damage exerted over them in the first place (Butler, 2003).

Nonetheless, Butler (2003) suggests that to deny a life is not equivalent to a complete erasure. Those systematically negated and persistently 'unmourned' constitute social and human existence as much as the affirmed, "since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness" (p. 22). This idea splices with Kristeva's definition of the abject (further developed in the next section) whom – despite their condemnation, exclusion and disavowal - are never entirely erased. The abject persistently remains through its function within the system of meaning, simultaneously as a threat and an ally to social order. Its constitution is a useful tool to reinforce the inside by demarking what is outside. Abjection persists through an excluded quality that reinforces the dominance and violent hegemony of discursive regulations (Kristeva, 1982).

To Butler (2003), this stubborn endurance of the excluded means that the mechanisms of precarisation and abjection not only define the lives of those who suffer from them but of all human beings. Since what we are is always in connection with our constitutional attachment to others, each of us is formed by those who we are able to recognise and mourn as much as those who we cannot cry for. On this basis, Butler (2003) suggests a collective responsibility that emerges from grief as a political resource for acknowledging our mutual exposure, identifying with those who have been deprived, and taking responsibility for the integrity of one another. She argues that this recognition can transform the structure of vulnerability itself.

Considering schooling and its promotion practices from the perspective of dispossession guide us to interrogate the educational distribution of vulnerability and its roots on the performative construction of identities. As much as grade retention can be describe as a regulation or a practice, it might also be considered a

performative process which, for many students, creates a ‘discursive trap’ (Youdell, 2006a, p. 96) making their rejection, marginalisation and deprivation not only possible but inevitable. In parallel, this viewpoint highlights how unrecognised and excluded identities are an integral part of the school power machinery that defines educational limits and schooling experiences for all.

Categorisations: The bad, the impossible and the abject

Processes of categorisation are at the centre of discursive practices forming distinctive identities. Subjects become intelligible through these categories/names and, consequently, depend on them. Since those categories are not neutral descriptors but productive of what they name, they can be considered performative. They are more ‘revealing’ of the context in which they take place than of those who they try to define (Youdell, 2006a).

Schools are performative institutions; they set the frames of possibility by which their members are made intelligible. An essential aspect of these performatives is that the categorical names received by the people in the school are limited by the circulating discourses of the context; some of them are more acceptable or intelligible than others (Youdell, 2006a, 2011). In the case of the students, categories of recognition are mechanisms of social order and regulation closely linked to the institution’s management of human and childhood complexity through evaluation, classification and distinction from which distinctions of value are made (Rose, 1999). Policies, such as those regulating promotion, are part of this process. Such policies produce and determine types of learners and alter students’ classifications. Labels

such as ‘normal’, ‘ideal’, gifted’, ‘problematic’ or ‘special’ are strongly rooted to school assessment policies (Ball, 2013), such as those that relate to students’ progression. These mundane and apparently innocuous ‘descriptions’, judgements of who children are in the educational context, have massive implications for all students’ educational experiences and the future opportunities open to them (Youdell, 2011).

A key element of how educational policy operates organising and assigning values to bodies is through definitions of deficiency or difference and the strategies of compensation and redemption that follow. Although those arrangements appear rational and natural, they are sustained by an ‘imaginary ideal’ that defines a desirability that is neither apolitical or neutral. Claudia Matus (2019) has identified such ideas with the concept of ‘normalcy’. This definition alludes to an active force which, situated in social practices, participates in power relationships and the production of inequality. Normalcy is co-constitutive of identities of difference (deviation) and the discriminatory processes that they are subjected to. It has an agency and a mode of production that divides subjects giving them differential status while creating an illusion of inevitability and immutability. Everyone, including policy makers, people in the school and educational researchers are subject to the invisible but powerful operations of ‘the normal’. Critical thinking, claims Matus (2019), accompanied by a collective and constant examination of naturalised interpretations might be a way to challenge the “colonialist trap of deficiency” (p. 168) in which normalcy usually places us all.

Relevant to identity distinctions within the school’s discursive frameworks, and the inscription of normative notions, is the opposition between good and bad students. This central hierarchical binary enables critical schooling processes of

evaluative judgements and comparisons. While the ‘good student’ identity is inscribed as ideal, normal, acceptable and desirable, the ‘bad student’ is positioned in a sphere of abnormality, deficit and deviance that ‘calls’ for the deployment of disciplinary endeavours (Ball, 2013; Bradbury, 2013; Youdell, 2006a). Without contesting the performative and exclusionary implications of these binary operations upon children’s educational identities, I will draw on Deborah Youdell’s (2006a) work concerning students’ subjectivities to suggest that the bad-abnormal student (as much as the good-normal one) is still intelligible within the discursive framework of the school. This means that both binary opposites - the good and the bad student - are accessible subjectivating categories and, therefore, those who are characterised by them are recognisable (in Butlerian terms) as ‘subject to schooling’. I will stretch this argument to suggest that in the daily experience of the school - to some students and under certain circumstances - these opposites work rather as a continuum that allows a certain transit between positions more or less close to each end. Students can move across these categories over time and, at the same time, bad and good aspect of the same pupil can coexist within the educational milieu. Even the ‘bad end’ is inscribed in terms of recognisability that allow this crossover. It is important to notice though that, in many cases, this movement remains superficial and defined by daily actions and achievements that coexist with more enduring educational identities. However, there is a space in which, if unstable inscriptions are sustained, students’ identity positions can move across the good and bad continuum. Although uncommon (especially within the same school), the anticipation or expectation of this flow has profound disciplinary consequences. As desirable and acceptable positions are not entirely ensured, students remain in a permanent position of internal and

external examination and judgement. For those on the ‘good’ end of the spectrum there is a constant threat of degradation, while those at the other end are called on to keep hoping and striving for a more favourable position. Although for many students these transitions are not available, the fragile plausibility of mobile subjectivities is part of schooling discourses and disciplinary processes.

Outside the school discursive frameworks, the hierarchical binary of Same/Other, and the ‘good/bad continuum’, stands the ‘impossible learner’. The concept, introduced by Youdell (2006a), denominates subjective positions exceeding meaningful discourses that frame schooling and studenthood. Some children’s subjectivities, she argues, are “so incompatible with school discourses of students and learners that they may be rendered *impossible*” (p. 101). Biographical and social identities – and their interactions with notions of ability, effort, conduct and compliance – are understood as fundamentally implicated in this operation. The impossible pupil, defined in contempt to educational logics and values, is incommensurable with educational understandings and goals. Unlike the discursive terrain of the bad student, the impossible learner is unintelligible in schooling’s terms. These are positions that are not ‘just’ undesirable: there are no opportunities for transit or displacement towards more favourable positions; the ‘impossibility’ of these children is totalising. Since being a student or a learner are the only available inscriptions for a child in a school, not making sense within those categories means not making sense at all. Conceived outside the borders of recognition of good/bad student logics, these pupils are disengaged from the educational categories that simultaneously signify subordination and existence (Butler, 1997b) and, in this way,

they are exposed to unintelligibility not only as learners but also as human beings (Youdell, 2006a).

This failure of recognition locates ‘impossible selves’ at risk of ‘abjection’. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Kristeva (1982) defines abjection as a position outside the symbolic order (or signifier) and therefore in radical opposition to social meaning. From a developmental perspective, this definition originates in the psychodynamic process by which the baby ceases to recognise itself as an extension of the maternal entity and begins to differentiate itself. In other words, it corresponds to the path through which the subjective position is inaugurated by entering into relation with an Other mediated by a previously determined system of signs. Far from being a smooth evolutionary step, this is conceived as a shuddering and violent process that entails a radical subjective metamorphosis. In its archaic form, it is represented by the scene in which the infant feels nausea towards the milk the mother offers/imposes. The baby’s repugnance and rejection signal the impossibility of remaining in perfect union with the mother and thoroughly assimilated with her desire. It is through the retching’s spasm and the violent vomit that it is possible to establish a separation, a limit, between the infant’s existence and their parents’ existence. At the same time, this movement also involves a fundamental cleavage of the baby with itself as they reside in their parents’ desire; expelling the nourishment entails expelling the self in the same act. This inaugural loss of one’s being drives the individual to seek an external ground of recognition in the symbolic system which inaugurates the immersion into the culture. Nevertheless, the complete overlap between signified and signifier is just apparent; something stays out of the signifier (‘the real’). There is always a lack, a remaining ‘missing part’ outside the symbolic

order challenging the recognition system that has become the “living universe” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4) and the subject’s possibility of existence. This creates the need to set a limit to that non-sense; that non-existence which can neither be admitted nor fully expunged. The nausea that emerges from the abjection fulfils this position, protecting the subject from the “fading away of all meaning and all humanity” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 18) while pointing out the constant danger of that possibility. Thereby, abjection and their modes of circulation equate the rejection of the social to the dismissal of one’s existence. While approaching the abject leads to condemnation and obliteration, its refusal implies pride and protection. The place of abjection in the constitution of the individual has its reflection in the construction and preservation of social life. Nevertheless, as much as abjection inaugurates the subject into culture, it also draws attention to the fragility and arbitrariness of social positions. Abjection poses questions of the system and its boundaries; it exposes its ambiguities, undermines the rigidity of its borders, shows the mirage behind its objects and reveals its precariousness. The abject always returns to reveal the absurdity of the logic of its own exclusion and, by this operation, threatening to collapse meaning and open possibilities of new significance (Kristeva, 1982). Drawing on Butlerian terms, we might say that abjection has the potential to expose the discursive performativity on which performances rest.

Applied to the educational field, abjection has been used to describe debased educational subjectivities and spaces that - rejected from the mainstream and formal educational terrains – are located in border positions from which they cannot be entirely erased, but neither can they be fully incorporated (Grinberg, 2011; Youdell, 2011). Furthermore, the idea of abjection has been used to describe educational

positions that are not only constituted at the borders of studenthood but also imply a potential risk of transmitting this condition to others (Kenway & Youdell, 2011; Youdell, 2011). Embedded in abjection's challenge to established boundaries is the risk of contamination (Kristeva, 1982); 'proper' social/schooling arrangements are thereby threatened (Youdell, 2011). As a protective movement, abject subjects must be resisted and repelled. In this sense, the abject is defined by Kristeva (1982) as a "jettisoned object [which] is radically excluded" (p. 2), constituted in an unthinkable sphere on the borders of annihilation.

Both impossible and abject students share, as a common ground, a position outside the terms of the prevailing subjectivating discourses and the place of vulnerability that follows. I would, nevertheless, like to make a distinction between these concepts in order to explore differential analytic categories in which students are subjectivated, especially those within the 'retained spectrum'. I will argue that abjection implies a state of existing, not only outside meaning, but more fundamentally transgressing meaning. In this way, abjection is potentially more significantly disturbing to orders and identities; it poses a greater threat to the system. Abject bodies are, in this way, in greater disarray from the technologies of the disciplinary institution. I propose that these attributes generate a more violent and passionate reaction from the endangered entity that strives for preservation. While the impossible student might typically be excluded by a more subtle dismissal (aloofness), the abject child is subjected to forceful movements of condemnation and eradication (violent separation). The system of meaning must be protected by setting a limit that cannot be recrossed. While a transit can be established from the

‘impossible’ to the ‘abject’, there is no way back from the repugnance provoked by abjection and its injurious consequences.

Although bad, impossible and abject selves share their opposition to normative subjectivities of schooling, they differ in their inscription in educational discursive terrains, the availability of their recognition, their relationship with exclusionary processes and, ultimately, their function within the educational milieu. I suggest that these definitions and their distinctions can be useful conceptual tools to make sense of the subjectivation processes constituting students inside and outside the retained spectrum. Furthermore, they might contribute to understanding how students produced within that spectrum are ‘interpellated’ and ‘recognised’ differently.

Distinction between student and learner

When applying definitions of bad/impossible/abject subjects, I will generally use the concept of ‘students’ over ‘learners’. With this distinction, I intent to emphasise the difference between children as ‘subject to schooling’ and them as ‘subjects of learning’.

Youdell’s work on the ‘impossible’ subject of education (2006a) tends to use the concept of ‘learner’ as a way to highlight the fact that, while all school-age children and young people are recognised through educational discourse as entitled to receive educational provision, not all of them are constituted as capable of learning in contexts of marketisation, high stakes test and the logics of attainment. I will subscribe to this definition of ‘the learner’ as related to academic practices and outcomes. However, what I would like to stress by the word *student* is not children’s right to schooling or legal mandates of school attendance, but rather recognisability

as ‘subject to schooling’ beyond notions of intelligence, competency and performance. By this, I mean ‘studenthood’ as related to a developmental and moral individual ‘fabric’ aligned with educational and schooling goals and needs. When reflecting on the categories that subjectivate children from the retained spectrum, this last concept seems a more relevant way of defining progression than actual *learning*. Although promotion regulations in Chile establish that retention is mainly based on grades attained, I will argue that academic achievement – the constitutive measure of learning from which the ‘learner’ emerges - is not necessarily the most important aspect implicated in the functioning of grade retention.

Agency, change and resistance

Along with recognising the coercive (and productive) limits of discourse, this project conceives the social and educational field as mobile and mutable. Agency, change and resistance are embedded in Foucault’s and Butler’s thinking. In what follows, I examine how both authors address this dimension in their work.

Foucauldian resistance

Foucault’s work on systems of power/knowledge and the formation of subjects under discursive practices underscore domination and submission. The subject is inevitably formed within and through relations of power, which are part of its own constitution and from which s/he cannot ‘scape’ (Foucault, 1990). Although this seems to leave us in a ‘dystopic world’ in which there is little space for change or

refusal of processes of subjugation, the Foucauldian project also shows us how the contingency and revocability of our present open possibilities for its transgression (Ball, 2013). This means that the way things are in the present is arbitrary and can be altered. In an interview conducted in 1982, Foucault contends

> My role — and that is too emphatic a word — is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. (…) It is one of my targets to show people that a lot of things that are part of their landscape — that people think are universal — are the result of some very precise historical changes. All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made. (R. Martin, 1988, pp. 10-11)

The political task of philosophy is defined in terms of the recognition of contingency, the identification of the discretional limits of the present, and the commitment to the possibility of forthcoming self and social transformation (Patton, 2010). This implies spaces of agency and resistance within the circulation of discourses. Moreover, resistance, Foucault claims, is inherent to power. As much as instruments and effects of power, discourses can also be a point of defiance that expose and undermine existing relations of power (Foucault, 1990). This groundbreaking function of discourse is intertwined with the potential of human agency. While subjects are the site of power enactments, they are also the terrain of its resistance (Mills, 2003, as cited in Ball, 2013; Youdell, 2011). Apparently trivial everyday practices and individual interactions, allow spaces for disruption (Foucault, 1990). Individuals can antagonise and refuse practices (particularly those of governmentality), as well as they can engage in practices of resistance. The last

involves a conscious engagement in ‘practices of the self’ which, operating at the limits of subjectivity, provide opportunities to interrupt oneself, flee from familiar ways of thought and act, unveil the assumptions upon which they rest, make ‘ethico-political choices’, and become differently (Foucault, 1997, as cited in Ball, 2013; Youdell, 2006a, 2006b, 2011).

These forms of resistance are primarily local, unstable and itinerant. They typically appear as uncoordinated points producing fractures in social stratifications and individual unities. They can collectively impact power relationships in this cluttered form. However, the (more unusual) radical ruptures require their integration, that is, “the strategic codification of these points of resistance” (Foucault, 1990, p. 96). Besides, these resistances are never fully achieved operations but permanent ongoing partially realized processes (Patton, 2010).

Relevant consequences for policies and schooling arise from these opportunities for resistance and self-formation. People in the school, educators and pupils (or larger conglomerates), can engage in practices that enable new forms of subjectivity (Youdell, 2006a, 2006b). Agency, conflict and creativity – and not only constraints - must be considered when examining educational practices, policies and strategies (Ball, 1993, 2015) such as those related to grade promotion. While it is undeniable that the questions that guide this project – focused on the productive power entangled with grade retention – situates injury centrally, Foucault’s conception of resistance as inherent to power denotes the significance of problematising our *landscape* and considering other political possibilities.

Butlerian performative politics and discursive agency

Butler's notion of performativity offers political potential aligned with the Foucauldian project of interrogating the present and reveal spaces of disruption. A performative understanding of identity, as an effect instead of as a foundational status, opens possibilities of action and transformation. Although recognition of the phantasmatic status of the self – and the consequent rejection of the idea of ready-made subjects - does not constitute a political revolution in itself, Butler (1990) suggests that subversion can happen through a profound transformation of the understanding of the possible and the real. Such an alteration can originate in the interrogation of the constitution, functioning, effects and possibilities of identity categories.

This deconstructive thinking, as well as the following actions aiming to disrupt the institutions of monopolised power as the exclusive channel through which norms of recognisability are settled, can be identified with Butler's notion of 'performative politics' (Butler 1997a; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). This viewpoint opens a political space in which hegemonic discourses can be displaced and reinscribed, and subjectivation processes can be unsettled. New possibilities of recognition and legitimacy become available to knowledge, meanings, and subjects previously 'unauthorised' within particular contexts (Butler 1997a).

The notion of 'discursive agency' describes political practices of dissent exercised by the subjectivated subject. On the one hand, this term recognises the constraints of agency as an effect of power. On the other hand, it acknowledges that a subjects' discursive constitution allows unanticipated reinscriptions (Butler 1997a):

> This discursive agency is itself the product of subjectivation; having been constituted as a recognizable subject in discourse, this subject can deploy discourse to call up her/him self again or to call up another. (Youdell, 2011, p. 44)

Key aspects of this process are collectivism and repetition. According to Butler (1990) “all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat” (p. 198). On the one hand, the strength and (provisional) success of a performative act depends on the concealed citation of constitutive conventions as a reiteration of previous and authoritative practices. On the other hand, the disjunction between utterance and meaning means that iterations can occur outside original contexts, and precedented connotations and functions can be unsettled (Butler, 1997a). Since this mechanism of production restricts as much as it enables, intervening in the regulated process of repetition that rigidifies meaning necessarily implies practices of repetitive subversive resignification (Butler, 1990, 1997a). Although particular individuals can engage in these practices of counter-mobilization, the engagement of larger communities in public insurrectionary practices has, in Butler’s (2003) view, greater chances of altering normative meaning. By this, sources of repetition can be expanded towards a collective political responsibility. To Butler, the goal of performative politics is not - and cannot be – to transcend power to reach an original, pre-existence status. Rather, what should be pursued is a redeployment of power and a subversive appropriation of its discursive categories both to facilitate a less violent expression, and to open opportunities for partial recognitions susceptible to permanent problematisation (Butler, 1990; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). In this way, Butler partially address “the problem of explaining how resistance is possible” (Patton, 2000, p. 74). She offers a potential way of reflecting on the ways in which

self-aware individuals engage in Foucauldian struggles against subjection (Youdell, 2006b) and how ‘resistant’ strategic codifications can be deployed by shaking and redeploying existing terrains of legitimation (Butler 1997a).

When applied to the school, these ideas provide opportunities to think about how educational identities can be reinscribed and ways in which people in the school participate in these processes. In her book “Impossible Bodies, Impossible Selves”, Youdell (2006a) provides examples from school fieldwork of students and teachers deploying performative practices through which they might be constituted differently. She exposes the mobility of categories such as ‘badly behaved’, ‘less able’, or ‘disabled’ that seem to be fixed within school contexts. In parallel, examples of practices through which students who have been subjected to such categories challenge those inscriptions through discursive agency are provided. The volatility, limits and hazards implicated in such reinscriptions are also exposed. A significant issue in this regard is the need to remain within the boundaries of ‘viable studenthood’ - that is, to remain intelligible - even while striving to open possibilities to become otherwise as learners.

Overall, performative politics provides a ground to think about schools as places implicated in mechanisms of hurtful subjectivation and power reproduction, as well as spaces of opportunity in which those processes can be interrupted by discursive agency. In this way, Butler’s performative disruptions, as well as Foucault’s fields of resistance, provide spaces to think about practices and identities configured by grade retention not only as coercive but also as potentially ‘otherwise’.

Limitations of Foucauldian and Butlerian notions of resistance/agency

Both Foucault's and Butler's notions of resistance are essentially focused on the active and deliberate agency of individuals. Possibilities for change, in this way, are primarily concentrated in subjectivated forms of struggle and refusal. This approach has been criticised for its tendency to restrict transformation and political action to subjects' endeavours formulated within the limits of their disciplinary and symbolic constitutions (Ringrose, 2011; Youdell, 2011[50]). Although subjects' capacity to act and influence their contexts are not entirely determined, their discursive repertoires are constrained (as their agency is interior to power), and this has significant consequences for the parameters through which social productivity is thought.

From a critical posthumanism/new materialism approach, Jane Bennett (2010) highlights the limitations of power structures to account for the agency of non-human components. Structures (and their material components), tend to be simultaneously considered as resulting from human wills and intentions, and as the background that enables (acting passively) or constrains (acting negatively) human agency. Even when materialities can be recognised as part of discursive formations, their capacity to act seems hard to address from Foucauldian or Butlerian perspectives. Furthermore, Bennett associates this absence of matter vitality and interaction between heterogeneous elements (or 'actants') with systemic conditions of constraint and fixity. She considers that a point of departure based on structures in which action

50 "Inside post-structural thinking this has seen a tendency towards reading power as only disciplinary, resistance as necessarily curtailed in advance, and subjection as foreclosing agency and political action" (Youdell, 2011, p. 52).

is restricted to people's intentional choices emphasises obstruction and conditioning while hindering creative activity and movement.

In his work from a Foucauldian approach, Stephen Ball has also acknowledged – together with the several contributions and value of Foucault's theory - the dangers of falling into a 'naïve pessimism' (1993, p. 15) defined by the restrictions imposed by discursive frameworks. In his analysis of 'policies as discourse' (developed in more detail in the previous chapter), Ball (1993) recognises that such a definition emphasises rules and structural constraints over interpretation and enactments. This issue becomes evident when using a discursive entry point to explore policies in actual English secondary schools in the book 'How Schools Do Policy' (Ball et al., 2012). In this text, the authors note the challenges of recognising and incorporating struggle, counteraction and space for alternatives – in terms of resistance – when analysing evidence within a Foucauldian landscape. As the possibility of alteration is fundamentally bounded (from this perspective) to human agency, educational actors' attachments to contemporary neo-liberal arrangements and constraints are made (at least partially) responsible for the lack of accounts of mobility and struggle. Nevertheless, drawing on the previously mentioned critique to Foucault's and Butler's notions of agency and resistance, we could argue that the difficulty of finding forms of differentiation and dissent might rather be somewhat related to the conditions of the analytic viewpoint.

Along with indicating the limitations of this approach, we should not lose sight of its remarkable contributions and analytic potential. Without denying the constraints implicated in power relationships, we must note that, at the core of Foucault and Butler's work, is the idea that the 'truths' in which we live and the identities by which

we are recognised are contingent and modifiable. Moreover, individuals can participate in such alterations through ‘practices of the self’ and ‘discursive agency’. These scholars’ reconceptualisations of notions of ‘resistance’ and ‘agency’ are substantial steps towards thinking the social field as a terrain in which things can be otherwise and people can be part of such transformations. Incorporating these ideas when making sense of schooling processes can provide valuable opportunities to think education beyond its current boundaries.

Likewise, the question about the productivity of grade retention not only seeks to interrogate their current implications but also its further possibilities. I suggest that the notion of subjects’ resistance is a relevant analytical tool for exploring points of departure from this current state of policy/practice affairs. At the same time, the limitations previously acknowledged must be considered. They make it essential to integrate complementary conceptual platforms to reflect on how grade retention's arrangements might be diversified and transformed.

Deleuze – Assemblage, desire, affect and becomings

The ideas of assemblage and the ‘rhizomatic’ (in Deleuzo-Guattarian conceptualisations) provide significant tools to reflect on grade retention’s productivity from a complementary viewpoint. Not only do they contribute to stepping beyond the previously identify limitations in the Foucauldian and Butlerian conceptual devices, but they also introduce novel ideas from which to approach this research project.

To consider grade retention from this perspective means thinking of it beyond the subject and beyond socio-historical power relationships/structures. The

phenomenon of grade retention can thus be conceived in terms of multiplicity and potentiality, as a ‘complex social formation’ that combines non-hierarchically, self-sufficient and interdependent material, affective and symbolic components. Although grade retention is configured, to a large extent, as a site of segmentation and restriction, the operations by which it enters educational arrangements and crystallises them are not fixed. There is a dynamism in the circulation of the forces that constitute and are constituted by grade retention that the vocabulary provided by the assemblage theory helps us to explore and account for. Furthermore, this approach opens up possibilities for the disruption and reconfiguration of those arrangements. It opens a window to examine the conditions of social and political change, not as human organised political response to domination and conflict, but as a multiplicity of lines of flights intrinsic to social forces inviting continuous flow and movement.

Assemblage and rhizome

The concept of assemblage originates from a ‘rhizomatic’ understanding of production. The notion of the rhizome challenges traditional (arborescent) systems and structures defined by delimited, univocal and pre-established connections between different points hierarchically positioned. In contrast to this binary, teleological and reproductive logic, the rhizome suggests a way to understand processes renouncing authority, hierarchy, uniformity and permanence. The rhizome is an open field of productive activity with no organisation, no space-time or semantic restrictions and without beginning, direction or aim. It stands as an a-centered system

made of productive connections without order or positions and in which channels of communications or individual definitions do not pre-exist (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983).

> The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, exclusively alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be”, but the rhizome is woven together with conjunctions: “and… and… and…” In this conjunction there is enough force to shake up and uproot the verb “to be”. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, pp. 57-58)

The rhizome does not have a beginning or end; it is always in the middle, made of plateaus (intensities that avoid foundations or orientations towards culmination points). Foreign to deep structure and reproduction, the rhizome is always susceptible to transformation, expansion, discontinuity, rupture and reconstitution (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). In the context of this decentred and anarchic space, some processes are invested by provisional forms of meaning and order. Emerging from there, assemblages are constructed as relatively organised and recognisable terrains of delineable production which nevertheless refuse to resign the multiple and indeterminate rhizomatic character inscribed in their origins (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

In this way, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of assemblage provides a tool to understand social complexity far from traditional understandings characterised by unity, hierarchy, stability, binarism, homogeneity and fixed differences. As an analytic device, an ‘assemblage’ refers to a combination of multiple material and symbolic components interconnected in distinctive and productive ways. Individuals, institutions, legislation, policies, politics, semiotic systems, social and cultural forms, representations, discourses, subjectivities and affectivities might be all part of the forces that interact in any particular assemblage.

The distinctive modes by which these heterogeneous elements converge delineate the terrains of understanding and activity enabled by their singular arrangements (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Youdell, 2010a, 2011). The focus of analysis is shifted from essence and unity to potential and multiplicity (McGimpsey, 2017).

Assemblages are related to, but not determined by, their components' properties, since those properties refer to other interacting elements. The influence of the whole over the components is at the level of capacities. It enables and constrains performance and offers its components risk and opportunity. The emphasis is not on the abiding attributes of the whole or its elements, but the network qualities (strength, reciprocity, stability, density, etc.) and its productive force (DeLanda, 2006). Just as components hold potential connections with multiple assemblages, the assemblages are also open and exposed to relations with other arrangements. In this process, assemblages stand as open-endedness fields, always being produced and always being broken down as production (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

Some processes reinforce the stability of assemblages' elements while others arouse a departure from the existing territory opening opportunities of transformation. These operations have been called territorialization and deterritorialization processes, respectively. Furthermore, the same component might be involved in both contrasting movements by exercising different capacities. Territorialization is related to increases in the assemblage's internal homogeneity and the sharpness of its limits. Consolidating this operation there are genes and linguistic entities performing coding processes. Deterritorialization, on the other hand, relates to the increase of internal heterogeneity and the reduction or disruption of the solidity of boundaries. These are related processes. Every territory might be potentially decoded, as each identity

alteration or discontinuity is susceptible to being reterritorialized once again (DeLanda, 2006). The last does not mean a return to the origin but rather the onset of new territorialization processes (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

The different movements that constitute every arrangement interact with the different kinds of lines that comprise it. Molar lines (or 'sedentary' lines) refer to large, governing and rigid formations involving categorisation, distinction and hierarchy in which everything/everybody has a particular place (for example large structures or identity categories). These formations are connected to territorialization and reterritorialization movements, as well as overcoding operations that block movement and delineate the social as unities of fixed meaning, dominant organised forms of knowledges, and established orders. A more local and fluid form of division characterises molecular formations (or 'migrant' lines) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). These are lines of intermediate fashion. Youngblood (2010) describes them as tiny singularities that destabilise molar, dominant structures. They are part of the becoming or micro-becoming processes. Their forms of deterritorialization are, however, relative and partial, susceptible to reterritorializing forces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). Lines of flight (or 'nomad' lines), for their part, flee from and potentially scatter assemblages of meanings, representations, practices and subjectivations and offer new 'becomings' (Youdell, 2010a, 2011). As lines of rupture, they operate by disturbing the local equilibrium of power through deterritorialization processes and generating open spheres of possibility with unknown origins and destinations. Connected to movements of departure from 'sameness' and divergence from the norm, these lines are assemblages' primary and more decisive elements, as

they define their capacity for doing or ‘becoming otherwise’ (i.e. ‘minoritarian-becomings’) (Deleuze & Guattari 1983; Patton 2000).

These movements and lines, defined by Deleuze and Guattari as constitutive of social formations, not only facilitate the incorporation of heterogeneous components and their interactions to the analysis but also provide a vocabulary to express functioning and identify mechanisms involved in processes of transformation. Productivity is not only announced, but it is also dissected and rebuilt through its operational forms. At the same time that this understanding foregrounds the movements behind operations, it blurs direction and organisation.

Assemblages can, nevertheless, also be delimitated in fixed ways, have restricted relations to the outside, and tend to striation, reterritorialization, scaling and governing processes. A representation of these sorts of arrangements are called ‘abstract machines’. They are concrete operations that order the social field by organising dominant statements and forms of knowledge and establishing segments and hierarchies. Their efficacy within the social field depends on their enactment by the State apparatus (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). This kind of interaction of forces, or assemblages, in which the frontiers of a certain state of affairs are reinforced, can be associated with the Foucauldian theoretical notion of ‘dispositif’ (Legg, 2011; Patton, 2000). The ‘dispositif’ (translated into English as ‘apparatus’) has been defined as a concrete/contingent social milieu whose relations of forces (power) support and are supported by particular types of knowledge (Foucault, 1977b; Peltonen, 2004). Such a regime is composed of a network of entangled discursive and non-discursive elements (institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, discourses, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic

propositions) that, in a given historical moment, have the concrete function of responding to an urgency (Foucault, 1977b). The concept incorporates an interrogation into how diverse elements converge into a determined social arrangement of knowledge, power, truth, and subjectivation, and how its forces operate over subjects and social forms to define the meaning 'emanating from' them (Foucault, 1990).

While multiple convergences of these terms can be identified, in line with the commonalities of the Foucauldian and Deleuzian theoretical projects[51], there are fundamental distinctions between them in terms of their approach to the operation of social forces and their understanding of social transformation. As part of this, there is a significant difference between them of scale and scope. The 'dispositif' refers to a 'historically specific social totality'; a socio-historical regime from which meaning is captured. Examples of social formations which have been defined and explained through this term are the school, the prison, Christianity, the French Revolution (Deleuze, 1992), sexuality, and marriage (Peltonen, 2004). The general application of the concept to 'thorough' social formations stresses the concept's use at a macro scale[52]. The notion of assemblage, on the other hand, is inherently flexible in this

51 Both, Foucault's and Deleuze's conceptualisations are influenced by Contemporary Complexity Theory and Systems Theory alike. Their productive nature and the complexity of social forces configuring them, make dispositifs and assemblages close concepts. Besides, the connection of those terms is aligned with the convergence between both scholars' political and philosophical commitments to the recognition of the limits of the present (and the past) and subsequent possible different futures. Dispositifs and assemblages are formed by generative forces that act and interact in an open and relational fashion – resisting the conception of social encounters as dialectic oppositions of forces or as reduced to a fundamental lack (Hickey-Moody & Rasmussen, 2009; Patton, 2000, 2010).

52 In an attempt to present the term in a more 'local' and 'contained' fashion, Agamben (2009) redefines the apparatus as "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (p. 14). He aims to incorporate 'small devices' (such as cigarettes, pens, navigation and computers) – in addition to major structures of meaning – into the idea of the dispositif. Although this approach allows for greater flexibility in terms of scale, this reinterpretation strongly overlaps with alternative Foucauldian concepts such as 'discourse' or 'disciplinary technology', diminishing its precision and, ultimately, its explicative power.

regard. Since assemblages are defined by capacities, network forces and open interactions (instead of the attributes of their components), they accommodate diverse social processes irrespective of their extension or scale. This makes the concept more suitable for addressing entities of an intermediate sort, such as policies and practices. Even different aspects of their productivity can be considered through distinctive or interacting assemblages, represented through an interspersed and interconnected arrangement. The operations and flows occurring within them can be considered in terms of the extent to which they stabilise, crystallise or diversify grade retention's existent territory.

Another relevant distinction between these concepts is the prominence they grant to human agency. As I began to delineate above and develop further in the next section, within the Foucauldian perspective human subjectivity has a foundational gravity while assemblage theory is fundamentally a-subjective. In relation to that, dispositifs appear to be more hierarchical and organised structures (forces over subjects) with a more defined objective (a concrete 'dominant strategic function') (Foucault, 1977b). The Deleuzo-Guattarian project, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with assemblages as terrains of dynamism, indeterminacy and open-ended mutability (Patton, 2000). Acknowledging the relevant parallels between the two concepts, we can say that while dispositifs allude to social regimes that constrain and restrict, assemblages *typically* refer to possibilities, change and operations. An emblematic example of the last are the revolutionary 'war machines' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). While lines of flight are part of every assemblage, war machines are specific ensembles that are radically committed with creative process of mutation and multiplicity, as "the conditions of actualisation of absolute

deterritorialisation and the means by which relative deterritorialisation occurs" (Patton, 2000, p. 110). They can take numerous forms, from new technological inventions to revolutions at the level of affects, judgement or jurisprudence. These territories' productive operations are exterior to the State. Moreover, they are constituted as the reverse of the apparatus of capture and domination broadly embodied in state formations, and are in permanent tension with them (Patton, 2000). While the last strive for self-preservation and immutability, war machines pursue diffusion and disintegration of the domination apparatus and even of themselves. As nomad and a-historical, its enterprise it is not to last but to perturb and alter before vanishing. Self-destruction is not foreign to its trajectory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). This takes us to the risks involved in endeavours of departure and becoming-otherwise. When war machines incarnate in 'people of the line´- 'nomads' marginal subjects pursuing lines of flight and rejecting subjectivation - annihilation also looms. These movements might draw territories in which their primary conditions of self-existence are dismissed (Youdell, 2011). Moreover, these lines are not agreements or itineraries but uncertain ventures. Their developments and products are potentially unexpected and inconclusive, as well as hazardous (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). While the risks implicated in the departure from the terrain of segmented lines give sense to the robustness of the molar structures and their arborescent ground (Youdell, 2011), they do not make these movements less worthy or less necessary (Renold & Ringrose, 2011).

In terms of the grade retention problematic, the rhizomatic theory provides a fertile ground from which to approach the operation of productive educational forces in interaction and prospective becomings. This perspective offers conceptual and

analytic tools with which to question the type of arrangements implicated in grade retention as well as their contingent movements. It also stresses the question of the function of retention, that is, what it does to identities and to the educational milieu (instead of the focus on what it is as an abiding whole).

Grade retention can be thus conceived in terms of multiplicity and potentiality, as a complex combination of self-sufficient material and symbolic components interconnected in distinctive and productive ways. Promotion regulations, pedagogical practices, academic outcomes, affects and emotions, perceptions of risk and danger, educational identities, neoliberal values, ideas about normality and development, monetary flows, educational opportunities and material precarities can be all considered part of a complex, contradictory and contingent assemblage that articulates grade retention as a field of understanding and activity. The plasticity of this perspective also facilitates the incorporation and interaction between the different conceptual elements previously considered. Subjectivation processes, discourse, power, performativity and disciplinary technologies can all be incorporated within the notion of assemblage.

Desire and affect

Deleuze and Guattari's focus on dynamic operations and becomings relates to the notion of 'desire' as the productive and organising principle that determines the existence of any assemblage. Assemblages are themselves a composition or arrangement of desire (Buchanan, 2021).

Desire, for these scholars, is conceive as a revolutionary flow of forces, human or non-human, that push for more connections, for more productive relations,

and hence, for the possibility of change. Desire resists any mode of capture or territorialization. Deterritorialization, by contrast, is operated by desire. This conceptualisation deviates from a psychoanalytic understanding of desire as centred on lost, sexuality or subjectivity (Patton, 2000). Instead, the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of desire has parallels with Foucault's definition of power, in terms of its pervasive, generative and all-embracing nature (Hickey-Moody & Rasmussen, 2009). Both produce subjects and 'reality', and both are expressions of capacities and interchanges between forces which are implicated in all social and political processes. They are distinctive, however, because of the chronological force that defines them. While desire focuses on possibilities of future transformation, power is anchored to the socio-historical relations that configure it. As part of this, 'desire' detaches from a reading of social forces centred on discipline. These convergencies and distinctions also have implications for the way both scholars conceive the nature of contingency within social arrangements. On the one hand, there is a shared understanding of the social as made by temporal relationships and their rules of interaction; structure is neither stable nor complete. On the other hand, while Foucault's contingency operates within a socio-historical frame, Deleuze locates contingency as the primary material of every social formation, always happening in the present time.

Another discrepancy between these perspectives is the emphasis they give to the human component. The a-subjective character of desire contrasts with the subjective forces that circulate in power (Patton, 2000). Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) theory suggests that the subject is de-centred from social processes. Subjectivation is considered just another of the multiple forces that configure

assemblages. Agency does not only ‘belong’ to the subject, but it is expanded to the material as an equally relevant force (DeLanda, 2006). Matter encompasses vitality in a way that can be difficult to address in perspectives focussed on discourse and power structures (Bennett, 2010). In this sense, this approach brings non-subjective elements to the ‘front’ of the analysis of social processes and facilitates their consideration in the interactive processes of heterogeneous forces. This attribute opens a space to explore the conditions of social and political change and the conception of freedom as the recognition of contingency outside the notion of ‘human resistance’. Deterritorialization and becomings are not individual or organised political responses to domination and conflict, but a multiplicity of lines of flights intrinsic to social forces inviting an incessant flow and movement (Patton 2000; Youdell, 2011). Central to this understanding is the relationship between desire, intensities and affects. Deleuze’s notion of desire involves an inner principle of increase by which, like an expansive force, desire seeks its own enhancement and augmentation. This process of expansion depends on the range and degree of intensities available and bodies’ sensitivity to different kinds of intensive states (Patton, 2000). Such intensities are “the primary mode in which desire consumes itself” and “the primary mode in which a body of whatever kind is affected” (Patton, 2000, p. 72). The affective dimension is key to this process. According to the principle of increase, the power of a body of whatever kind depends on its capacity to enter into relationships with other bodies and engage with their power, that is, to *affect* other bodies and *be affected* by them (Deleuze, 1983, as cited in Patton, 2000).

Affects do not belong to a specific body, they precede and constitute it (Youdell & Armstrong, 2011). Affects can be understood as an amalgam of bodily

pre-personal and pre-discursive sensations and intensities, social rather than individual, and escaping from the boundaries of symbolic orders and unitary subjects that provide an anti-subjectivation tool for becomings (Youdell, 2011). They are a visceral response to an encounter, separated from or prior to, thought, interpretation or subjective recognition; independent from discourse. Affects are about capacity, relations, and influence. They are not about emotion or how people report feeling but engagements with other bodies' powers (Patton, 2000; Youdell & Armstrong, 2011); emotion might come later to capture those intensities into symbolic registers (Kenway & Youdell, 2011). It is at this level of understanding and regulation that affects acquire their subjectivating character (Youdell, 2011).

Although de-centred from social arrangements, the subject and its mechanisms of production are not erased from the Deleuzo-Guattarian approach. Subjectivation is part of assemblages and, as such, is also implicated and influenced by their movements, operations and possibilities of becoming. Subjectivity in itself can be conceived in terms of molar lines that constitute identity, but also consider the moves of desire that inaugurate non-segmentary molecular trajectories and even lines of flight from persistent and crystallised categories. Deterritorialization can operate destabilising the rigid lines of subjectivation and open possibilities of becoming otherwise subjects (Youdell, 2011).

Human freedom, from this perspective, it is not about the capacity to pursue and fulfil one's fundamental desires but about creative transformation and metamorphosis. Deleuze and Guattari draw upon the idea of 'critical freedom' which emphasises agents' potential to question, detach and transgress the acquired and accepted structure of values, and to move towards new possibilities of doing and

being. In this way, personal desires, aims and preferences are profoundly altered rather than satisfied (Patton, 2000). As with any form of becoming, flight from subjectivation is an ambivalent and risky affair. It is a movement from existing definitions of who we are and what we must be towards an uncertain and open-ended process of self mutation (Patton, 2000; Youdell, 2011).

This approach to social phenomenon is an opportunity to think about grade retention as a complex circuit of desire complementing the Foucauldian understanding centred on power, disciplinary technologies and subjective forces anchored in historical processes. The a-subjective perspective of affect facilitates the inclusion of heterogeneous elements' agency in the analysis of productive forces entangled with grade retention operations. Moreover, it provides a guide to examining social intensities: how those diverse agents meet, engage and influence each other in the daily configuration and functioning of promotion processes beyond symbolic and discursive operations.

Finally, Deleuzo-Guattarian desire locates the retention phenomenon within a field of transformation defined by dynamic connections that push towards movement and change. Such a perspective encourages a consideration of how the composition of elements configuring grade retention can be modified and how alternatives to the processes of subjectivation and subjection related to its operation can unfold.

Pedagogies of becoming

The conceptual definitions provided by Deleuze and Guattari can be powerful tools to think about schools, educational identities and possibilities for future alteration. Deborah Youdell's (2010a, 2011) work on 'pedagogies of becoming' is a

significant example of this. In the context of an ethnography in an English 'special' secondary school for boys designated as having 'social, emotional and behavioural difficulties' - and drawing upon Deleuzian concepts of lines of flights and deterritorialization together with Judith's Butler ideas about performative politics and discursive agency, Youdell delineates an 'anti-subjectivating' political educational experience of resistance and reinscription. 'Pedagogies of becoming' refers to processes that challenge negative fixed identities within educational spaces by unsettling and altering the borders of intelligibility (Youdell, 2010a, 2011). Affectivities, and their capacity to exceed symbolic orders, play a fundamental role in this process. From this perspective, there is a possibility for children and young people to become students and learners moment by moment and without reference to prior persistent constitutions or the need to maintain them in the future (Youdell, 2010a). To children whose school identities are linked to inequalities and exclusions, or those whose status as students have been undermined, this might be a place of recuperation (Youdell, 2011). This understanding not only provides opportunities through which students (and other school community members) can depart from - or at least call into question - abiding fixed identities, but also enables educational spaces to become less attached to normative, exclusionary and binary constitutions (Youdell, 2010a).

'Pedagogies of becoming' are available to people of the school as they can be deployed through educators' and students' practices and reflexivities. At the same time, these pedagogies tend not to be definitive structural transformations but rather partial provisional and fluid fields of alternative and expanded recognition (Youdell, 2010a, 2011). The transgressions and possibilities they offer are not free from risk;

they are produced in constant tension with the subjectivation processes and the rules of intelligibility we are all vitally attached to (Youdell, 2010b).

Youdell's exploration on the challenges and opportunities related to identities defined as 'socially, emotionally and behaviourally difficult' provides significant hints for examining the way in which students from the retained spectrum are constituted. Drawing on 'becomings' complements notions of resistance and discursive agency when thinking about ways in which the current framework defining grade retention (and identities configurated by it) can be scattered and transformed. Meanwhile, local and contingent intelligibility and recognition operations and 'becomings' processes in a special secondary school for boys in England are probably very different from those that can be deployed in the context of mainstream primary education in Chilean schools. Unsettling normative meanings or becoming 'nomads' probably does not carry the same significance in the two settings; there are other potential risks and other opportunities opened too. This suggests the need for caution when considering 'pedagogies of becoming' in the present project. Ethical issues must be taken into account when considering the uncertain ventures of becoming-otherwise in relation to young and vulnerable people and other school members in this novel setting.

Grade retention ensemble

The different conceptual tools explicated here are all relevant for exploring the productivity of grade retention beyond its usual understandings within the public policy and research domains (addressed in the previous chapter). These concepts and ideas provide novel paths to illuminate how grade retention is 'done' by schools

and what it ‘does’ to schools. At the same time, they delimit frameworks of meaning and frontiers of comprehension. This project uses them in an articulated and, at the same time, flexible way, expecting to overcome some of their constraints (or at least mitigate them).

I suggest that the complexity with which grade retention operates through the educational milieu exceeds the understanding that each of the concepts can achieve in isolation. Grade retention can be conceived as being involved simultaneously in a number of processes including: educational discourses, power operations, desire, identity recognition and intelligibility, subjectivation processes, categorisations, and affects. The way in which it functions can be understood as discursive, as a technology of disciplinary power, as performative, as a device of dispossession, and as an assemblage. I will argue that no one of these frameworks thoroughly address the productivity of grade retention. Rather, each of them contributes essential (although partial) elements to a deep and original understanding of the grounds, mechanisms, and implications of grade retention.

Additionally, I would like to suggest that these different approaches work synergistically when the ethics of researching with children and vulnerable people is considered. Foucault, Butler and Kristeva’s formulations confer the subject a central place, positioning the modes in which it is constituted and it relates to its environment at the core of social issues. I consider this a fundamental stance when facing the question of grade retention’s productivity and its implications for primary students’ subjectivation. Complementarily, assemblage theory provides the opportunity to reflect on the subject (and their entanglements to other elements of the social milieu) from a diverse perspective that incorporate a distinctive sensitivity towards moments

of destabilisation and the diversification of educational categories and identities. This openness to the unsettling and interruption of subjectivating mechanisms that engender precarious lives and sustain inequalities adds a necessary and relevant ethical component to this project. At the same time, when applying Deleuze's approach, in conjunction with the previously mentioned formulations, the ethical risks implicated in de-centring the study subjects from the social process are avoided or at least reduced.

As a reflection of the hybrid and complex approach I have outlined here, I will refer to grade retention as an 'ensemble'. The research thereby explores the production and productivity of the 'grade retention ensemble'.

By using the term 'grade retention ensemble', I aim to highlight an understanding of grade retention in terms of capacities and interactions between multiple and heterogeneous forces while avoiding the capture or saturation of meaning by a single approach. By doing this I hope to enable the integration of the conceptual tools presented and the transit across them to explore distinctive facets of the phenomenon of grade retention from different (and complementary) viewpoints. In this way, the 'grade retention ensemble' emphasises productivity, complexity, diversity, relationality, potentiality, and plasticity within a framework in which diverse forces/processes of subjectivation/performativity, discursive and non-discursive elements, power operations, disciplinary arrangements, subjective and non-subjective agency, and different channels of transformation are all in play.

I acknowledge that 'ensemble' is a term that has been previously used in educational research. Ball (1993), for instance, has referred to 'policy ensembles' as a collection of policies and related elements (such as the market, management, and

performativity) that “exercise power through a production of 'truth' and 'knowledge'” (p. 14). The term has been associated in this way to a Foucauldian discursive formation. Although the last is certainly a significant conceptual device to explore the research questions, I am interested in the idea of ensemble as a more heterogeneous and hybrid theoretical and practical arrangement. The idea of ‘grade retention ensemble’ within this project does not directly follow Ball’s approach, neither takes up the notion of ensemble as a synonym for assemblage as is the case in some Deleuzian work or mirror any other preceding reference to the notion of ensemble. It intends to use it, rather, in a novel manner.

At the same time, I recognise the connection between the term ‘ensemble’ and the ideas of dispositif and assemblage previously discussed. Furthermore, I acknowledge that this encompassing approach to the phenomenon under study is formulated after the fashion of recognised scholars who have used similar hybrid frameworks to make sense of the educational field, including Deborah Youdell (e.g. 2011), Anna Hickey-Moody (e.g. 2013), Maria Tamboukou (e.g. 2006, 2003), and Deana Leahy (e.g. Leahy & Malins, 2015). I have drawn on their work in my examination of educational and pedagogical spaces and the engagement with the concepts set out, and as an inspiration to employ these as a creative, inquisitive, and unpredictable device[53].

53 It should be noted that some definitions drawn on in this chapter are reiteratively presented throughout the manuscript, particularly within the analytic chapters. I have avoided overloading the text with explanations and repetitive references. Unless otherwise stated, they always refer to the ideas set out here.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

A methodological becoming

This Methodological Chapter could have been written as if the research strategy and the researcher position had been stable and coherent throughout the project; as if I had defined a methodology before developing the research and it had remained unaltered through to writing the last word of the manuscript. However, nothing could be further from my perception of the way things happened. This research did not end as I had initially planned it. In fact, very little went 'according to plan' or to my prior expectations. To explain this process briefly, I might say that I departed from the grids of intelligibility through which I conceived this project in 2015. Furthermore, I have left behind the grids of intelligibility through which I used to understand educational research and the position of the educational researcher.

This research has been a process of becoming, and it keeps becoming as I write these words, as an ongoing travelling. In this chapter, I invite you to walk with me throughout this journey as I attempt to articulate the steps I took to explore my research questions as well as the ideas, concepts, positions, experiences and scholars that helped me to approach them. Proceeding in this way does not feel especially comfortable. However, this journey has taught me that seeking comfort is not necessarily the most productive course of action.

An interpretivist start

This project started as what has been called a ‘conventional’ or ‘traditional’ humanist qualitative inquiry (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018; St. Pierre, 2011). It aimed to explore grade retention practices and to ‘uncover’ or ’apprehend’ their practical and symbolic value as well as their implications for the educational (pedagogical and relational) process through a close examination of what people in school were doing and saying (experiences, perspectives and representations) regarding the phenomena studied. I envisioned I would find a stable meaning that was ‘available’ to be discovered, interpreted, and represented. I expected to be able to address such meaning through word codification and (what I see now as) a fairly limited ‘conceptual toolbox’.

I hoped this methodological position would guide me to a deeper and more contextualised understanding of grade retention, away from the quantitative-positivist approach that has traditionally been used to explore the phenomenon with a focus on objectivity, representativeness, generalisation, and prediction (Saunders et al., 2003; Thomas, 2009).

Within the frameworks of this ‘interpretative paradigm’, I conceived the researcher as a reflexive agent whose subjectivity was implicated in the process of discovery (in contrast to the positivistic ideal of researcher objectivity and detachment) (Robson, 2011). However, I did not problematise this subjectivity; I believed that it would be possible to ‘deal’ with it by making the researcher’s position clear and explicit when reporting the research findings (Thomas, 2016). Moreover, I placed the researcher as a privileged tool for data collection and analysis. I presupposed that, as long as the researcher could be thoroughly immersed in the

setting, engaged in the research process, and reflexive of their own subjectivity and knowledge, they would become a channel providing access to the research phenomena (Foley, 2002; Thomas, 2009). In this way, I leaned into a traditional understanding of reflexivity in which a self-knowing and rational researcher can produce more accurate analyses by managing their identity in the field and understanding its effects (Pillow, 2003).

I was also interested, from the beginning of the project, to incorporate an ethnographic stance. The reflexive positionality previously described was consistent with a traditional ethnographic approach that 'requires' the ethnographer to approach social phenomena with a 'distinctive analytic mentality' consisting in an attitude of suspending preconceptions and theoretical presuppositions to gain access to 'other worlds' and understand them as their own members did (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Robson, 2011). At the same time, I aimed to engage in the production of a 'thick description' of the phenomenon under study. While I was attracted to this strategy in its search for nuance and complexity, I also assumed - from a rather *modernist* view of ethnography (Britzman, 2000) - that it would give me access to a transparent reality which would be *the* truth.

From this position, I conceived the analytic process as involving the in-depth review of data, making connections between dispersed elements, developing and refine related concepts and categories, and creating a cohesive explanatory model capable of capturing the essence of the evidence (Thomas, 2016). A 'proper' analysis of the data, from this stance, would provide me access to a realistic description, representational clarity, and reliable explanation. The presentation of my findings would become a 'victory narrative' (Lather, 2000) through which I would be able to

offer an authentic and valid portrait of the ‘true meaning’ of grade retention. The text containing the research process and its outcomes would “resolve contradictions, smooth over inconsistencies and achieve a sense of closure” (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, p. 53).

The inescapability of theory in research

I cannot identify a moment in time at which I started to turn away from this interpretivist view. Still, I can recognise that my immersion into theory was what made *something happen*.

I started this project convinced that this inquiry – and any other that I would undertake in the future – would benefit from strengthening my knowledge of sociological theory. With this idea in mind, I purposely sought to engage in the process of learning theory, and I committed myself to this task unaware of where it would take me. I thought theory would be just another complementary research tool. In other words, I was planning to incorporate a theoretical angle to my usual modes of researching in education. I was convinced that reading theory would be a first step that would lead me to define and train myself in a method of data analysis that would allow me to organise and apprehend the educational topic that interested me. For a while I kept chasing after these methods. However, it was not long before my reading and theoretical engagement started to change my perspective and positionality, as well as my ‘search for methods’.

Fundamentally, I became convinced that a theoretical position is inescapable within educational and social research (Ball, 1995; Wright, 2008; Youdell, 2006a). A

‘reading of data’ without theory would assume a unique world out there that a thorough and exhaustive analysis would be able to reflect - and that was precisely what my readings started to make me question. In the instant that I acknowledged the research and the analytic process as an interpretative construct, I also realised that I would not get very far without a ‘conceptual toolkit’ (Ball, 1993, 1994) and a theoretically informed researcher position. Theory soon became not just the most relevant but the only way to approach the research process – and suddenly, things began to unravel in unexpected ways.

This project understands theory as the key component by which research questions are shaped and reshaped and social problems are conceptualised, as the critical tool to interrogate the evidence, and as the definition of the researcher standpoint (Ball, 2006; Wright, 2008; Youdell, 2006a).

This understanding implies that there is always a theoretical framework that – independently of how explicitly it is acknowledged - mediates our approach to the social world and, in that sense, defines restrictions to researchers’ discursive repertoire and representations (Youdell, 2006a). At the same time, theory becomes a “system of reflexivity” (Wright, 2008, p. 9) that guides us not necessarily to clarity or simplicity but to complexity and plausibility. Moreover, it is a resource to explore research encounters’ meanings in novel ways (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018), opening possibilities of thinking in an “appropriately dangerous” fashion (Ball, 2006, p. 1).

A poststructuralist tack

But it was not just ‘any theory’ that shook my positionality as a researcher in this way. This transformation was led by an engagement with post-structuralist theoretical frameworks - and particularly with the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, among other scholars that have engaged with these lines of thought (especially within the educational field). Further details of the conceptual registers on which this project lean on have been featured in the previous chapter. Here I provide a brief examination of what it has meant to me to engage in educational inquiry informed by post-structural ideas and assuming a social world situated in ‘discourse’.

First, grade retention has been understood as a dominant knowledge and practice circulating in primary school that I have tried to make visible and revisable within discourse. This perspective has involved revising the phenomenon through the problematisation of its conditions of possibility and its implication in the modes of intelligibility that constitute educational ‘truths’, educational subjects, educational practices, and educational material structures. A delimited regulation such as grade retention has become an avenue to explore discourse, power, subjectivation and discipline within the primary school.

Regarding my approach to the field, I (increasingly) relinquished the pursuit of a faithful/realistic description of the grade retention ground or any attempt to discover a ‘real meaning’ behind people’s experiences and perspectives. Rather, I followed calls from scholars working within post-structural ideas (e.g., Jackson & Mazzei, 2018; St. Pierre, 2011; Youdell, 2006a, 2006b) “to abandon (the myths of) representational clarity and total accessibility to the subject” (Stronach & MacLure,

1997, p. 4). I ‘use’ the experiences collected during the fieldwork to try to disentangle the discursive practices and performatives that produce the local realities I visited. Such ‘disentanglement’ is not understood as definitive or unique, but as one narrative - of many possible ones to be told – that address the studied phenomenon from a particular point of view that inevitably carries theoretical (and personal) assumptions, interests, sensibilities, blind spots, and political engagements.

When searching for discursive frames of meaning, I interpret, I represent, I even define categories. I try to explain, to make sense - and in that, I assume that there is ‘sense’ to make – of possible explanations to draw and answers/problematisations to delineate. Nevertheless, at the same time, I recognise that ‘such a sense’ is provisional, incomplete, contingent, and on the move (as we – people and social territories – are) (Graham, 2005).

I acknowledge the problematic nature of exploring the educational field with research questions that claim to seek an answer that I will not be able to address in a thoroughly or definitive way. I do not (cannot) provide a solution to this problem. I rather recognise the complexity of inscribing research within this ‘dilemma of uncertainty’ as an irresolvable challenge as much as the productive dynamo in this research journey. To research, to analyse and write with a permanent question mark, in this recognised partial way, in constant struggle, has become an empowering tool to examine and constitute the making and remaking of educational practices and subjects within shifting fields of discourse (Youdell, 2006a).

At the same time, I should acknowledge that my engagement with this post-structural sensibility has neither been smooth or fully accomplished. I have repeatedly found myself caught by familiar patterns of thinking, seeking authoritative

answers in individuals' attitudes and intentions without consideration of the discourses, power relationships, and structures that frame them. I have questioned, discussed and fought with this 'old strategy of meaning-making' at different times and with different degrees of success.

A rhizomatic investment

The research analytic perspective and practice I use has also been informed by assemblage theory; a perspective that conceives social phenomena as a vital, contingent, and continual exchange between heterogenous (symbolic, affective and material) productive components[54]. The post-structural emphasis in heterogeneity, difference, fragmentation, indeterminacy, discontinuity and the distrust of totalising narratives led me to ruptures and problematisations that the epistemology of the assemblage enabled me to take further. I have explored discourse, power and subjectivation influenced by complexity, multiplicity, inter-relatedness, hybridity and affective economies.

Assemblage theory has been a critical – and very practical - conceptual-analytic tool in this project. It guided me to conceptualise grade retention as a complex social formation configurated by heterogeneous self-sufficient components and allowed me to dwell on their productive interchanges. It has also re-emphasised the significance of exploring what logics and practices do and how they are done, over what they are or mean to someone.

54 Further detail of the conceptual devices taken from this approach has been given in the previous chapter.

Furthermore, this perspective allowed me to think in this inquiry's main interrogation fields – the subjectivation-abjection production, the processes of discipline and normalisation, and the legitimisation of inequality, exclusion and violence – as non-hierarchical interdependent mechanisms connected not only by discursive operations but also by affects and materialities. Although I have not been able to do justice to the significant place this approach gives to material components, I have been better equipped to reflect on the embodiment of the forces implicated in the phenomena of grade retention and the material effects of these. Moreover, I have engaged in the productivity of Deleuzian materialism (Buchanan, 2021).

Rhizomatic investments have brought greater sensitivity towards the dynamism of the forces configuring my research field – including those tending to the delimitation and crystallisation of enduring arrangements. In this way, rhizomatic investments have operated as conceptual and epistemological devices to address moments of destabilisation, diversification and counteraction within grade retention's landscape. Within this process, possibilities of thinking how the contingent educational arrangements that configure grade retention can be challenged, scattered and reconfigured have been inaugurated. Further considerations of the way this plea for movement and transformation has impacted my political investment in this venture - or, rather, what I intended this research to do – are offered in the last section of this chapter.

The indiscernible researcher subject

Accounting for our theoretical investments is a critical task. Theory forms our research questions, provides tools and strategies to think about them (with their

assumptions and limitations), and locates our selves in dialogue with a frame of thought to which we and others can refer. At the same time, our theoretical positions do not stand objectively and uniformly, but are deployed in the context of an individual narrative framed by our subjectivity. The researcher's discursive, physical and affective implications in the articulations and interpretations of the explored field are simultaneously theoretical and personal (Youdell, 2006b, 2010b).

A significant number of qualitative interpretative inquiries consider that the subjectivity of the researcher can be traced and “transcended” (Pillow, 2003, p. 186) by reflexivity. This understanding proposes that researchers can critically assess and make visible their own subjectivity and, in this way, ‘neutralise’ or ‘exploit’ it as a tool to account for the construction of knowledge (e.g. Foley, 2002; Thomas, 2009). The ‘whole-coherent knowing subject’ implicated in this perspective has been problematised by scholars engaged in post-structural and non-representational approaches (Lather, 2000; Pillow, 2003; Skeggs, 2002; St. Pierre, 2011; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Youdell, 2006a, 2010b). They have contested the aspiration of reaching a definitive knowledge about the researcher or the researched through this traditional understanding of reflexivity (or by any other mean).

I site myself within these argumentative lines to renounce the pursuit of my own visibility as much as the aspiration to become invisible within the research practice. I could not deny that being a ‘white’-upper-middle class-heterosexual-non teacher-Chilean-woman-in her thirties has greatly impacted the way I approach, interpret, represent, and convey the educational field and its articulations with the phenomena I am exploring, as well as the ways in which others have engaged with me throughout the fieldwork. However, I cannot be sure in which ways these features

have had influence. Furthermore, I believe that not only every category under which I might be described but also that every life experience I have had has shaped my research practice in significant and uncertain ways. Beyond the impracticality of including here a detailed self-description or memoir with the aim of making myself transparent to the reader, this becomes meaningless the instant that we recognise that we are not even transparent to ourselves. Social inquiry is not independent of researchers' positionalities, attachments, affectivities, capacities, dispositions, and power relationship investments, that are undiscernible through self-reflection (Youdell, 2006b, 2010b) and that coexist in permanent superposition and transformation (St. Pierre, 2011). Moreover, our readings bear the stamp of what we are not, of what we have not lived and of what we are (at least temporarily) unable to conceived and feel (Rosaldo, 1993).

Considering this, the traditional reflexivity standpoint can be rearticulated to trouble the process of simultaneous researcher/researched discursive constitution (Youdell, 2010b). Such reflexivity demands that the researcher remain aware of their responsibility for the production of knowledge. In this way, reflexivity becomes a practice that interrupts and interrogates representations and 'knowing mechanisms' that are made and exercised within hegemonic structures that subjectivate the researcher while implicating them in the subjectivation of others (Pillow, 2003).

By this, I am not suggesting that we should understand research as an indecipherable personal fiction. Instead, I am accepting the invitation made by post-structural scholars to recognise research as a subjective production, enabled and constrained by discourse, and to conceive the realities that are represented by them

as constituted within a contextualised, provisional, and partial territory in which the researcher is also immersed.

Coming to approach research and knowledge ‘from discourse’ has been a long process that has been forged over the development of this project. I have progressively learnt to inhabit a place of contradiction, multiplicity, incompleteness, doubt, and permanent transformation. My hope is to be able to convey this search in the following chapters of this manuscript.

Researching the school: A post-structural ethnographic case study

This study draws on the tradition of post-structural case studies (Ball et al., 2012; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Johns, 2003) and post-structural ethnographies in education (e.g. Ball, 1994; Bradbury, 2013; Britzman, 2000; Grinberg. 2011; MacLure et al., 2012; Matus, 2018; Teague, 2015, 2018; Youdell 2006a, 2006b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011).

For simplicity, I have called this project a ‘post-structural ethnographic case study’. However, being more specific, its methodology can be described as a post-structuralist case study undertaken in six schools that overlaps with an ethnographic approach in two of them.

This hybrid focus was taken with the aim of gaining extension, focus, and depth when exploring the research questions. Although grade retention is omnipresent within the educational field in Chile, it is not overtly or regularly ‘exercised’ in schools’ daily life as (for example) pedagogies, curriculum and assessment are. Its presence is felt (like gravity) rather than seen (like the school

books). It only *happens* once in a year and even this happening is usually *expressed* in subtle, private and undefined ways. The 'case study orientation' facilitates a purposeful and direct seeking of the grade retention phenomenon in school. This approach provides focus and structure to the task of gaining (explicit) in-depth and detailed access to perceptions and perspectives on grade retention in different schools (Thomas, 2009).

The inclusion of various different organisations at the beginning of the project aimed to facilitate a better understanding of the phenomenon of grade retention *across* the educational system. Schools were not selected as a 'case of something', but they were chosen for their value as 'typical cases' (Yin, 2009). Within the exploratory character of this inquiry, I selected different types of 'ordinary schools.' By this I mean that, on the one hand, schools are different to each other because of the socioeconomic characteristics of the population that attend as well as in terms of location, size, organisation, religious affiliation, academic results, and grade retention rates. On the other hand, they are similar in the sense that they are not peculiar within the system (when considering these specific and visible characteristics). By this strategy, I tried to examine grade retention in different contexts while avoiding overemphasising the mediating effects of unique characteristics or particular circumstances on the way it functions (e.g. Ball et al., 2012).

The engagement with these diverse schools is 'summative' instead of 'comparative'. The emphasis has not been contrasting divergencies in the expression of grade retention in relation to schools' distinctive features. Rather, the aim has been to explore aspects of grade retention in which convergencies can be found within a diversity of mainstream schools – considering schools as unique places and also as

part of a broader educational system. Thus, the focus is on the spaces of assembly and the connection points that delimit grade retention as a field of understanding. This does not mean that schools' distinctiveness is dismissed or considered unimportant. Differences are acknowledged and incorporated into the analysis, but without a focus on systematic contrasts. In short, the deployment of grade retention in primary education is sought *within* and *beyond* local contexts.

In two of the six participating schools the methodology evolved into an ethnographic approach. This move sought to access a (more) spontaneous emergence of grade retention's components within schools' daily lives and explore the network of meaning interwoven with them – beyond people's overt perceptions, perspectives, representations and feelings. I also aimed to provide a more general look at the school while wondering what kind of space grade retention can exist and make sense in.

In a sense, I lean towards a well-established tradition of ethnographic inquiry. This research methodology has been characterised by placing research in natural and everyday settings and seeking detailed representations of them; for being interested in the contextualised construction of reality; by its focus on the web of meanings entangled with social interactions and institutional practices; by prioritising depth over breadth; and by its open-ended and responsive stand (Foley, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

At the same time, this study ethnographic approach has been undertaken within a poststructuralist framework. On the one hand, these perspectives hold a methodological affinity. Both attend to the entanglements between the minutiae of everyday life in particular contexts and broader frames of meaning (Ball, 2013; Foley,

2002; Geertz, 1973), and both share a commitment to reflexivity and critical thinking (Ball, 1994). On the other hand, post-structuralism takes ethnography away from its conventional engagements with knowledge, fidelity, authenticity, coherence, and reciprocity. Poststructuralism disturbs the idea of a rational, cohesive, and stable subject able to express and grasp reality – including the researched, the researcher and the reader (Britzman, 2000; Youdell, 2006a, 2010b).

Within this project, the poststructuralist engagement with the ethnographic approach implies drawing on the granularities of school events and daily life to interrogate discourse, complexity, interrelatedness and subjectivating forces. Thus, the focus has not been to reach an accurate description of the field or the topic under study but to untangle discursive practices that forge their constitution (Britzman, 2000; Youdell, 2006a, 2011). This has included an interest in how apparently harmless mundane small actions – especially those who are cumulatively implicated in social injustice - are rooted in broader power structures (Gillborn, 2008). Besides, within this stance, research encounters and practices have been understood as embedded in the circulation of contingent discourses and, in this way, as always partial, provisional, and constrained (Youdell, 2006a, 2011).

The field of assemblage ethnography (McGimpsey & Youdell, 2018; Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015) has also (increasingly) influenced this project's methodological position. Conceptual engagements with assemblage theory are certainly part of that imprint. Besides, the more I have engaged with this line of thought, the more ethnography itself has evolved into a terrain of symbolic/material/affective-human/non-human agency, in which the researcher is 'another component' of the

interacting productive forces implicated in the process of the research assemblage being and becoming (McGimpsey & Youdell, 2018).

Engaging in research through this stance was as exciting as it was distressing. I had only received training in more conventional ethnographic approaches before starting the project. From the beginning, I felt challenged by the openness and flexibility required from the researcher. Although very useful for extending my knowledge and gaining confidence, my reading of ethnography and post-structuralism, and the revision of educational ethnographies did not appease my concerns.

Aware of these anxieties and about to start my fieldwork, I was given two pieces of advice (within the fuller guidance process) by my supervisors: '*embrace the odd*' and '*always arrive a bit earlier*' (which in Chilean culture is already a rather odd thing). In a space of uncertainty, I hung out on those suggestion. These precepts resonated with me throughout my immersion in the field, evolving and interacting with each other in many ways along with my experience in the schools. They gave me permission to 'just hang around' with no reason and no aim, and to prize 'in-between' moments where structured interactions and defined positions were unstable. I materially located myself in a place where *things might happen* while accepting a subjective awkward/uncomfortable non-place. This did not prevent me from experiencing the affective flux of the research encounter (such as the stomach-ache of the unknown). Rather, it enabled me to welcome these intensities without fighting the complexity and the awkwardness they comprise. In this way, my engagement with these maxims was not trivial or anecdotal; it shaped my strategy and stance to

the field – and even later, they influenced my analytic position. This is the reason why I consider it relevant include this account of them here.

Participant schools

Schools selection

The schools participating in this study were selected to explore the phenomenon of grade retention in 'ordinary schools', and not as particular cases in themselves. Although atypical cases were intentionally excluded there has been no ambition to offer a 'representative' sample.

The schools participating in this study are all located in Santiago, the national capital of Chile. The area concentrates about a third of the country's total population and 27.8% of primary students' enrolment (in 2016). Considering time and budget restrictions, this feature facilitated the simultaneous access to a diversity of urban mainstream schools in a geographically contained territory. At the same time, it is important to note that Santiago is very distinctive from other areas of the country in many respects, including their schools' characteristics and educational organisation. For example, while 43% of schools in the country are characterised as rural, this figure is less than 1% in Santiago. Given this divergence, I focused on 'mainstream' schools within Santiago city, acknowledging that my sample would have looked different if I had considered the whole country.

Considering the aim of identifying and recruiting 'ordinary' primary schools located in Santiago, the first step towards their selection and recruitment was to

delineate a general picture of the schools in the area. For this purpose, I examined the information accessible in 2017 (by open access or request) on the webpage of Studies Centre of the Chilean Ministry of Education (Centro de Estudios MINEDUC) and the Chilean Education Quality Assurance Agency (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación). I selected and examined databases and variables of interest, using Stata statistical software. For a detailed explanation of this process, please refer to Appendix Nº 3.

With this information, I characterised the primary education system in Santiago and the whole country in terms of a) Schools' administrative dependence (public, subsidised and private), b) Schools' location (urban, rural), c) Schools' educational levels, d) Students' enrolment, e) National Quality Measurement System Results, f) Schools' socioeconomic distribution, g) Students'/schools' vulnerability levels, h) Schools' religious orientation, and i) Grade retention figures and distribution; cross referencing between these features where possible. This exercise provided me with a general picture that both guided the selection of schools and enabled me to locate participant schools within the broader social and educational context. A detailed outline of this information is provided in Appendix Nº 1.

From this characterisation I delineated an 'ideal-flexible' sample of five diverse 'ordinary' primary schools. I decided to exclude private schools from my sample for two reasons. First, their relatively low representation across the Chilean educational system (only 8% primary students in Chile and 16% in Santiago are enrolled in private schools). Secondly, private schools have low grade retention rates; while around 4% of primary students attending public and subsidised schools were retained in 2015, this fell to 0.7% primary students enrolled in private schools.

In order to prioritise schools where grade retention was not uncommon I defined a minimum rate of grade retention of 2.5% within the schools that I would include in the sample. In addition, given the large conurbation area of Santiago city (641 km²) and the diversity within diverse districts, I aimed to incorporate public and subsidised schools from different city areas.

Two strategies were undertaken to identify potential participating schools. First, and in consultation with my database, I asked people and institutions I thought could help me access primary schools in Santiago to establish contact with some of them. I eventually selected three schools that fulfilled the prerequisites and were willing to participate. A fourth school was contacted through the Headteacher of one of those schools.

Given that there were characteristics and types of 'ordinary' schools that were not represented within this group of four, I used the database to locate schools with these missing features. I contacted them directly through official channels (institutional telephone and email). Although this proved to be a very laborious task (especially being abroad), I was able to recruit two additional schools to the sample.

In all cases, access to the schools was primarily negotiated with a school authority, generally the Headteacher. In some cases, they designated another member of the school to help me organise the fieldwork. Further consent was later discussed with each participant. In schools where the research was taken inside the classroom, access and consent were negotiated and organised with each class teacher. Participant students (and their parents) were also included in this process[55].

55 Further information is provided in the section on ethical considerations.

Although the final group of four public and two subsidised participant schools diverged from the initial 'ideal' sample, they fulfil the intention to be a diverse cluster of schools that could be characterised as mainstream, within the urban city of Santiago, and illustrative of (without representing) some of the area's heterogeneity and exceptionally. At the same time, they are schools that do not present themselves as serving a specific population and are fairly typical in curricular and pedagogical terms. Participant schools were also located in geographically distant and diverse areas of the city. I would have liked to include more subsidised schools (for example to incorporate secular ones), however, for reasons that remain unclear, these were more difficult to contact and motivate to participate in the study.

Finally, before providing a more detailed account on the six participant schools, it is important to note that – although all of them are classified as serving populations that were middle-high or highly vulnerable – they were not exceptional with regard to the students enrolled in them. To someone not familiar with Chile and Santiago's sociodemographic characteristics, this can look like a piece of research focused on poor schools. However, the schools included in this study shared the 'typical' socioeconomic features of schools under the same administrative regime. They can be described as mainstream public schools and mainstream subsidised schools.

As an example of this, in 2017, the Ministry of Education Vulnerability Index (which indicates the 'social risk condition' associated with the students enrolled at each school) established that over half of primary schools in Santiago were located in the middle-high vulnerability group, while a quarter of them were characterised as highly vulnerable and a fifth as middle vulnerable. When only public schools are

considered, over 90% of them were within the high or middle-high vulnerability groups. Furthermore, vulnerability levels in both public and subsidised schools tended to be even higher outside the capital. No private schools are included in these figures since this indicator assumes that there are no students under conditions of social risk/vulnerability enrolled in them (further details on the Vulnerability Index are provided in Appendix Nº 1).

The exclusion of private schools (catering to the well-off in the population) and the over-representation of public schools (which generally serve the underprivileged) in this sample can create an illusion of an emphasis on the disadvantaged schools/pupils/families. However, what should be underscored by the high vulnerability of the 'ordinary' schools participating in this study is, instead, the vast inequalities in Chilean society, the hyper segregation of the educational system, and the generalised conditions of precarity that a significant portion of children in the country experience daily.

Brief account of participant schools[56]

Colegio Jesús Misionero

Colegio Jesús Misionero is a private subsidised school. The institution was administrated by an NGO and mainly funded by the State (although private donations were also received). It did not charge fees to the families of the students who attended to it. In many ways, it operated as a 'charity', in the sense that it was sustained by a logic in which the well-off 'help' less-advantaged children

56 Note that some information has been deliberately omitted or made vague in order to preserve the anonymity of the schools.

According to the Chilean Ministry of Education, and like the majority of subsidised schools in Santiago, the level of vulnerability of the students was, on average, middle-high. The school was located in a quiet, mainly residential area which was where the majority of the students lived. The houses were rather modest and simple but constructed with solid materials. Fences and walls were generally low and, although I was warned that drug trafficking had recently penetrated the area, it felt safe (at least during the day). Although it was well connected by public transport, the location is quite peripheral; commuting into the city centre took at least an hour.

Colegio Jesús Misionero provided one class per grade across pre-school, primary and secondary education. Infrastructure and facilities were good, both for the students and for the staff. The whole place had an aesthetically pleasing appearance. Recreational areas were ample, and everything looked well cared, tidy, clean and relatively new.

The percentage of students retained in the primary school was slightly lower than the average figures for subsidised schools in Santiago and across the country. The results of the school on the National Assessment System (SIMCE) were higher than those obtained by schools accommodating a similar socioeconomic population (middle socioeconomic group). This position of academic ‘superiority’ in relation to other similar schools was ingrained in the identity of the institution. High academic attainment seemed very relevant within this educational space. All the interviewees described the school as a ‘high performance’ institution in which students were compelled to ‘study hard’ and achieve good academic results. Students’ outcomes were publicly displayed in comparative forms on classroom walls. Behind these practices, there was an aspiration to encourage students’ on to higher education.

Many of their graduates were the first in their family to continue their formal education beyond secondary school. At the same time, some participants recognised that sometimes this mission contradicted a desire to be inclusive that might risk 'lowering standards'. The school did not have 'Integration Programme' for students with Special Educational Needs. However, there were some specialists supporting students who deemed to have SEN and referrals to external professionals were frequent.

The school also had a strong Catholic identity. Religious symbols were displayed in the schoolyard and inside classrooms and offices. There were daily prayers, and students participated in different religious activities across the school year.

Escuela Los Bellotos

Escuela Los Bellotos is a small public school with preschool and primary levels. The vast majority of the students lived nearby. Like 46% of public schools in Santiago (and 72% nationally), they were described as highly vulnerable by the Ministry of Education. Like all public schools in Chile, the school had an 'Integration Programme' for students with Special Educational Needs. The school National Assessment System (SIMCE) results were lower than the national average and were still low when compared with schools described as 'equivalent' (middle-low socioeconomic group) by the Ministry of Education. Like the majority of public schools in Santiago, this was a secular school. Figures of grade retention were similar to the national average for public schools and lower than the local average.

The school infrastructure was limited and very basic: there was only a very small playground and a few corridors were used as part of the ‘playing area’. There was little space to run or do sport. The offices were small and the teacher’s staffroom was tiny. Some walls were so thin that noise travelled between rooms. Everything from the administrative offices to the classrooms had very simple, old furniture. The curtains, tables and chairs, shelves – everything – was very humble and, in some cases, in a poor state: resources were clearly scarce. Still, in general, the school was kept clean and tidy.

The school is located in a shantytown, in a very poor community. Originally, the community was (and in some places still seems to be) only informally established there. The majority of the houses were constructed with light materials and, the local community and families faced multiple disadvantages. Although the place is not too far away from the city centre, it felt peripheral; educators recognised a feeling of isolation. The area around the school was mainly residential and was close to small local shops and services mainly selling food. People internal and external to the school commented that this was a dangerous area: taxi drivers evaded the neighbourhood after sunset to avoid “inevitably” being assaulted and robbed. I was also told that there was heavy drug trafficking a few blocks from the school. All the school windows over-looking the street had bars, and the school (like many nearby houses) was completely closed to the outside.

According to the staff, the majority of the students lived in very precarious conditions; substance abuse, domestic violence, abuse and parental neglect were reportedly not rare. A significant number of students lived in social care. Also, there was a considerable percentage of students from indigenous ethnic groups and

immigrant students whose families had recently arrived in the country and who lived under extremely difficult conditions. Some of them did not speak Spanish. In general, school leaders and educators conceived their students as living in highly deprived social and material conditions and expressed a strong commitment to the school providing a safe and emotionally supportive environment as well as a positive pedagogical experience.

Escuela Andalhue

Escuela Andalhue is a secular public school with pre-school and primary education. Since the number of students attending was significantly higher than the average enrolment of public schools in Santiago it might be considered a large school. Like all public schools in the country, Escuela Andalhue had an 'Integration Programme' for students with Special Educational Needs. The school outcomes on the National Assessment System (SIMCE) were similar to other schools considered equivalent (middle-low socioeconomic group) in some tests and lower in others. The percentage of students who were retained in the same grade from 1st to 6th grade was slightly above the city average for public schools.

The population of students attending the school had been identified by the Chilean Ministry of Education has having, on average, a vulnerability level similar to the city mean for public schools (middle-high vulnerability). When asked on the students' profile, school leaders described their students' backgrounds as highly deprived and violent. They comment that child neglect and abuse were not rare in their family contexts. I was also told that a significant number of the children had one or more family members involved in criminal activities or in jail. The school, by

contrast, was considered by the staff as a place of protection. Educators were generally committed to offering an inclusive education that provided socio-emotional support to a diverse group of students. They suggested, however, that this approach conflicted at times with the possibility of obtaining high results on the national standardised tests.

Regarding the school premises, Escuela Andalhue was accommodated in a big building made of roughly cast concrete and with two spacious playgrounds. Everything – from the construction to the furniture and decorations – was modest and simple. Material resources seemed scarce. Some areas, like the students' toilets, showed a lack of maintenance and repair. Still, the school appeared to be well kept: offices and classrooms were generally clean, ample and well-maintained.

The school was located very close to an urban centre in which there are shops, services, and easy access to public transport. The area was well connected to the rest of the city. The streets and common spaces were generally clean and well-kept. There were green squares and trees in the blocks near the school. The houses around the area were, although modest, made with good materials and well-constructed. In general, fences were not high, which gave a feeling of security when walking around.

Escuela Olga Poblete

Escuela Olga Poblete is a small public school offering pre-school and primary education. The number of students enrolled was less than half of the average for Santiago. Being a public school, the institution had the 'Integration Programme' for students with Special Educational Needs. Its results on the National Assessment

System (SIMCE) were similar to schools defined by the Chilean Ministry of Education as equivalent (middle-low socioeconomic group) in some tests and lower in others. The percentage of retained students was lower than the average for public schools nationally and locally.

According to the Ministry of Education definitions, the 'vulnerability level' of the school population was high (as almost half of public schools in Santiago and more than 70% nationally). School leaders commented that students generally came from extremely deprived environments and 'dysfunctional families.' They reported that, since many students' parents were in prison (one or both), it was not rare that children were cared for by alternative adults. They also suggested that many of them were involved in domestic labour, care duties, or worked informally outside their homes. The children's environments outside the school were described as 'not-safe'. The school, on the other hand, was perceived by staff as a place that protected students' rights. Some educators, however, had low expectations of the opportunities that education could provide to these students in the future.

The surrounding area, where the majority of the students lived, was well known as very poor and having become very violent in recent years. Although the majority of the houses were very modest constructions, many of them were equipped with very high fences and bars that close them completely to the outside. Around the dusty and discoloured streets surrounding the school, walls painted with young people who had recently died stood out (birth and death dates were inscribed next to their portraits). Memorial altars ('animitas') were easy to find in the streets close to the school. I was warned – and it became evident walking around - that local gangs

and drug trafficking activities operated very close to the school. I was told that it was common to hear gunfire from inside the school.

Despite this, the school did not seem particularly closed to the local community. Although windows facing the street did have bars and there were fences outside and inside the school (separating reception from the rest of the premises), they were kept open during the day. The building seemed more welcoming and integrated into the area than the majority of the buildings around. The school building, its décor and furnishings were all very modest. In spite of this, offices, classrooms and common spaces were generally spacious, well-lit and well-maintained. Some walls had been painted with catholic religious messages; the school self-defined as Catholic. Inside the school, there was a familiar atmosphere; it felt like a contained space where everyone knew each other.

Colegio Santa Evangelina

Colegio Santa Evangelina is a private subsidised medium-size school (in local terms) offering primary and secondary education. According to the Chilean Ministry of Education classifications, on average, pupils' vulnerability was middle-high (like 55% of subsidised schools within the city and 42% across the country). The number of students retained at the primary level was higher than the national and the local average for subsidised schools.

The school results in the National Assessment System (SIMCE) were, in general, higher to those obtained by 'equivalent schools' (middle socioeconomic group). The school staff mentioned that significant time and resources were spent

preparing their students for this evaluation. Educators were proud of the school's good results and the educational opportunities they opened for the students.

The institution did not have an 'Integration Programme' for students with Special Educational Needs. The Headteacher considered it unnecessary since, "for whatever reason," the institution did not enrol many students requiring additional pedagogical support. However, during a visit to the school I witnessed a carer seeking to enrol a child identified with SEN being discouraged from applying to the school *because* they had no Support programme.

Colegio Santa Evangelina was traditionally a selective school. Students seeking to be enrolled and their families were subject to an evaluation. One of the most important criteria for selection was religious affiliation; the school had a strong Catholic identity and the staff declared that religious education was a core value for the institution. Furthermore, the school selected its students through their carers' capacity to pay; modest fees were charged. Educators were aware that the new inclusion regulations being introduced in Chile would prevent them from asking for payments or maintaining selective enrolment practices. Some of them seemed anxious about this new scenario since they recognised that they had no experience dealing with inclusion, diversity or students with "higher complexities" (more complex needs).

Colegio Santa Evangelina was the largest of the schools visited in terms of space and infrastructure. The school building seemed old, although spacious, well equipped, and well maintained. Common areas and recreational spaces were ample and nice. Everything looked clean and tidy. Religiosity was strongly present in shared

spaces and offices which were loaded with religious symbols. Offices were also generally full of photos and the awards of those who work there.

Regarding its location, the school was situated in a residential area, close and well connected to urban centres. Houses and little shops around the school were generally small and quite modest but constructed with solid materials and well maintained. Although it did not feel like an especially dangerous place, the school had high walls and bars, and several security measures limited who could enter the premises.

Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta

Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta is a medium-size public school offering pre-school and primary education. The number of students attending was similar to the average enrolment in public schools in Santiago. It self-defined as a secular institution. The rate of retained students was higher than the national and city average for public schools.

Like all public schools, Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta had a special 'Integration Programme' for students who had been identified as having Special Educational Needs. While the Headteacher described the school as "the most inclusive of the district", the 1st grade teacher characterised the pedagogical practices as "inclusive but not personalised", meaning that teachers did not have enough time to address children's individual learning processes.

The school's outcomes on the National Assessment System tended to be low when compared with schools considered 'equivalent' by the Chilean Ministry of Education (middle socioeconomic group). Teachers attributed these results to the

“problems of the Chilean educational system” and the lack of engagement and ‘cultural deficits’ of the students’ parents. The Headteacher agreed but added teachers’ incompetence and school leaders’ inability to fire low-performance professionals.

In terms of the social conditions of the enrolled students and their families, they were identified by the Chilean Ministry of Education as having a middle-high vulnerability level (like 47% public schools in Santiago and 26% nationally). The Headteacher described the students as coming from low-middle class families.

Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta was located in an affluent district where several private schools also operated. The school was based in a middle-upper class residential neighbourhood. The area was nice and quiet although close to a main road and well connected to the rest of the city. There were trees and grass on the sidewalks. Streets were clean and well-maintained. With few exceptions, the houses around the school were big and constructed with good, solid materials. Despite the tall fences around some houses, it felt like a safe place to walk around.

Although the school was mainly made of concrete and there were not many green spaces, it had a cosy and welcoming atmosphere. The school had good infrastructure: playgrounds, offices, corridors, and common spaces were spacious, tidy and clean; furniture and decor were simple but nice. There was nothing fancy, but everything seemed comfortable and well-maintained. Compared with the other public schools visited, this had the most material resources.

Student's cases

This research project was designed to explore the productive domains of grade retention beyond retained students. Considering the many earlier studies with that focus, this project was planned to direct attention towards the entanglements of grade retention with operations 'making' primary education and 'making' those who were involved in it in a more general fashion.

However, once engaged in fieldwork, it was not long before I was completely 'captured' by stories of students within 'the retained spectrum'[57]. They quickly emerged as a key element of the components and lines comprising the 'grade retention ensemble'. The conditions under which this arrangement seem to be produced, as well as what it was doing to the school and its members, appeared inevitably intertwined with the embodied subjects more pressingly submitted to it.

Furthermore, I realised that the emerging retained students' stories were not those usually represented in the research and literature on the topic. Or maybe more precisely, the perspective from which I was looking at and hearing those stories was rather marginal in academia. From there, I saw the need to bring their silenced stories to the fore and recognise the injustices they represented – as political (MacNaughton, 2005) and emotional (Ahmed, 2014) acts.

Between different accounts of students' school lives within the 'retained spectrum', I address the stories of some of them in greater detail. I do not pretend to expose their 'real stories' or portray them as 'they really are', rather, I try to represent how they are produced by the school and within the forces of the grade retention

57 These refers to students who have been retained and also those who are or have been at risk of retention.

ensemble. More than my 'objects of knowledge', I have tried to engage with these stories as lines of flight (or at least molecular lines) that might *take us elsewhere* (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 620). I do not provide (as if I could) a thick description of these students' characteristics or stories; instead – probably in an attempt to capture you too by them and thus justify my own 'captivity' – I invite you to join me in our encounter across the next chapters.

Selection of grades

Having chosen the group of schools taking part in the study, the next step was to select participants in each school. I planned to incorporate a broad group of school members (including teachers, pupils, and parents) and conduct classroom observations. At the same time, I was aware that the study's limited scope would make it impossible to research all classes in each school. For this reason, I decided to concentrate my efforts in two grades (and, in some schools, I would follow in their transition to the following grade).

It is important to mention that this project considers primary education as involving grades 1st to 6th (typically involving children aged 6 to 12 years). This is in line with the majority of the educational systems across the world and with the current transition of the Chilean system from an eight to a six grade structure in primary school (expected to be fully implemented in 2026)[58].

As presented in Table 2 on the following page, the number of students retained each year varies across primary grades and by gender. Primary schools'

58 Ley General de Educación or 'LEGE'. Law N°20370/2009. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1006043

initial and final grades tend to concentrate a greater number of retained students (that are more frequently male). This variation suggests that different productive forces operate at different levels of primary school.

Table 2. Percentage of Non-Promoted Primary Students in Chile in 2015, by Grade and Gender

Primary School Grades	1°	2°	3°	4°	5°	6°
% Female Retained Students	3.1%	2.3%	1.7%	1.2%	2.0%	2.8%
% Male Retained Students	5.2%	3.7%	3.0%	2.3%	4.4%	4.9%
Total	*4.2%*	3.0%	2.4%	1.8%	*3.3%*	3.9%

Elaborated with information from the Chilean Ministry of Education

I decided to focus on 1st grade (6-7 years old) and 5th grade (10-11 years old) for two main reasons. First, both presented a relatively high rate of retained cases; since my plan was to follow these classes to the following school year, I knew the scope of research would be extended to the 2nd and 6th grades - both of which are grades in which the retention rate is relatively high. I considered that this would increase my chances of 'seeing' grade retention mechanisms and operations. Secondly, as they are grades distanced from each other, they would facilitate the capture of diverse dynamics related to grade retention and also age as a factor.

I also dismissed the 4th and 6th grades as potential classrooms to follow during the first phase. Fourth grade sees the use of the Education Quality Measurement System and this would fall during the period of fieldwork; I thought this could interfere with access to teachers and students and powerfully affect observations. Sixth grade

was similarly discarded since its progression to the following year occurs outside the primary school.

Time and stages of research

Assuming that the time of the year in which evidence was collected would be entangled in non-trivial ways with the educational/temporal patterns that structure institutional agendas as well as the lives of those being studied (Ball, 1983, as cited in Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), I chose two periods of intensive fieldwork. First, towards the end of the 2017 Chilean school year, and then (after the summer holidays), at the beginning of the following school year. I chose these times believing that the 'presence' of grade retention would be more vivid when the reality of being retained loomed and was then implemented as some students restarted the same year with a new group of children.

In the first phase of research – from mid-October to the late-December – I collected rich and diverse evidence regarding the deployment of grade retention practices in six schools. I focused my attention in one 1st grade class and one 5th grade class in each school. In parallel, I started developing an ethnographic engagement with some of these schools emphasising the exploration of the field beyond grade retention. Consequently, the level of engagement was not the same in all schools. While some were visited only twice in order to conduct interviews, others were visited more than ten times to collect information through interviews but also through students' drawings/stories and diverse observations from inside and outside classrooms. Although the 'pyramidal' engagement in schools had been planned, the

decision about the intensity of research in each school was negotiated during the fieldwork and conditional on each institution's willingness to participate.

The second phase of research was carried out between mid-March and mid-May in the two schools that had participated more intensively in the first phase. I intended to visit one public school and one subsidised school. I followed the transition of the classes I had previously observed to their following grades. I took the decision to follow these transitions instead of staying in the same grades and tracking those who were retained for several reasons. First, retained students very often leave their school. Even if I had been able to follow them to their new schools – which was unlikely - my first intention was not to focus the research on retained students but rather on the circulation of productive forces and their entanglements with the diverse subjects and components of the educational assemblage. Another reason was that I preferred to prioritise a deeper immersion in the field, observing the same students (and in most cases the same teachers) who already 'knew me' and I already 'knew'. Finally, staying in the same class gave me the opportunity to widen the range of grades observed.

In an effort to deepen the ethnographic approach started in the first phase (as far as possible given the time constraints) I tried to spend several hours, twice a week in each school. I seized every opportunity to spend time at each school and do observations. I also tried to widen the range of members of the schools consulted about grade retention.

Table 3 (next page) outlines a summary of the evidence collected throughout the fieldwork. Information in black refers to activities undertaken in the first phase of fieldwork while in blue italics I present those carried out during the second phase.

Table 3. Summary Collected Evidence

		Colegio Jesús Misionero	Escuela Los Bellotos	Escuela Andalhue	Escuela Olga Poblete	Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta	Colegio Santa Evangelina
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**	Headteacher	Mercedes	Luciana	Aníbal	Olimpia	Pablo	Sergio
	Senior Leader*	Mónica *Marta*	Beatriz	Amanda	Ofelia	Patricio	Sonia
	Class Teacher 1st-2nd Grade	Jimena *Macarena*	Luisa	Adela	Odette	Paulina	Susana
	Class Teacher 5th-6th Grade	Martina	Bárbara	Antonia	Óscar	Pilar	Salomé
	Special Ed. Teacher	*Johanna*	*Betsabé*				
	Psychologist	*Juana*	*Leonor*				
	Parent/Guardian 2nd Grade		*Lourdes*				
FOCUS GROUP	Parents/Guardians 6th Grade		*6 participants*				
DRAWINGS/ WRITTEN STORIES	1st Grade Students	30 drawings	26*** drawings	21 drawings	16 drawings		
	5th Grade Students	39 stories	7 stories	9 stories	4 stories		
CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS ****	1st Grade Class	12 lessons	5 lessons	4 lessons			
	2nd Grade Class	*10 lessons*	*17 lessons*				
	5th Grade Class	8 lessons	1 lesson	4 lessons			
	6th Grade Class	*8 lessons*	*8 lessons*				
OTHER OBSERVATIONS	Parent/Class Teacher Meetings	*2nd G. Meeting* 5th G. Meeting	1st G. Meeting *2nd G.Meeting* 5th G. Meeting *6th G. Meeting*	1st G. Meeting 5th G. Meeting			
	School Councils on Students Promotion	2 meetings	2 meetings				
	Graduation Ceremonies	1st Grade Ceremony 5th Grade Ceremony	1st Grade Ceremony				
	Recess/Playground, Social/Cultural/ Sport Activities	✓✓	✓✓	✓			

* According to the positions that fulfil this role in Chile, 'Jefes de la Unidad Técnico-Pedagógica', 'Coordinadores Generales/Coordinadores de Ciclo' and 'Inspectores Generales' were interviewed.
** 30 Interviews (31 interviewed) in total.
*** 'First attempt' 'free style' format (explained below).
**** Lessons of 45 minutes.

A third phase of research was planned to be conducted in 2020 to follow up the schools visited during the implementation of the new promotion regulations (Decree 067/2018) that were due to be implemented that year. At that point, grade retention would newly be considered a non-automatic process (see details in Chapter One). Unexpectedly, the global crisis caused by COVID-19 stopped access to schools (which were physically closed most of the year) and interfered with the implementation process that was strongly influenced by the strange ways the educational system functioned that year (according to leaders interviewed in four schools). In view of this, the limited information collected in this third phase has not been integrated into the analysis of evidence. It is, however, considered in the final discussion of the research project in Chapter Seven.

Methods of producing evidence

Interviews

In all, I conducted thirty semi- structured interviews and one focus group with a total of thirty-seven people[59] during the fieldwork in the schools. Four additional interviews were conducted remotely with school leaders in the follow-up phase in 2020.

In the first phase, the focus was on interviewing teachers and school leaders in the six participant schools. In the second phase, I tried to include more of them but also to reach psychologists, special education teachers and students' carers. When relevant, I focused on those involved in the 1st/2nd and 5th/6th grade classes.

59 One interview included two school leaders, and six carers participated in the focus group.

Interviews generally lasted between 45 minutes and an hour (although some of them where longer and others shorter than that). The focus group lasted 30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and major parts of them were transcribed.

A table summarising the data collected has been presented above. The people interviewed in each school depended on the school's structure and the willingness of the potential participants. For example, although I aimed to conduct four focus groups with students' guardians, their low turn-up rate only allowed me to conduct one focus group and one interview with them.

I used a semi-structured schedule designed specifically for each interviewee's position. Some questions applied to all interviews while others were specific. For example, while school leaders' interviews had a greater focus on institutional processes, retained students' 'management' was explored particularly with teachers. All interview guides can be reviewed in Appendix Nº 4. Although these schedules are presented in a structured fashion, they were generally used flexibly. While I tried to elicit conversations to cover the topics of interest, the dialogue generally flowed in a different order to the one planned and novel questions and topics emerged. My receptiveness to these emergent elements grew with time and increasingly influenced my approach to subsequent interviews.

The transition from a relatively conventional, interpretivist position to a post-structuralist commitment significantly shaped my approach to interviews as a research method. Schedules from the beginning of my journey reflect my desire to pursue a 'capturable' reality that might be found to some extent in participants' answers. In the first fieldwork period, I was constantly frustrated by the inconsistency

of participants' narratives and the even more fragmented relationship between words and actions. I was annoyed by these contradictions because I felt the urge to resolve them, to find out which one was 'true' or 'real'. While I was seeking transcendent coherence, an educational field of impossible saturation insisted on plunging me in "and… and… and…" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 57) conjunctions that I initially resisted but I eventually accepted I was defeated by.

The idea of self-knowing and rational agentic subjects that might express/reach the truth through words, reflexivity or by any other mean was ultimately relinquished. I re-evaluated these interviews as immersed in - sometimes conscious and other times unconscious - agendas, desires, capacities, possibilities, affects and frameworks of meaning that engaged us in simultaneous processes of exposure and concealment. They shaped what could be said and what could be heard on both sides of the audio recorder at any moment.

The formulations extracted from these interviews were then considered to be contextualised, inconcludable, ambivalent and uncertain articulations embedded in discourse, invested in power relations, and functioning with constitutive effects (including researcher and researched) (Graham, 2005; Stronach & MacLure, 1997). They are used as an occasion to explore complex entanglements within the grade retention ensemble.

Observations

During the first stage of fieldwork, I conducted observations focused in 1st and 5th grade classes at three participant schools. I observed lessons, parent/teacher meetings, Schools Councils on the topic of students' promotion, and graduation

ceremonies. I also observed informal examples of school life whenever I had the chance (such as student's morning arrivals and break times).

In the second phase of the research, I followed the two previously visited classes in two schools (i.e. four classes in total). During this phase, I spent long hours in each school, not only observing lessons and attending parent/teacher meetings but also being present at all kinds of social, cultural and sporting activities. Furthermore, I frequently just 'hung around' in these schools. Sometimes I was waiting for a lesson (or other activity) to start, or I was seeking the arrival of a potential interviewed or having lunch in the teachers' canteen, or waiting for a meeting in another school. Those 'in-between' or 'without aim' moments were great opportunities to observe daily dynamics of the school's life.

Within an ethnographic stance, observing was *the* way by which I approached the field. It was a subjective position more than a method.

When observing lessons, teacher/parents' meetings or School Councils, I sat at the back or in some corner and took notes, trying to capture as much detail as possible. I included notes about interactions, activities, entire verbatim conversations, descriptions of physical spaces, and maps of people's distribution within a room. I tried not to 'judge' or choose what was worth, or interesting to include. I rather 'captured' as much as I could of those moments, knowing that my subjectivity would be inevitably entangled in such endeavour. As soon as I had the opportunity, I transcribed and digitalised those notes. In many informal situations, I did not have the opportunity to take notes while observing. In those cases, I made notes as soon as I had the chance and always within the same day. Frequently, I added further reflexions or accounts about my personal feelings regarding the events. I also

highlighted possible lines of analysis to develop or elements that seemed important, and I drew connections with evidence previously gathered or with theoretical concepts and ideas. I ended up with three different ‘columns’ of notes: a) Observation/Description; b) Perceptions/Feelings/Comments and c) Analysis.

Certainly, these three dimensions were in constant superposition and interaction. The information contained in the Observation/Description column does not reflect a ‘truthful’ reality. At the moment of description, I am representing, and interpreting based on my interests, affective intensities, capacities, ideas, and conceptual engagements. Moreover, these recordings were not independent of the discursive frameworks that constituted me as subject/observer/researcher and simultaneously produced the field of observation. Here I follow Youdell’s (2006a) claim that “observation is itself simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by the world and the subjects that it seeks to observe” (p. 68).

Following this argument, it would not make sense to define my engagement in observations as ‘non-participant’. In spite of how quietly and physically separate I was in a room, my presence was never neutral or unnoticed in the field; intersubjectivity was inevitably at play (Youdell, 2006a). I was always fully engaged in the production of the event and in its ‘translation’ into research evidence. I can only locate myself as positioned on an edge that cannot be described as non-participant, but neither was I fully a participant.

Reflexive diary

Across the fieldwork phases, and even in the stage between them, I wrote a reflexive diary. While in the fieldnotes schools were kept separately, the reflexive diary cross-references them.

The topics addressed in the reflexive diary were diverse. I used it to think and reflect on my research as much as an emotional release within intensive fieldwork. My reflective notes express emotions, frustrations, anxieties and hopes arising from my immersion in the field. I also incorporate reflections regarding my position as a researcher, and things I was learning about doing research within a school context.

Sometimes I included reflection about the specific account of a participant or a particular experience in the field. However, more frequently, I articulated reflection on topics that traversed different schools. I highlighted paradoxes or incoherencies that started to appear, emergent topics and questions that I had not thought before, elements to explore further while in the field, potential lines of analysis to address, and links to theories and analytic concepts. I also started to reflect on the emphasis that I wanted to give to the project and the structure that seemed better to configure this manuscript.

Read chronologically, the reflexive diary reflects my transition, as a researcher, from a more traditional interpretivist positionality to a post-structuralist stance grounded in discourse and complexity. At the same time, it shows the evolution of my focus and concerns. During the first stage, my experience in the field had major relevance. Then, in the period between fieldworks, I drew numerous connections between the gathered evidence and theoretical ideas and concepts inspired by reading, but also by seminars and other academic activities. During the

second phase of fieldwork, I started to draw more defined lines of analysis, many of which would later become analytic chapters/sections.

Children's stories and drawings

Children's drawings and creative stories have been used for decades in health and psychology as a form of expression and a strategy to access authors' personal meaning (Malchiodi, 1998; Sewell, 2011). Research on children and young people has increasingly used them to explore how they experience and see the world, and as a mean to crystallize their perceptions, ideas and feelings (Barton, 2015; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Sewell, 2011). Although still considered non-traditional data collection methods in schools, educational research has followed this general trend (Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Sewell, 2011). Increasing interest in involving children more as active agents in educational research and the validation of their inputs have contributed to the expansion of drawings and written stories as research strategies in the field (Angelides & Michaelidou 2009; Barton, 2015; Boles & Winsor, 2019; Knight et al., 2016; Leitch et al., 2007).

Drawing and writing research techniques have been considered both 'child-friendly' and 'school-friendly', as they are non-threatening, conventional school tasks (Barton, 2015; Sewell, 2011). Primary students have tended to be the most receptive to these kinds of exercise (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Tatlow-Golden & Guerin, 2010). Pre-schoolers have shown less interest engaging with them, while secondary students are more prone to consider these tasks 'childish' or to associate them with processes of evaluation (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Sewell, 2011).

There is great diversity in the way in which students' productions are analysed. Some studies label and categorise drawing/story components according to previously established or/and emergent codes (e.g. Boles & Winsor, 2019). The popular "Draw a Scientist Test" illustrates this type of analysis (e.g. Losh et al., 2008). Other studies give greater focus to the process of creation and the personal connotations of the images and narratives. Researchers working in this way usually request further verbal or written information about their images and stories (e.g. Angelides & Michaelidou 2009; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Sewell, 2011; Tatlow-Golden & Guerin, 2010).

Regarding the analytic process, some voices have warned about the risks and limitations of attributing meaning to children's productions from an adult/external perspective (Angelides & Michaelidou, 2009; Leitch et al., 2007). It has been claimed that this process might deprive children of the empowerment given by elaborating their drawings and stories (Barton, 2015). Although there is not a neat solution to this problem, some scholars have suggested the importance of listening to what the young ones have to say about their creations and to consider the complex context in which they are inscribed (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Leitch et al., 2007; Sewell, 2011).

Despite these concerns, different research experiences using children's drawings and written stories suggest that, used carefully and giving consideration to age differences, they can be powerful instruments enabling students to be involved in educational research (Angelides & Michaelidou 2009; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Knight et al., 2016; Sewell, 2011; Tatlow-Golden & Guerin, 2010).

In this study, all students in one 1st and 5th grade class in four schools were asked to draw or create a story about a retained student. This strategy aimed to gain some access to primary students' knowledge, perceptions, and representations regarding grade retention. Furthermore, the method was conceived as a way to explore the meanings attached to the practices and understandings of grade retention through the stories/drawings that *could be told/drawn* about it by pupils within the educational discourse in which they were situated.

Considering the limited possibilities for taking students out of the school routine and proposing alternative activities, this method had many advantages. First, it did not represent a significant disturbance to the school routine of teachers or students. In addition, it allowed information to be gathered from all the students in each class (except for those who were absent that day or who chose not to participate) in a short period (a class lesson of 45 minutes). 'Spoken methods' would have forced me to select very few students to interview very quickly/superficially. Even a focus group would have presented the problem of selection and, additionally, of social desirability in children's responses. Although not free from such desirability, personal drawings/written narratives provided a more personal and creative space to express individual meaning. Furthermore, it was a way to address a potentially sensitive topic that might cause anxiety among some students – especially those within the retained spectrum – in a less direct, more playful manner.

With the idea of proposing a task that allowed students greater freedom of expression, I addressed the field by asking my first class of 1st grade students "to draw something related with grade retention", "whatever you want concerning grade retention". This approach did not work according to my expectations. During the

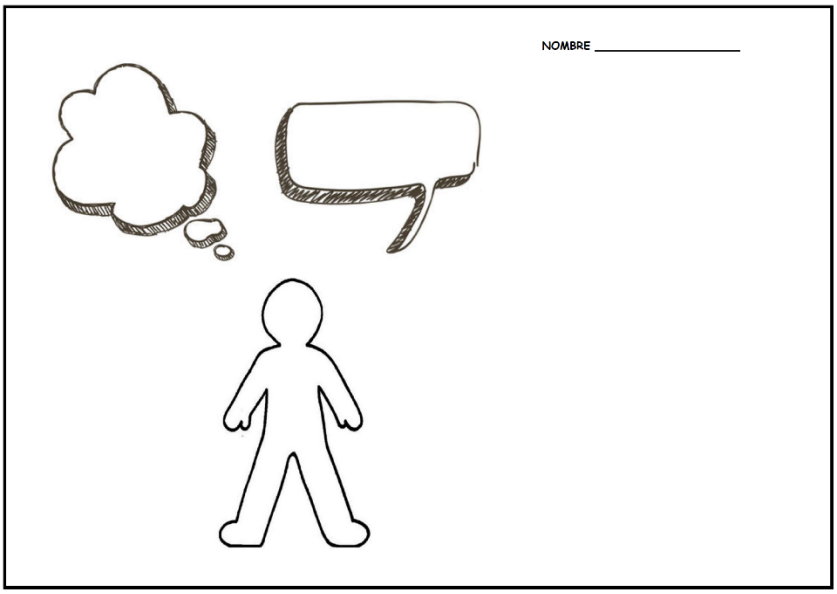
process of drawing, students seemed very confused and unsure about what they should do. Although I started by asking them what they know about the topic and some of them ‘explained’ to their classmates that retention was having to do the same grade again, many students remained troubled and even anxious about having to complete the task. The majority of drawings did not seem to have any connection to grade retention. Many of them were not even (explicitly) related to the school. Every time a student finished drawing, I approached them to ask what they had drawn (and to take notes) and invite them to provide a title for the drawing. Again, students were often disconcerted by these requests. In addition, I had only a very short time to talk with each of them about their drawings, and many of them did not finish in the allocated time, giving me no time to question them at all. In the end, the impossibility of engaging in further exchanges about the drawings made it very difficult to extract useful information using this method. Although there is no doubt that those drawings ‘contained’ many meanings, the limitations on my position in the field made it difficult to gain access to them. The ‘ideal approach’ did not fit my opportunities for action in the context of this research.

Faced with these challenges, I decided to change my strategy. The method of labelling components according to a general rule suited the time/exchange restrictions but did not seem appropriate to the exploratory character of the study. On the other hand, a more creative and ambiguous approach focused on personal meanings had worked badly given the restricted opportunities to talk with students about their creations. With the idea of finding a more structured, age appropriate strategy, and consistent with the limitation I had but still focused on personal meaning and as much free expression as possible, I sought external advice. Oriented by a

child psychologist and a few primary students known to her, I designed a more structured activity, maintaining a projective/creative component and integrating verbal/written expressions to facilitate access to the personal meanings (ideas, feeling, perceptions, representations) of the individual creations.

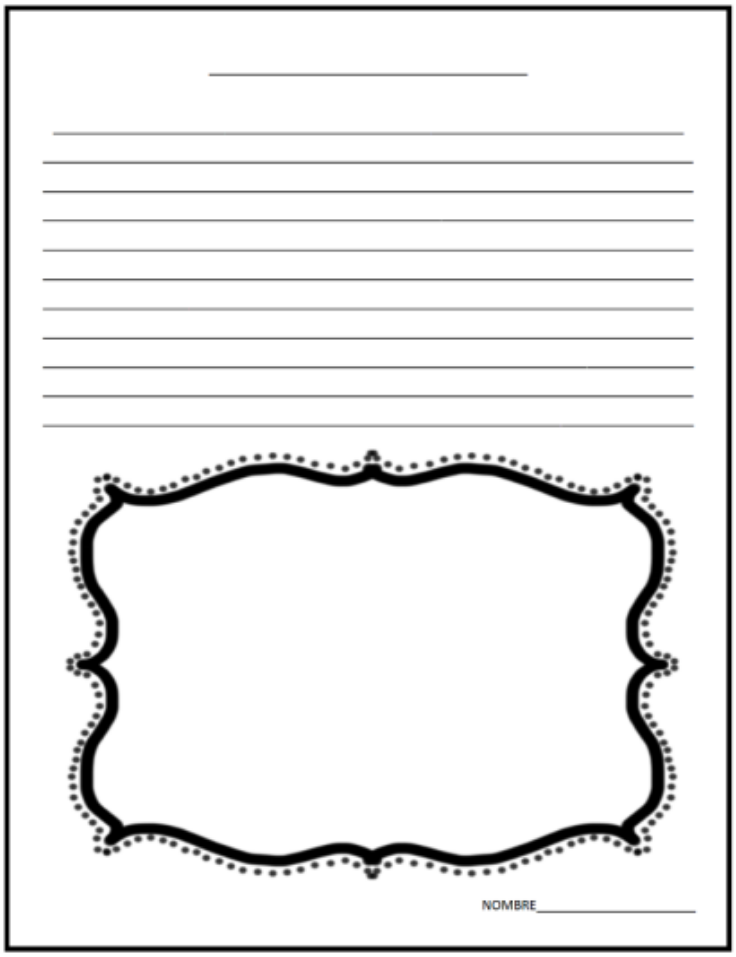
In first grade, I gave the students in each class a page with the sketch displayed below in figure 1, and I said to them: “This is a student who was retained. I would like you to paint it. While you are painting, I will approach you and I will ask you what the student who repeated a grade is thinking and what the student is saying. I will write down what you tell me in these white stickers [showing them]. If you want, you also can draw what the student is thinking in the thought bubble. It is important to write your name at the top of the sheet. If you want me to write it for you just let me know.”

Figure 1. Sketch 1st Grade Students Activity



At fifth grade, I gave to every student the sketch displayed below in figure 2 and I said to them “I want you to create a story about a student who has been retained. The idea is that you write the story of the student who was retained and then make a drawing related to it. At the top of the page, you can add a title. If you like to write and don’t like drawing, you can just do the writing. If you do not have enough space, you can continue on the back of the sheet. If you like drawing and don’t like writing, you can just draw. But it is important that, in that case, the drawing incorporates thought bubbles or dialogue boxes. And please remember to write your name at the bottom of the sheet”.

Figure 2. Sketch 5th Grade Students Activity



In every class, the activity was always preceded by an introduction from myself about the research project, and the reading (and pertinent explanation) of the Student Consent Forms.

Analysis

The analytic process was not a singular isolated stage on this journey. It *happened* while exploring the field, while generating evidence, while engaging with theory, and while writing the thesis. In this sense, I have already accounted for a significant part of the analytic process.

A particular moment that I can identify as distinctively 'analytic' was the period between the finalisation of the second period of fieldwork and the beginning of more formal writing. At this point, I focused on refamiliarising myself with all the evidence. I explored it repeatedly in as many ways as I could: by classroom, by school, across grades, across schools, by type of evidence, by the time of the year, and across fieldwork phases. I also 'followed' students from the retained spectrum across different pieces of evidence related to them.

While doing this, I tried to hold a question regarding a) discursive formations in which grade retention seemed embedded, and b) spheres and dynamics of discursive production within the grade retention ensemble.

Within this endeavour, recurrent encounters and ritualised performances that seemed entangled with grade retention rationales and practices across schools started to emerge. I also tried to remain aware of nuances and particularities between

them. In parallel, I looked for ‘unique’ pieces of evidence and exceptional moments that seemed significant to be considered closely.

As my aim was not to reduce complexity but to engage with it, I was not guided by aggregated organised categories, consistent patterns, or the pursuit of a cohesive explanatory model. There was, indeed, a sort of ‘theme extraction’ – in the sense that I identified matters of interest – but this was mostly influenced by conceptual connections and theoretical investments, as well as my personal political/ ethical/affective commitments. I chose pieces of evidence and topics that I considered critical to be acknowledged and spoken about as part of a ‘research that moves’ (this idea is developed in the last section).

The interpretative devices offered by the post-structuralist theoretical framework were the critical tool of analysis (as much as of evidence generation). While at the beginning of the research journey *working with* theory looked mostly like an integration of theory into descriptions of participants ‘views’ or the application of defined concepts to make sense of particular elements of interest, little by little I started to *think with* theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018). This involved a complex process in which my theoretical *position* ‘informed’ the data, as much as the evidence illuminated and expanded my conceptual framework. I situated my experience in the field alongside theoretical ideas and conceptualisations, I explored how they worked with selected pieces of evidence, I sought new ideas and theories when my conceptual repertoire seemed insufficient, and I made the writing process a ‘field of play’ (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 621) as relevant as the fieldwork itself.

Ultimately, I am ‘evoking’ the educational field, recognising the entanglement between the representation of data and the regimes of truth in which it is produced.

Further details of the conceptual framework entangle with the regimes of truth in which this project stands are given in the first sections of this chapter (based on definitions previously articulated in Chapter Two).

Ethical considerations

This research has been conducted within the guidelines of the Humanities and Social Science Ethical Committee of the University of Birmingham.

The research was undertaken on the basis of informed consent. Headteachers from all schools were aware and provided verbal consent for the activities undertaken in their educational communities during the fieldwork. Having this prior consent, and before collecting evidence, interviewed and observed participants were informed verbally and on paper about the purpose and possible uses of the research and the data I intended to collect. Along with this, they were handed a Consent Form where the voluntary nature of their contribution, their right to withdraw, and the principle of confidentiality by which the evidence would be managed were stressed. My contact details, as well as those of my supervisors, were provided to enable participants to express (and have answered) doubts, suggestions or complains, exercise their right to withdraw or request the study's results.

Acknowledging the hierarchical nature of schools, participants' rights were stressed when dealing with teachers and other school members. I emphasised that headteachers' authorisation to research in their schools only allowed me to invite them to participate but that they could refuse or withdraw at any time without explanation or further consequence to them. Every time I observed lessons, my

presence in the classroom was negotiated and accepted by the teacher beforehand. Consent to conduct interviews was sought separately. My observations in other educational spheres (school events, school councils, guardians/teacher's meetings, etc.) were also always previously discussed with relevant school members. It should be acknowledged, nevertheless, that on some of these occasions, the large number of people involved made it impracticable to inform everyone about the study and seek their individual consent without generating massive interference. In those cases, I tried to focus my observations on those who had previously contributed with the data collection or at least I was sure were aware of who I was and what I was doing in the school.

Children and young people involved in the collection of evidence were similarly informed about the research, and their assent to participate was sought. The drawing/writing activity always preceded classroom observations. This gave me the chance to introduce myself to the students and to clarify the study's purpose and their rights (verbally and on paper) before conducting observations.

Considering the resemblance of the drawing/writing activity with regular schoolwork, it was made very clear to students that the exercise was completely independent of school assessments and tasks, absolutely voluntary, and that they could stop participating whenever they wanted. This meant that more than half of students decided not to participate in some classes while in others, almost all of them agreed to engage with the activity.

All students involved in the 'ethnographic approach phase' of the research were provided with Information Sheets and Assent Forms for the classroom observations. Although not all of them were returned, they were a means to explain

to the students what I would be doing (and why) in the school and inside the classroom for the following months.

Methods used to collect information that involved students were designed with consideration for the fact that grade retention could be a delicate matter for some of them. Avoiding upsetting or causing anxiety to children, or negatively exposing those from the retained spectrum was a priority in every interaction with students. The right to be informed, the voluntary participation, the confidential management of information, and the right to withdraw were allies in this objective.

Either the class teacher or I asked participant students to take home Information Sheets and Consent Forms to hand to their guardians. On them, carers were informed on the nature of research, the participants' rights and the activities students would be invited to join. They were asked to provide consent for their children's participation in observations and in the drawing/writing activity separately. It was made clear to students and carers that adults' consent never obliged children to participate. The return rate of consent forms was different depending on the school and the class. Whenever I had the opportunity, I explained the research project to guardians face to face during the parent/teacher meetings, and I invited them to fill the Consent Form then. Again, attention was drawn to their right to turn down their children's participation at any time.

All 'Participant Information Sheets' and 'Consent Forms' can be review in Appendix N°5.

The evidence obtained during the fieldwork was stored securely and managed under the principle of confidentiality. The only exception to this – stipulated in the Students' Assent Forms – was the acquisition of any information suggesting that the

welfare of a child/children might be in danger. Fortunately, I did not have to draw upon that clause. Therefore, no one, apart from my supervisors and myself, had access to the raw data in which participants could be identified.

Participants (individuals and organisations) are referred to using pseudonyms. Descriptive information that might help to identify them has been omitted. Students' productions are also presented in anonymised form.

As a matter of simplification, participants' names always start with their school's initial(s). In Chile, primary public schools are generally referred to as 'Escuela' while subsidised and private schools with primary and secondary levels are usually called 'Colegio'. This difference has been included in the pseudonyms given to the schools to facilitate their general identification.

Final note on the ethics of researching the grade retention ensemble

Doing research in a field that has been consistently related to educational inequalities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020; OECD, 2016b), and exploring its implications in children's lives and educational spaces (many of which are embedded in conditions of social vulnerability), as well as its roots in broader power structures, has been an ethical endeavour in itself.

Post-structural ideas have helped me to navigate the political task of questioning the persistence of marginalising and excluding practices in primary education. First, they have guided a process of recognition and exposure of how ordinary and normative actions conceal injustices under claims of truth. This 'testimonial' work (Ahmed, 2014) aims to be a step towards a counter-politics of promotion logics and practices. The engagement with discourse, performativity and

rhizomatic complexity has highlighted the discretional limits of abiding arrangements and the recognition of their revocability towards new spaces for resistance and reinscription.

In this vein, I have tried to engage in research that ‘moves’; an undertaking that resonates in bodies and thought, that interpellates you and me in unexpected – and even uncomfortable – ways. This search has been inspired by those who have taken this stance before. Particularly, those who have called to engage research audiences’ capacities and affects in the configuration of a provocative inquiry that challenges foundational assumptions and projects into the future to inspire a different way of thinking and being in the social and educational world (Britzman, 2000; Fox & Alldred, 2017; St. Pierre, 2011; Vannini, 2015; Youdell, 2010a, 2011).

I embarked on this journey seeking academic acceptability, methodological accuracy, novelty, comprehensiveness, integrity, usefulness. I have emerged from it, hoping to have engaged myself and others in a meaningful (re)search. By this, I do not only mean research in which there is something left when the last word has been read, but also research that articulates something in the future - new paths of thought and action (including researching); a politics of becoming (Youdell, 2011). I accept the uncertainty of the dynamic movements implicated in this search, as much as I recognise my implication and ethical commitment with some directions of the motion. I take the risk and the blame, in this (unfinished, tentative, limited, ambitious) attempt to move the world as it is.

CHAPTER FOUR: SUBJECTIVATION WITHIN THE GRADE RETENTION ENSEMBLE

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the production of the 'student from the retained spectrum' within the primary school. This dynamic is principally explored using Foucault's and Butler's theorisations on the subjectivating processes by which identities are created. Assemblage theory is made a complementary tool to glimpse into students' constitution beyond the limits of subjectivation but also to place subjectivation within the complex interactive forces of the 'grade retention ensemble'.

The analysis suggests that – in contrast to the implications of 'promotion policy'[60] – neither ability nor academic achievement are the central notions constituting retained students at primary school. Although notions of learning and performance are part of the narratives associated with retention causes, other frameworks of meaning appear more relevant. Being sufficiently 'educable' to progress throughout the schooling system seems to be, not just about competence or learning, but also and more importantly, about being 'schoolable;' that is, aligned to the school's goals, needs and systems of meaning. Although being a 'subject of learning' still appears to be linked to progression in some circumstances, intelligibility as 'subject to schooling' seems to be a more decisive requirement.

60 At the time of the research, the norm in place suggested that grade retention related only to underachievement or low school attendance.

These definitions seem to unravel in different ways throughout the primary school. In the early grades, students are made intelligible through the discursive binary maturity/immaturity, which simultaneously involves and dismisses developmental references. In the upper primary grades, schooling viability concerns the assessment of young people's attitudinal and moral dispositions. This variation is analysed drawing distinctions between the bad/impossible/and abject schooling identities delineated in Chapter Two.

A final section explores how these categorisations are made sense of in relation to understandings of students as extension of their families (and especially their mothers).

Influential inclusive narratives

An important point to make before a further examination of grade retention's subjectivation processes, is that notions of 'ability' and 'learning outcomes' are secondary to retained students' constitutions. This seems entangled with the introduction of the Special Education Needs (SEN) signifier and new regulations on educational inclusion promoted in Chile in the last fifteen years (outlined in Chapter One). In essence, these policies and cultural narratives have separated 'viability as a student' from 'viability as a learner', allowing 'impossible learners' to remain as subjects of progression. Students identified as having learning problems or neurodevelopmental disorders were traditionally those who struggled to fit within school subjects. These students who were typically more likely to be retained are

now usually considered to have SEN that must be understood and adequately managed by the school to ensure successful schooling trajectories.

Schools that have subscribed to the School Integration Program (PIE) have an obligation to provide these students with curricular adaptations and adequate support to guarantee their continuation, participation and progression within the educational system[61]. This has made administrators and school authorities more reluctant to retain SEN students. Some teachers reported frustration and discomfort at being 'pressured' to promote pupils who would previously and undoubtedly have been retained before PIE.

By contrast, in subsidised schools where PIE had not been implemented, children identified as having learning difficulties or 'cognitive problems' were retained more often, and concepts of capability and performance were more likely to be implicated in grade retention. In those environments, there was a stronger link between being an acceptable learner and being 'subject to schooling'. Nevertheless, even in these schools 'inclusive logics' suggesting the need for curricular adaptation, specialised support and differentiated assessment over retention strategies permeated collective narratives. Their authorities and educators tended to justify SEN students' retention almost exclusively when additional factors (discussed below) overlapped with SEN diagnostics.

Although these 'included' bad/incompetent learners remained in a place of 'non-normality' within the educational context, they had gained intelligibility through the SEN category by which they could, under certain circumstances, become 'acceptable Others'. The frontiers of recognisable 'studenthood' or 'educability'

61 This Programme, explained further in Chapter One, is mandatory in public schools and voluntary in private, subsidised schools.

involved in the ‘grade retention ensemble’ seemed greatly invested in other territories.

From here, this chapter examines how primary students from the retained spectrum were defined and constituted under this developing and complex scenario in which simple understandings of ‘ability’ and performance did not appear to have the anticipated explanatory power.

The constitution of retained students in early primary education

Miguel: The first encounter

Colegio Jesús Misionero
Observation. November, 2017
School Playground

It is break time and I am outside the 1st grade classroom waiting for the next module in which I will ask the students to do the drawing activity. It will be my first time in this class.

The classroom faces the playground in which the students from the lower levels spend their break time. Many things are going on in the playground. Above all, a boy with impressive kinaesthetic skills catches my attention. He jumps, runs, climbs and plays skilfully around a large table that has been left in the playground. I cannot stop looking at him, completely impressed and a bit scared while he makes risky and complicated pirouettes with amazing ease and security.

When the bell rings, the boy runs to the 1st grade classroom with his prodigious gymnastic style. The class teacher, Jimena, looks at him and say to me “the ´tole-tole’ over there”, sighing with what I interpreted as a mixture of resignation and complicity [in Chile ‘tole-tole’ is used to refer to a ‘turmoil’, ‘fusses’, ‘jumble’]. My view of the boy rapidly changes from pure admiration to confusion and curiosity.

When I heard the teacher's comment, I did not know what it meant to be a ‘tole-tole’ in that school. From the way that the teacher said it, from my knowledge of the concept and my observation during the break time, I guessed that it was a negative term to describe a chaotic, disturbing and excessive energy. It felt as if all the talent, joy and potentiality that I had read into to my first ‘encounter’ with Miguel were called into question by a word and a gesture.

When the class finished, the teacher approached me and clarified that the ‘tole-tole’, Miguel, is the boy who was retained last year and who she told me about during a prior interview. I was very surprised to realise that the athletic boy from the playground and the immature and disruptive student that the teacher had talked about were the same child. In this educational encounter, the generative power of discursive performativity and its bond to recognition were exposed. During the minutes that I watched Miguel play, I looked around for someone to share my admiration for this boy whose ‘prodigiously athletic nature’ was on display. I was surprised that nobody else around seemed to ‘notice’ it. On the other hand, when Jimena approached me and saw me watching at Miguel’s behaviour, she seemed to assume that I would easily recognise him as the disruptive boy she has described earlier. The same bodily practices were interpreted - made meaningful through particular discursive framings - in ways that generated two different, even opposed, *essentialised* subjects.

Initially, I wondered if these two performative constitutions could overlap, if integration of the athlete and the tole-tole was possible. During the weeks that followed, I learned that the ‘educational truths’ that enabled the ‘tole-tole’ naming to work as performative of an immature identity were incompatible with the boy having

exceptional physical abilities. This last performative citation did not make any sense within the discourses which framed what was valued and desirable in the students from Miguel's school. The unintelligibility of my reading of Miguel within the institution - which might be understood as a provisional identity claim or an offer of recognition - was settled later when the boy's "delayed motor development equivalent to a two or three year old child" was pointed out by another member of the school as one of the major problems composing his 'tole-tole' identity.

As the understanding of Miguel's performance as manifesting prodigious or exceptional abilities was not viable in this setting, I almost entirely dismissed it. During the classroom observations, I started to expect the expressions of the categories in which he had been described/created by the school. Like the educators, and the boy defined and trapped by the label, I soon found myself caught up in the performative implications of the 'tole-tole' signifier and the 'im/maturity discourse'.

Immaturity as a discourse

From the first conversations with Miguel's teachers, they described him as 'immature'. His individual, inner nature, and the explanation for retention, were all contained in the subjectivating and disciplinary significance of the immaturity discourse. During my interview with Johanna, the special education teacher of Colegio Jesús Misionero, she elaborated on the particularities of Miguel's immaturity and their implications for his educational trajectory.

> In the case of Miguel, he has a general immaturity, an immaturity of his whole organism… (…) There is an immaturity in his thinking, in his motor function, in his learning, in his way of interacting with other people. You see him now, and he is a boy who, even having repeated a year, looks younger than his classmates. He looks like a preschool boy. However, if you assess his reading speed, if you give him a test, he can look at the cover of a book and answer correctly every question you give him about that book. So, his developmental progress is very disharmonic, and the suggestion of retention in his case was due to that immaturity. It was not related to academic proficiency or anything like that. Ultimately, that immaturity was preventing him from engaging in the class, from concentrating, and was making him crawl around the room. But he is brilliant, I mean, he would be brilliant if his maturity were as it corresponds to his chronological age. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, April 2018. Johanna, Special Education Teacher).*

In this account, Miguel seemed to be on the verge of positive recognition, of desirable studenthood. Johanna and Miguel's class teacher agreed that learning had never been a problem for him. Both considered him 'clever' and 'fast'. However, his consolidation within a positive position failed. He could be smart or athletic or talented, but these features were overshadowed and made unintelligible by the immaturity discourse. Even his academic competencies (which could have positioned him as a 'possible learner') were presented as proof of abnormality through the 'disharmonic' development that was referred to as evidence.

Discourses of *normal* development and *normal* childhood were powerfully silent presences throughout Johanna's account. A model of 'normalcy' (Matus, 2019), in which a concealed imaginary ideal constitutes the deviant subject, is operating here. The teacher's remarks included two parallel claims to 'abnormality' that were often present in reports given by educators regarding students whose immaturity was given as the cause of their retention. First, Miguel is constituted as an *abnormal organism* whose abnormality is generated by a developmental inner malfunctioning.

Secondly, he is portrayed as an 'impossible student' (Youdell, 2006a) unable to fulfil school requirements. This second affliction constituted him outside recognisable educational positions and was understood as a consequence of a primary developmental failure.

In further conversations with educators across the schools visited, I noticed that 'immaturity' was the most frequent reason given to justify early retentions. Even among those who claimed to be less inclined towards, and more critical about, holding students back, there was a general consensus that in, the lower grades of primary school, retention was justifiable in 'cases of immaturity'[62].

In this chapter I will suggest that 'immaturity' works as a discursive configuration within the grade retention ensemble as it is implicated in the operations through which meaning is inscribed in early primary education in Chile. I will suggest that 'immaturity' is more than a signifier or statement within developmental discourses. Although gaining legitimacy from it, 'immaturity' can be conceived as having a distinctive character and producing distinctive effects. One of the more powerful, is the formation of 'impossible students' – children incommensurable with educational understanding and goals, unintelligible in terms of schooling – in an 'inclusive' context.

I acknowledge that suggesting that 'immaturity' is a discourse might be problematic when the term 'discourse' is conceived as a comprehensive terrain of truth foundational to subjects' ability to think and articulate meaning. I do not refer to the immaturity/maturity binary as a broad and primary general system or one typically

62 Certainty, there were other 'acceptable' narratives circulating within the grade retention ensemble used to justify young students' retention. However, the pervasiveness of 'immaturity citations' across the participant schools and how distinctive they were of early primary grades made this an interesting focus of analysis.

associated with the idea of ‘regime of truth’ or episteme. Instead, my thought is more circumspect: that operating as an objective description of the educational world establishes rules of possibility. Naming ‘immaturity’ as a discourse is a practical choice in the sense that it emphasises its symbolic and material function, its involvement in the production of knowledge and power, its subjectivating significance, and its contextual emergence (Foucault, 1972, 1977a, 1990). In addition, it enables me to distinguish between the ambiguous, polysemic and fluid nature of immaturity as a concept in practice, and the fixity of immaturity as a field of understanding that crystalises meaning within the grade retention ensemble.

Exploring ‘im/maturity’ meanings

The maturity/immaturity binary seems to establish parameters of inherent-organic normality and deviation in the early years of primary school. Maturational understandings of students’ academic and behavioural performances appear strongly rooted in neurobiological ideas, and extracted from scientific discourse about normal/abnormal childhood development.

Over the last century, developmental discourses have been powerful and pervasive expert discourses normalising notions of childhood in the school and beyond. This has happened to such a degree that these ideas operate as the ‘truth’ from which pupils are understood, assessed, corrected and excluded (Bradbury, 2013; Rose, 1999). The ‘developmental norm’ establishes the average abilities and performances expected of children at every age. In their early years, students are closely observed by educators to evaluate these norms through which their behaviour is judged. This allows professionals to assess 'the normality' of every child by

comparison with the ‘standard’ or ideal. Deficiency, inadequacy, delay and abnormality are claimed when those requirements are not fulfilled (Mac Naughton, 2005). These views and ideals originate from fields of knowledge and expertise - such as medicine and developmental psychology - which are highly socially respected and valued. The ‘official truths’ emanating from these ‘scientific disciplines’ are naturalised and are therefore hard to contest. The pervasive nature of this discourse means it is part of the general imaginary; concepts and ideas about early development and maturity circulate among educational practitioners and the general population (Rose, 1999).

In general, the literature has recognised the preferential place of developmental discourses in understandings of pre-school children’s characteristics and behaviours (Bradbury, 2013; Mac Naughton, 2005). The evidence collected in this research suggests that their relevance persists throughout primary school. Especially in the early grades of primary education, student’s achievements, their levels of progression and their characteristics were commonly considered to relate to levels of maturity. Intelligibility as ‘subject to schooling’ was coupled to developmental normativity. First and second grade teachers paid close attention to signs of their students’ ‘developmental stages’ and situated their practice within these arrangements.

Valerie Harwood and Julie Allan (2014) refer to this phenomenon when they describe the ways in which children entering primary school are scrutinised to assess their level of suitability to schools’ demands. They suggest that, at this level, developmental discourse guides educators’ judgments and divides ‘normality’ from ‘maladjustment’ operating in a similar way to diagnoses of mental disorders.

Developmentalism was particularly cited when ‘maladjustment’ was ‘identified’. ‘Immature’ students were described by educators as those who failed to fulfil the school’s expectations of what they should be and do in their current grades because their developmental process was read as ‘behind’ their chronological age. At a very general level, this meant that their attitudes, behaviours and capacities were considered to be more similar to those expected from younger students than those requested for students of their age/grade. From this understanding, making them wait an extra year to be promoted located them in ´the right’ class for their developmental stage. However, unlike ‘scientific’ developmental understandings which view development as mobile and teachable, grade retention transformed these (momentary) ‘delays’ in an irrevocable permanent condition. There was no expectation that retained students could catch up with their peers; retained students became locked into their ‘maturity cohort group’ throughout schooling.

In this way, on a closer examination, the alleged association between ‘immaturity’ and scientific developmental discourses within the grade retention ensemble reveals it to be more fragile than it seems at first glance.

The production of organic failure

A very important ‘immaturity marker’ in the school is preterm birth. The idea that premature babies develop into immature/impossible students seems to be extended among educators working in early education. This association highlights the organic and scientific ‘fundaments’ of immaturity as an unchallengeable objective truth and as a substantial justification for retention.

On different occasions during my research, premature birth was pointed to by educators as the cause of developmental delays and as irrefutable proof of the need for grade retention. When educators at Colegio Jesús Misionero described Miguel's immaturity, his premature birth was given as its logical cause. It seems as if that aspect of Miguel's biography made both his immaturity and his retention inevitable and necessary.

This is aligned with sanctioned biomedical discourses that have described prematurely born babies as having a higher risk of brain damage, cognitive deficits, and neuropsychological and behavioural impairments in childhood and later in life. In relation to the schooling process, researchers have associated premature birth with academic difficulties, low school performance, special educational needs, and even directedly to grade retention (Nosarti et al., 2010). Although not all evidence is conclusive in this respect (e.g. Andersson et al., 2017) and even those who make such claims highlight distinctive outcomes depending on the length of pregnancy (moderately, very or extremely preterm) and its interaction with diverse environmental factors (Nosarti et al., 2010), these more refined considerations are missing from popular understandings of preterm birth populating schools. The general perception is that premature birth – whatever its particular conditions - predetermines impaired outcomes. Teachers rely on this maxim as accurate science and employ it as part of what they perceive to be the proper practice of their profession.

However, the neurodevelopmental narratives deployed in primary school do not necessarily reflect the scientifically sanctioned principles that 'inspire' them. While 'science' appears to produce difference and deviation from an apparent neutral and apolitical norm (Matus, 2019), 'scientific claims' about (for example) primary students'

immaturity are constituted within the relations of power and rules of possibility in which they are generated and applied (Foucault, 1970).

During an exchange with the 1st grade class teacher of Escuela Los Bellotos about students' progression during the school year, she established a strong connection between preterm birth and maturational consequences that affect educational outcomes. Her account also exposed how neurodevelopmentally sanctioned regimes of truth can undergo substantial modification when applied to the 'immaturity discourse' in school.

Luisa: I personally believe, and this was taught to me by a teacher many years ago, she taught me something that I would like every teacher understood: to calculate the children real age. It is not the same when a baby is born on the 42nd week and full-term than when it does it on the 38th week. Then you try to calculate the maturation level considering the real age they have.

Alejandra (Researcher): I have never heard about that.

Luisa: For me, it was enlightening, because my teacher – that was a neuroscience teacher – said to me 'Why you are expecting from a child who born on the 36th week the same that from one that born on the 42nd week, when their developmental and maturity processes are not the same?' And she was right.

Alejandra: And that makes sense to you?

Luisa: Absolutely. Because, why some students mature earlier? Then you look at the student's records and of course! It is something to consider when assessing the students. (…) There is a reason why pregnancy lasts as long as it lasts; there are physiological and maturational development processes that have to happen. What didn't happen intrauterine, will happen extrauterine. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, October, 2017. Luisa, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

Luisa's conviction about the relevance of the age at delivery for children's outcomes illustrates the strength of biomedical and developmental discourses in the school. In this account, faced with school requirements, premature babies are predetermined to struggle since they are at the level of their 'official/non-real' age. As educational and maturational demands are understood as convergent, 'real ages' must be calculated and teachers must include 'birth considerations' when assessing students. Being born premature, then, operates as a natural and essential identity (Butler, 1990) defining interchanges between the school and the child.

First, this conversation shows the high status of scientific narratives within the early years' educational context (Mac Naughton, 2005). Neuroscientific knowledge seems to be both proof of credibility and professional competence. But as much as Luisa claimed a scientifically informed base for her position, she used it in a rather idiosyncratic way. As mentioned earlier, 'specialised' concepts and logics were often used by educators to validate statements although not necessarily appropriately. Frequently, claims that drew on scientific truths and developmental theories involved innovative applications.

This seemed to be the case in Luisa's understanding of normal and premature birth. First, the teacher had a peculiar understanding of the connotations of pre-term births. She focused the issue of premature babies on the fact that their 'real age' is miscalculated since it is counted from the anticipated birth instead of the expected full term birth relative to the time of conception. She placed great importance on the need to discount the weeks of earlier delivery in the age calculations. However, considering that students in the same class can have up to twelve months of age difference, the weight Luisa placed on a couple of weeks is difficult to understand.

Another bewildering element of Luisa's account is her classification of full-term and pre-term birth. In her account, only babies born on the 42nd week are considered full term; babies born at the 38th week are considered premature. This understanding is not aligned to scientific agreements that consider human pregnancies to last 40 weeks and to be full-term from the 37th week (Nosarti et al., 2010). Beyond official definitions of the weeks a pregnancy should last to be considered full-term – that are actually arbitrary demarcations – what is notable in this misalignment between developmental science and a teacher's knowledge is that, if we follow the last, the majority of children are born prematurely. An implication of this might be that every time Luisa develops a 'hypothesis of immaturity', she can 'confirm' it through the school's register. From that moment, those children's intelligibility becomes regulated by a discourse of developmental deficit in which they are named 'premature' and 'immature'. The grounds for sustaining this lay-definition and its more or less 'scientifically accurate' effects on more or less 'imagined' bibliographies does not change their performative effects. Shielded by 'developmental truths', new defective educational identities are generated within the educational frameworks of possibility in which educators exercise their practice.

Psychopathology and immaturity entanglements

Within scientific discourse, abnormal development, and mental disorders overlap. Several conditions that are frequently cited by schools - such as those related to the autistic spectrum, motor disorders, communication disorders, learning disorders, intellectual disabilities and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) - are conventionally classified under the category of 'Neurodevelopmental Disorders' in

internationally accepted manuals of mental disorder diagnostics[63]. In this sense, certain 'developmental deviations' are at the same time (according to this field of knowledge) psychopathologies. Since 'immaturity' was typically acknowledged by members of the school as a problematic or deviant development, it is interesting to examine the role of psychopathologisation in the production of young retained students.

To educators, psychiatric diagnostics were distinct from 'immaturity'. They were the type of conditions that school professionals seemed to have in mind when they talked about SEN (rather than the 'im/maturity' polarity in relation to the connections between retention and development). This aligns with recent Chilean policies on educational inclusion that define the mentioned diagnostics as indications of SEN that need to be addressed by the school to promote progression. The developmental claims that populate the 'grade retention ensemble' in early primary years were generally free from the 'burden' of inclusive regulation.

An essential difference between childhood mental disorders and the stages of development cited by the 'immaturity discourse' is the process by which they become official truths about a child. There was a general understanding in the schools that a mental disorder or a SEN must be certified by a diagnostic procedure performed by a specialist[64]. Even though teachers often made preliminarily informal diagnostics of their students' mental health/disorders, they knew that other specialist evaluations would provide the last word. Maturational assertions, on the other hand, needed no formal declaration from a 'specialised authority'. Teachers seemed to have

63 E.g. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-V*. American Psychiatric Publishing.

64 According to protocols activated under the current regulations, SEN should be diagnosed by a professional external to the school or by a school (internal) specialist registered on the 'Special Education Evaluation and Diagnostic National Register'.

permission and the authority (at least implicitly) to assess and judge im/maturity status. Members of the school communities accepted their conclusions without question. In contrast to psychopathological declarations, these pseudo-developmental references were a space of freedom in which teachers could 'make sense of' their students and act with relative independence[65].

The lack of a need for formal and specialised validation made immaturity resolutions handy (and unregulated) devices for differentiation, normalisation, and correction. They seemed to enable a rare space of pedagogic autonomy and teachers' self-determination in contrast to the accountability regime of educational institutions with their endless, overlapping norms and demands for action. While 'neurodevelopmental disorders' and other 'scientific categories' of the child conveyed an obligation to mobilise specialists, treatments, pedagogical measurements, management techniques and all sorts of pedagogic and material resources, appeals to immaturity did not seem to initiate any defined liability. On the contrary, responsibilities that schools ordinarily had towards their 'normal' students seemed relaxed or at least relativized.

To some extent, the 'undemanding' nature of im/maturity was related to the lightness and ordinary connotations of this identity category. Explicit references to immaturity within the 'grade retention ensemble', usually connoted it as a benign and transitory condition without further implications. Although this can be challenged when looking from a more exhaustive angle and considering the permanent material implications that the 'immature' label triggered, the 'official' discourse of immaturity

65 By this I do not want to imply that attributions of immaturity would be more legitimate if they were measured and labelled under the 'rigorous criteria' of science/medicine. Rather I want to expose how discourses on maturity can operate distinctively from the more traditional and medically sanctioned 'development truths of the child' to constitute professional positions and practices.

circulating in the lower grades of primary school brought rather gentle connotations. In many senses, claiming maturity deficits seemed more acceptable and less harsh than making psychological or neurodevelopmental diagnoses. The younger the child, the more cautious people tend to be regarding mental disorder diagnostics. In fact, some experts and educators consider it wrong to 'label' students at early ages in this way or believe that some conditions cannot be properly identified until they are older. The opposite applied to immaturity claims. In the first and second grades, immaturity seemed to be the more acceptable and 'nicer' way to name children's abnormality and 'studenthood impossibility;' it could be utilised as an (apparently) transitory state before children were old enough to be 'fully psychopathologised'.

'Immaturity' explanations also had a totalising effect/quality. As much as they were ambiguous or gentle, they could also encompass the entire individual. Miguel's special education teacher's narrative was very emphatic in this sense. She described the boy's immaturity as a 'general' problem involving "his whole organism". She even portrayed his academic abilities as part and proof of his 'disharmonic' developmental progress. There seemed to be no escape from these developmental flaws. Personal and educational identities were entirely subsumed by them. In this sense, they worked similarly to those mental disorders that were classified as 'permanent' by educational policy, with the difference that immaturity was not explicitly acknowledged as such.

As this suggests, in spite of the apparent division between the psychopathological and the maturational 'truths about the child' there was a complex interaction between them. The following statements from interviews with educators at

different schools illustrate how these discourses were positioned and entangled within the ‘grade retention ensemble’.

> To me, the important thing about being retained is the possibility of maturing. I mean, in this school there are many children with attention deficit disorder, with hyperactivity, that ultimately are just immature, no more than that. *(Escuela Pintor Roberta Matta. Interview, October 2017. Patricio, Senior Leader).*

> There is a group [of retained students] who are very immature. They don’t have any learning disability, but they appear to have one; they are not able to connect, to focus, to work. In those cases, students are retained and the following year things change because they grow up. You give them that extra time and they get better. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, November 2017. Jimena, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

> There is a large group of children that are retained due to learning disorders. As I told you, they are immature. (…) Sometimes it is damaging to the child to be promoted if they are not mature enough, that problem they have, that learning problem… maybe the support they received was not enough and grade retention will make things better. *(Colegio Santa Evangelina. Interview, October 2017. Susana, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

In Patricio’s remark, the psychopathological discourse is ‘absorbed’ by immaturity as its ultimate cause. For him, ADHD – the most prevalent and well known behavioural disorder among school-age children and adolescents in Chile (Rojas et al., 2018) and globally (Berger et al., 2018) - was simply a matter of maturity. Jimena stated that, while immaturity can have the external appearance of a psychological disorder, it is not; her comment about retention ‘solving the problem’ was delivered as confirmation of her claim. Finally, in Susana’s account learning difficulties and immaturity claims are positioned as interchangeable definitions.

Another significant aspect of Patricio, Jimena and Susana’s remarks is the relationships established between retention, maturity and psychopathology. In all

cases, being held back was described as an opportunity to 'grow' in close connection to maturity, not to pathology. It seemed as if grade retention were the correct path to take with those students *because* their 'difficulties' were ultimately related to immaturity rather than mental disorders. Grade retention definitely seemed more connected to the first than the second. The policies and regulations established in Chile in recent years with the explicit intention of improving the inclusion of students with SENs has, perhaps, had an influence over this distinction.

Since psychopathology and immaturity discourses have different implications in educational practices and the provision of school resources, in contexts of scarcity, attributing behaviour to either has profound ramifications. The ways in which the distinctions between these two rules of intelligibility impact subjectivation and practices were exposed during the conversation with Beatriz from Escuela Los Bellotos.

> Considering the support from the special education teacher and the psychologist, the curricular adaptations, the support outside the classroom and the incorporation of the family in the process, students from the Integration Programme should not be retained. But it happens. Now, if a student with Special Educational Needs is retained, we ask the Integration Staff for all the information regarding what was done to support that student. (…) [When the inclusion staff mention that a student with a SEN diagnosis is at risk of being retained I say to them] 'ok, but I want to know what you have done, what the family has done, what the teacher has done, to prevent the retention of this student', and they say to me 'yeah, you are right'. If they did all this, then I can say to the parents 'we did all this…' Because a commonplace is just to say 'the student is not mature enough to be promoted to the next grade'. They say this all the time. Everybody uses that concept, the teacher, the parents, brothers, sisters, everybody uses it. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, October 2017. Beatriz. Senior Leader).*

Interactions and distinctions between immaturity and psychopathology narratives seemed implicated in interpretations of students' 'deficits' as much as in the approaches that educators developed towards these children. Beatriz's statement reflects the reservations that she and other school leaders had regarding the retention of students who had been diagnosed as having SEN, the importance they usually gave to the intervention designed to address these diagnoses, and the obstacles and conditions required by the schools' authorities to 'agree' with using grade retention in the case of these particular students.

At the same time, the senior leader exposed a tension between school leaders and teachers regarding the provision of 'inclusive interventions'. Immaturity claims appeared to be being used by teachers to manage SEN through grade retention practices instead of providing support consistent with the Integration Programme. In her comment, Beatriz criticised the lightness with which immaturity assertions were used by teachers to justify non-promotion without taking the appropriate actions to prevent it. In Beatriz's description of teachers' positions, an im/maturity discourse appeared to 'overrule' diagnosis and responses to SEN and established retention as necessarily the path to follow. This highlights that the material effects (retention or progression) of particular behaviours/dispositions do not depend on the performances themselves but rather on the ways in which individuals are performatively constituted through them. While a SEN diagnosis discouraged retention, 'immaturity indicators' in the same child (identified by the same attributes) appeared to make it necessary. Despite their gentle and short-term appearance, immaturity claims had profound persistent effects on school identities and the implementation of inclusive regulations within the lower level of primary education.

They appeared to be a ‘nicer’, less ‘committed’ way to invoke psychopathology and a ‘softer’ explanation supporting ‘hard’ practices.

In Miguel’s case, an attention deficit hyperactivity syndrome had been diagnosed. Although his teachers mentioned this disorder as independent from immaturity, in practice it was very difficult to distinguish between them. The majority of behaviours that teachers associate with the boy’s immaturity (such as excessive movement and difficulties sustaining attention, following instructions or finishing schoolwork) are also part of the ADHD diagnosis (according to psychiatric descriptions). However, in spite of the overlaps between the ‘symptoms’ of both ‘conditions’, these descriptive categories were made very distinctive within the teachers’ accounts. They felt more comfortable staying in the ‘immaturity arena’. Miguel’s immaturity was portrayed as his primary ‘problem’ and the cause of his difficulties fulfilling educational expectations. Explanations regarding his retention were connected exclusively to claims of immaturity. For its part, the diagnostic for ADHD appeared secondary in educators’ narratives of Miguel, mainly addressed in relation to the use of psychostimulant medication. In this way, a single performance might trigger very different educational responses according to the category under which is defined. While Miguel’s psychopathology appeared to justify the use of medication, his immaturity seemed to back grade retention despite his diagnosis of SEN.

Whereas the examination of immaturity and psychopathology interactions reaffirms the significant influence of an inclusion discourse over grade retention dynamics, it also suggests that they include reterritorializing strategies by which –

under new parameters - the same ‘impossible learners’ that were previously retained can remain ‘impossible students’ subject to retention.

Polysemous citations, circumscribed meaning

Im/maturity claims involved normalising developmental and psychiatric discourses as places of validation and reference but were practised in ways that exceed and were distinctive from them. These claims were far from the defined categories and symptoms that are officially associated with each mental disorder in globally sanctioned psychiatric compendiums. Nor could they be located in the much more diverse, complex and debated spectrum of developmental theories. Judgments of immaturity were neutralised and accepted as ‘scientific truths’ without the need to follow rules of ‘scientific validation’ or the pedagogic commitments such diagnostics entailed. An important part of the productive power of the immaturity discourse was based on this capacity to invoke a scientific status while, at the same time, inaugurating rules of possibility exempt from the constraints of its definitions and methods.

Although these assertions shed some light on the grounds of im/maturity discourse, questions regarding what ‘immaturity’ *is* within the primary school remain open. The flexibility and ambiguity with which the concept was utilised within the educational context complicates a straightforward answer.

At first glance, ‘immaturity’ seems to take almost any meaning. In this sense, ‘immaturity’ appears as a ‘floating signifier’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1987); an unspecified form susceptible to take any symbolic content. The endless accounts of attitudes,

behaviours and attributes that were considered expressions of immaturity in the context of grade retention reflected the polysemy with which the concept was used.

During conversations with members of the participant schools, not only did different people use the concept in very different ways but also the same person might use it to refer to many different things. Examples of immaturity from a singular student could encapsulate a variety of conditions and behaviours. In Miguel's case, for example, his teachers identified several ways in which his immaturity manifested; his difficulty finishing his exams and school activities, his failure to deliver homework, his lack of concentration during lessons, his tendency to move around the classroom instead of staying still at his desk, his inability to prepare his backpack autonomously, and his 'younger' physical appearance were all part of it. Across schools, 'low levels of autonomy', 'low self-esteem', 'apprehensiveness', 'lack of self-care', 'cognitive limitations', 'low toleration of frustration', 'irresponsibility', 'oppositional/disruptive behaviour', 'low respect for teacher's authority', 'lack of school habits', 'non-proactive attitudes towards the school', 'low motivation to study and success', 'learning difficulties', and motor or phonological 'problems' were interpreted, in different contexts, as immaturity-related characteristics in the early grades.

While this long list stresses the 'floating' character of the concept, it also challenges the 'emptiness' of the 'immature' signifier functioning as a definition of individual deficiency. 'Immaturity' emerged as an 'abnormality wild card' as long as such abnormality produced 'innate' educational impossibility. In this way, students' immaturity could be anything that stepped outside the schools' needs, values, or regulatory frameworks. There were many ways to cross the limits of acceptability/maturity. The overdetermination of the 'immature' signifier makes it

‘suitable’ for educators describing *any* cognitive, emotional or behavioural mismatch to schools’ expectations.

The closeness of concepts of development, learning and education in early primary school facilitates a convergency between pedagogical, disciplinary and developmental understandings and aims at this educational level. An equivalence between ‘maturational normality’ and ‘student normality’ gives educational goals an appearance of neutrality and naturalness borrowed from scientific discourses on child development in these initial years. ‘Maturity’ is not ‘an issue’ for the school, since it is a default state of harmony with educational goals. It symbolises assimilation, fitting in, homogeneity and suitability to and for school demands and structure. Immaturity, on the other hand, names that which does not align to school requirements, or which hinders the ‘normal functioning’ of the school.

In Miguel´s case, his ‘tole-tole’ identity seemed to have more to do with the school’s needs for maximising discipline and achievement than with any criteria of motor or general development. In this way, I would suggest that he was not retained because his learning or developmental process was ‘behind’ what was expected for his class. Rather, what was ‘behind’ was his adaptation to the needs and goals of the school and, by this, his recognition as ‘subject to schooling’. In his case, as in many others, immaturity became an expression of developmental regimes of truths accommodated to schools’ needs and teachers’ disciplinary endeavours.

Impossible students, impossible pedagogies

The simultaneous flexibility and authority of im/maturity narratives facilitates their employment as ‘default explanations’ of students’ difficulties. Immaturity was

usually claimed to explain what was happening with a student whose source of 'educational struggle' was unknown. Immaturity seemed like a plausible justification for students' apparent deficits when other explanations were not available, unacceptable or not desirable within a particular schooling setting.

During the interview with Betsabé, the special education teacher of Escuela Los Bellotos, she commented on the case of a boy who had been retained at the school in 2nd grade. Faced with doubts regarding his conduct before retention and his later behavioural change, this professional provided im/maturity explanations.

> I remember that when that child was in 2nd grade for the first time he never stayed inside the classroom, it was very difficult for us, we had to negotiate with him. And when he did 2nd grade again it was not like that. (…) My theory is that he had a developmental delay, something that generated those difficulties because at that time I had noticed that the boy would learn something one day and the following day he had forgotten about it. And I remember thinking 'why?' So, I started to think that maybe there was a maturation issue. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, March 2018. Betsabé, Special Education Teacher).*

As part of their professional duties, teachers – and especially SEN staff - are asked to make sense of students' educational processes and maladjustments to school demands. The im/mature discourse provides a site of credible and acceptable responses which does not involve pedagogical scrutiny or the examination of any other element pertaining to the school. Immaturity explanations are born, develop and die in the private sphere of concerns about particular students; they barely reach the educational/pedagogical/professional domain. As educational requirements and judgments appear aligned with patterns of 'normal childhood development', primary schools are seen as natural places in which students must spontaneously fit unless

they have an inner problem that – as independent from the school - has to be privately and internally managed.

Moreover, immaturity claims were made when the actions carried out by the school in order to obtain the required outcomes from children were unsuccessful. The following account from Adela, the 1st grade teacher in Escuela Andalhue, illustrates this phenomenon.

> …of the 30 children in my class, only one is at risk of being retained because with the rest we have worked on their school plans. With him, we did not succeed because it is a cognitive issue, a maturational one. *(Escuela Andalhue. Interview, November, 2017. Adela. 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

As this account illustrates, assertions of immaturity foreclosed the possibility of thinking about alternative explanations or solutions in relation to both what was happening with the student, and also what was happening with the school. Consistently, when the maturity concept was triggered, pedagogical endeavours were halted. To some extent, this point resembles Harwood and Allan's (2014) reflections on how the psychopathology industry has replaced pedagogy and educational considerations in British schools. According to them, the pathologisation discourse is so powerful that it obscures other interpretations of what is happening with students who are named under psychiatric labels and the role that the school may play in it. In Chile, where inclusive policies have recently moderated the power of psychopathologisation to operate in this way, 'immaturity' seems to have taken over the role of a compelling deficit discourse that creates 'hopeless cases' (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 134) unsuitable for pedagogic intervention at young ages. Under this discourse, schools are prevented from (or perhaps spared from the need to)

addressing difficult questions, inquiring into their pedagogic practices, revising their educational objectives, or being held accountable for their students' educational fates.

The performative constitution of impossible students

At the end of the school year, several 'transfer meetings' were held in Colegio Jesús Misionero[66]. These consisted of each class teacher presenting her class to the teacher who would take them on in the following year. Not only the two teachers, but all the educators working with the class or at the same educational stage (senior leaders, teachers, special education teachers, the psychologist etc) were present and participated in the discussion. The expositions started by the retiring class teacher mentioned the characteristics of her class in terms of defined categories including "punctuality and attendance", "responsibility and attitude towards work", "respect for authority", "behaviour", and "respect between classmates". Although the aim seemed to be to describe the class as a whole, attention inevitably deviated to specific students who did not fulfil school expectations on each matter. Next, the discussion purposely focused on children classified as "students with complementary care", "students with behavioural problems", "students with language difficulties", "students with low achievement in maths", and "less hard working students." In many cases, the same student was examined repeatedly under each of these labels. The focus was clearly on to those students in each grade who were perceived by the class teacher as 'problematic' or 'deficient'.

66 Date: December, 2017.

This specific event, in which students' identities are revealed and settled according to specific categories, encapsulates the subjectivating process operating day to day within the schools. This whole deployment can be understood as an act of discursive performativity that consecrates the production of particular students' identities – especially the 'deviant' ones – based on grouping and differentiation. These constructions framed the possibilities and obligations placed on both children and teachers. Educators' identities and professional worth were also involved in these processes. Narrowing the boundaries within which students could be recognised also defines educational practices and stances under which teachers can engage with those students. Since an essential component of teachers' competency and legitimacy lies in their ability to manage and deploy classificatory techniques (Ball, 2013), they are also compelled to regulate their practices in ways that make sense in relation to the categories of students' identity already operative. Challenging educational constraints - of which students constitutions are part - represents a risk for professional teachers' viability (Teague, 2018).

During the 1st grade class presentation, Miguel's case was examined under two grouping categories: 'students with complementary care' and 'students with behavioural problems´. There was no 'immaturity' category, but as soon as Miguel was introduced (under the first classification) Jimena rushed to explain that "His major problem is his immaturity, something that will always accompany him." She went to go on to disclose his premature birth, his father's dubious parenting style and the myriad of 'tole-tole' features attributed to him. In this way, Jimena conveyed to Macarena (his 2nd grade teacher for the following year) the limits and norms of Miguel's intelligibility and the fixed meanings under which the boy should continue to

be available to his new class teacher. One after the other, Jimena's claims buried any other hint of the child, until Miguel was not Miguel anymore, he was not a student anymore, nor was he a boy. The only thing remaining were the multiple sources of his 'impossibility' as a recognisable school student. Everything else was erased until he was only intelligible in terms of an imaginary place in which all meaning has been reduced to his 'immaturity'. This was now the boundary that delimited and fixed Miguel's educational identity then and, as it was expected that this would 'be transferred' ("always accompany him"), in the future.

This was an occasion in which the distinctions and entanglements articulated by Butler (1994) between performance and performativity were markedly manifested. What was overtly being discussed by this group of educators was students' performances. The categories they discussed were descriptors of acts their students displayed based on what they considered to be their nature and preferences. Those actions were portrayed as defining educational relationships and fates, while the school remained a neutral agent confined to reacting to such inputs. In this way, transfer meetings were part of the schools' institutionalised practices that supported performativity while hiding the contextual production of students' labels behind the logic of performance (Butler, 1990). The meetings were links in a long chain of repetitions in which fictitious expressive identities were made, transmitted and sanctioned through the engine of the schools' material and symbolic requirements and normative frameworks.

The effects of these performative operations on educational exclusions were displayed when the meeting continued and Miguel´s case was cited for a second time by his class teacher. His 'immature nature' and the reasons behind it had already

been exposed in reference to his need for additional (psychiatric) care, but his name came up again as one of the students categorised as having behavioural problems. As soon as he was named, Mónica (Senior Leader) interrupted Jimena to say “But he won’t be with Macarena next year”- she was assuming that he would repeat 1st grade again. To Mónica’s surprise Jimena and other teachers explained that Miguel was actually being promoted to 2nd grade this time.

The Senior Leader’s intervention can be understood as a ‘natural reaction’ in relation to Jimena’s previous account on the boy. The exchanges between these educators are revealed as an occasion in which “different planes of producing meaning [within educational daily settings] converge around the concepts that make them real” (Matus, 2019, p. 137). That performative act positioned Miguel such that he must necessarily be excluded from advancing with his class. As he had been made intelligible within a framework of failure and exception, the coherent response from the school leader was to cast him out. Monica’s interruption positioned him as an ‘impossible student’ who exceeded recognition as a pupil about to being promoted to 2nd grade. At this point, he was not only an unsuccessful 1st grade student, but a subject that did not belong to his 1st t grade class; once again, his recognition within the class had been removed. To the Senior Leader, the im/maturity discourse in which Miguel’s performance was anchored made him an unreachable (unteachable) 2nd grade student. To some extent, this was a misunderstanding; the boy was going to progress to 2nd grade the following year. However, Mónica’s perception reveals the underlying processes by which an intelligible student is made an impossible one and the fragile lines of legitimacy by which ‘undesirable students’ move. In this way, when immature causes are claimed, as in this example, not only does the illusionary

become defined and unquestionable identities crystallise, but so too do the corresponding educational trajectories.

While the immaturity discourse fades, the productive power of grade retention remains

While the im/maturity discourse has a powerful performative effect on students' ('impossible') subjectivation in the early years of schooling, its influence on constituting pupils' identities as well as its power to justify educational failure reduces in the higher grades.

As has been argued, developmental claims are more accepted and normalised ways to subjectivate younger children. School actors usually explained the convenience of retaining immature students as an opportunity to place them in a group of children more developmentally similar in the hope that this would automatically 'normalise' them within the school process. However - as the research on the topic shows in line with the evidence gathered in this study - in many cases grade retention does not fulfil the 'renormalisation' expectation of educators. When measurements to 'overcome' whatever has been named as immaturity do not achieve the expected outcomes, other explanations and abnormality discourses take their place to sustain viable undesirable identities and justify subsequent educational failure.

The case of Miguel is illustrative of how abnormality claims quickly evolve within the early years of primary school from references to development to alternative constitutions. In the first stage of the fieldwork (while Miguel was in 1st grade for the

second time) his subjectivation as an impossible student was almost exclusively attributed to his presumed immaturity, and his retention was portrayed as having had a significant remedial effect in that regard.

> Now [doing 1st grade for the second time] Miguel is doing very well. He has matured… a bit (laugh). He is still immature, but he is better now. I mean, if he had progressed to 2nd grade it would have been worse. Now he is excellent, his reading is great, his writing is great, maths… he reads and answers the examinations with the rest of the class. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, November, 2017. Jimena, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

However, when I returned to the school the following academic year, I found the educators' narratives had shifted regarding both Miguel's position of deviance and his academic progress. My conversation with the class teacher who received him in 2nd grade is indicative of that transition.

Macarena: In terms of learning, Miguel struggles. He has many difficulties in that respect. There is a reason behind students' retention; they have more learning difficulties, that is their problem.

(…)

Alejandra: Can you already predict whether some of your students might repeat second grade at the end of this school year?

Macarena: What I have seen so far is that some students' learning process is slower; they write slower. But I think you can work on that. Apart from that… well, I need lots of extra time to explain things to Miguel. He was retained before. In maths, I always go straight to Miguel because I know that he has not understood what I have just explained. (…) Miguel is the student who is more at risk of being retained this year. He

(Continued on next page)

> struggles, he has severe difficulties in his learning process. I know that last year the possibility of him being retained again was on the table because he struggles so much. His second time in 1st grade was also problematic. He is the only one I remember having commented about with Jimena. They asked me to keep an eye on him because he was having so many difficulties… Yes, definitely Miguel. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, March 2018. Macarena, 2nd Grade Class Teacher).*

Less than a month after the beginning of the school year Miguel's second grade teacher had already given up hope for his chances of progressing to 3rd grade. On the one hand, the way in which he has been constituted as unavailable to educational recognition by his new teacher does not come from a couple of weeks of observation but refers to the historical subjectivating operations undertaken by the institution since the beginning of Miguel's schooling (and the historicity of all of the cases 'like' him who came before). Macarena based her perception of Miguel in his previous relationship with the school; his previous retention, the difficulties described in the previous year, and the request from his previous teachers that she 'keep an eye' on his deficits. There was an enduring deviant/deficit identity that she has been asked to recognise and has reproduced. On the other hand, there had also been a substantial shift in the understanding of and approach to the child. In the first account (and throughout this chapter), and in the previous year, the immaturity discourse was the channel through which Miguel was made a subject of the school, along with some references to his ADHD diagnosis. His 'tole-tole' identity was entirely contained in that field of understanding. By the time he had progressed to the 2nd grade, not only had these means of recognition disappeared but so had the remarks about him being an intelligent and 'brilliant' child who was making 'excellent' progress at the school after his retention. Now he was described as a student with severe, persistent and

apparently ineluctable learning difficulties. These new formations of impossibility offer no escape from a failed future educational trajectory to the point that – despite the many learning difficulties attributed to him – he was not among the group of students in that class who were offered additional support. He was placed beyond the pale.

Harwood and Allan (2014) have described a trajectory schools follow, from rescuing small children identified as ‘abnormal’, through optimisation and special interventions, to the containment of ’insurmountable deficiency’ of older students. They propose that, while educators remain optimistic about the corrective effects of remedial measures to address disorderly children of primary age, by the time children reach secondary school the hope is over. Interventions directed to ‘normalise’ the child are replaced by those aimed at ‘management’ of their dangerous potential and their negative impact on others. The evidence collected in this study suggests that, in some educational contexts and when students from the retained spectrum are considered, this process might evolve in a more accelerated fashion.

Colegio Jesús Misionero seems to be an example of such contexts. In my observations in the 2nd grade class, I also perceived a significant change in the educational approach of the new teacher and Miguel’s position in the class. Macarena was very strict and constantly reprimanded students who broke the disciplinary rules. Discipline had become central to every lesson. In first grade, Miguel was usually allowed to be more active than his classmates inside the classroom and maintained close physical proximity with Jimena. He used to sit on her chair or stay under her desk, went to the front to hug her, and sometimes he walked behind her following her while she walked around the classroom. In general, the rules were more relaxed for him and his participation within the lessons involved a physical

display. In his new class, no exceptions were made and there was no disciplinary tolerance shown towards him. Miguel had become significantly less active and less restless during the lessons. He still frequently lost concentration and was constantly moving in his chair, but his behaviour had started to align more with the 'normal-disciplined' child. He stayed at his desk and did not move around as before. At the same time, he had become less 'visible' during the class. He rarely actively participated. Sometimes he raised his hand, but he put it down after a few seconds without participating. When the teacher addressed him directly about the lesson, he usually provided a wrong answer or stayed silent until she turned to the next student. Overall, his conduct and adherence to disciplinary norms had become more normalised to the same extent as his willingness to engage and participate in the class has declined.

The new definitions from which Miguel was called seemed to have had a performative effect on his attitude and bodily expression. Although it is difficult to formulate a thorough explanation of his change, I might suggest that the way in which Miguel's new teacher had constituted him as a student with learning difficulties, the emphasis on discipline in the second grade class, and the effects of the developmental frames of understanding together with the subjectivating effects of grade retention practices were all elements implicated in the educational assemblage that had impacted who Miguel *was allowed* to be and how he could manifest as a second grade student. To the disavowal of his physical ability had been added a withdrawal of the recognition of his academic capabilities. Moreover, if Miguel was to be retained for a second time – and considering that the norm that allows the exclusion of students who have been retained twice is often applied in Colegio Jesús

Misionero – the risk was not only to his belonging to the class but also his continuity in the School.

Beyond the disciplinary implications that this case entails (further discussed in next chapter), Miguel's story exposes how grade retention affects how students are perceived by their teachers, how they are treated, the way in which they can conceive themselves within their educational context, their lasting educational identities and their educational trajectories. Miguel was just starting primary school and already he had been created as an impossible student at risk of permanent exclusion. He had stepped beyond the 'good and bad student' continuum of recognition, becoming unintelligible as 'subject of schooling' not just in the present time but also in the future. It was not 'just' that he had not made sense as a second grade student (as his retention in first grade might have suggested), but he had started not making sense as a student at all.

This case illustrates how the arrangements of the grade retention ensemble move and change. The categories through which some children were made intelligible as retained or candidates for retention underwent alterations, revisions and displacements. Nevertheless, these fluctuations did not seem to scatter the rigid lines of recognition that rendered them non-viable students. Instead, they seem to be reterritorializing forces that reinforce and crystallise those molar subjectivating formations. Like Miguel, many retained students were inaugurated into a path of subjectivating operations in which their identities as viable students were put in jeopardy. They became trapped in a call that hailed them as substantial, abiding and irredeemable 'impossible subjects of education'.

The next section examines the constitution of retained students in higher primary grades where im/maturity discourse lose strength and other discursive framework take its place.

The constitution of retained students in upper primary education

Continuities and distinctions

Unlike ‘immaturity’ in early grades, there was no one signifier that condensed the multiple sites of ‘impossibility’ for those who were retained in the upper grades of primary schools (5th and 6th grade in the Chilean case). When educators described such students or explained the causes of their retention they cited a myriad of characteristics deemed to lead young people to deviate from school disciplinary values such as respect for authority, compliance, docility, self-regulation and productivity: laziness, apathy, disengagement, irresponsibility, shamelessness, disrespect, opposition, disruptiveness, and aggression.

To some extent, this proposes a continuity with the production of students from the retained spectrum in lower grades. There was a distinct superposition between the ‘flaws’ identified as preventing students from satisfying evaluative and disciplinary requirements in initial and final grades of primary school. Essentially, children’s incommensurability with educational understandings and goals was, in both cases, the basis of unintelligible studenthood.

At the same time, there were relevant distinctions regarding the grounds over which deviation and undesirability of young and older students were articulated within

the grade retention ensemble. The same features understood as organic abnormality in early grades tended to be considered as attitudinal and moral deficiency as students progressed through primary school. Although in both cases 'student impossibility' (and subsequent failure) was constituted as an inner property; in the first case students were portrayed as victims of inner 'developmental' deficits, while in the second they were considered active agents of their own deficiency and defeat. The attitudinal and moral deficits painted students as *resisting* regulatory technologies of coercion and control, as well as the 'governmentality' processes (Foucault, 1991) that aligned institutionalised educational goals to personal inclinations and desires. In Rose's terms (1999), they can be described as subjects who refused to incorporate the "ethic of discipline" as part of their "very mental fabric" (p. 227). This idea of deliberate resistance seemed to eclipse explanations of 'involuntary inadequacy' such as those usually related to 'immaturity', 'inability', 'psychopathology' or 'SEN'.

This established a rift in educators' perceptions of the level of control they had regarding 'educational dysfunction'. In so far as educators perceived that children's agency over 'their impossibility' increased, their own power over the educational situation that involved them was considered diminished. This impacted their approach to older students from the retained spectrum and modified their emotional engagement with them. 'Voluntary deviation' was read as an uncontrollable threat that augmented educators' distress faced with these students.

Alejandra: In general, how is the experience of receiving students who were retained the previous year?

(Continued on next page)

> Pilar: Here, in this school, it is frightening. Because we know that they are contentious children, we already know what they are like. Those who are retained are not untroublesome children. They are quite disruptive children, so we are aware that they mean trouble. *(Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta. Interview, October 2017. Pilar, 6th Grade Class Teacher).*

By not referring to any 'real' student but the 'prospect' of them, this teacher provided a significant account of the common meanings and rules of viability through which these children were constituted. The system of knowledge that framed grade retention and their 'actors' was in place before they even 'existed'. Pilar did not need to actually know the retained students she was due to receive to identify them as deviant individuals whose 'disruptiveness' would be inconvenient and threatening for the school and for herself. The affective response towards these children anticipated impossibility had been determined *in advance*. Fear and anxiety were acknowledged by Pilar as feelings aroused by the foreseen incorporation of new students retained the previous year. She was predisposed towards them in this way. In this, she was not a detached disciplinary agent or a simple spectator of school grade retention practices, but she was attitudinally and emotionally invested in them. Her identity and place within the school was framed by the regulatory technologies that sustained institutional disciplinary power over her as it did for her students. When retained students' behaviour 'unsettled' or 'threatened' such technologies, professional positions and practices seemed disturbed in ways that provoked strong emotions.

Students retained in the upper primary grades in Chile were usually those who were conceived as a *risk* in the school context. This does not just refer to any danger, but a threat to the cornerstone of the school as a disciplinary neoliberal institution.

Not only did these children seem to endanger their own recognition as subjects of schooling, but they also manifested the fallibility and fragility of the institutional positions and orders that subjectivated them to such a position in the first place. By this movement, they threatened to scatter the endurance of these constitutive arrangements. These were not just 'bad' students (positioned in a place of deviance from the ideal and the norm), but - as many retained students from lower levels of primary school also were – they were 'impossible' (incommensurable with educational discourses). Beyond this, their subjectivities were put in radical opposition to educational significance and threatened to collapse meaning and order. Drawing on Kristeva's definition of abjection (1982) and Youdell's (2011) use of the term in the educational context, these students can be defined as 'abject subjects.' Their potential to disturb and transgress meaning was coupled with a radical condemnation and a forceful cancellation from the system they endangered (in this case, the school and the educational system). In this sense, when students retained in upper primary school were positioned as abject, they were simultaneously located in this double play which both *made* them a risk and put them *at* risk.

Hostility towards these students was so ingrained in the school community that it became the only 'sensible' response to their intolerable and harmful 'moral deficit'. School leaders, teachers, classmates and carers tended to naturalise, justify and expect the discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion of these children. Within this dynamic, the justification of grade retention tended to display a (unstable) shift from a response to biologic deviation in early grades to a more coercive and punitive strategy as students grew older.

Juan: An abject subject within the school

The story of Juan, a primary student from Colegio Jesús Misionero who was on the verge of being retained in 5th grade for a second time, illuminates the main components of the subjectivation of abject identities within the grade retention ensemble.

From the first conversations with Juan's class teacher (Martina), her perception of Juan's wilful misalignment with School's orders and identities was exposed.

> Martina: Juan is a boy who was retained last year, this is not his class, the 6th grade class is the one he was always in. He has good cognitive abilities, he does not have any problem. He understands and when he pays attention, everything is perfect. But he has an attitude very… like passive, he does not actively refuse to do the things, but he doesn't do them. He doesn't do anything. 'Juan, why you haven't done anything of your work?' (she stares into emptiness, imitating him) ten hours like that. He can stay looking at me like that during the whole class, and he doesn't open his mouth. It is as if he had already given up, as if he has given up from the very beginning. It has been so difficult to motivate him, I mean impossible, and it is something that happens with every teacher… he just doesn't do it. (…) I feel it is something completely psychological as if he were not able to cope with this… like 'comedown' he has. Although I do not see him depressed, because he plays and he is happy but… no…. he doesn't want to. He doesn't want anything to do with the school. I believe that he feels incapable and… however, I don't think is much like that because he does well when he does the things. Here all the students have a notion about why they are studying, and they want to get good grades… Juan doesn't care about it.

(Continued on next page)

Alejandra: And, why he was retained last year?

Martina: For the same reason. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, October 2017. Martina, 5th Grade Class Teacher).*

In this exchange Martina did not attribute Juan's past and prospective retentions to a lack of ability or competence, but to an attitudinal and moral flaw. In subsequent conversations and observations, the teacher reinforced this idea by describing Juan as 'intelligent', 'able to solve mathematical problems easily' and able to 'get everything' regarding curricular content. At some point, she mentioned that Juan might feel 'incapable', but she quickly dismissed the idea because of her 'evidence' that he had academic capacities. Something similar happened when faced with the possibility of him going through an emotional struggle. From her perspective, his 'attitude of disengagement' from the school was the cause of his retentions. His disengagement is mainly attributed to a passive, unproductive and unmotivated stance that prevented his dispositions and aspirations aligning with those promoted by the school.

Using the distinction between learners and students – in which the first relates to learning and the second to 'studenthood' – it might be suggested that (as with Miguel's case) although Juan was presented as a viable learner, he was unintelligible as a student. For his teacher, the problem did not seem to be Juan's inability to learn or perform but his 'passive' resistance towards school regulatory technologies. His 'deviance' was located at the level of his attitude towards the evaluative and disciplinary logics that permeated the neoliberal Chilean schooling system, rather than his capacity to fulfil them. He could behave as requested, he could study and

get good marks if he wanted, but he “does not care about it”. Furthermore, according to his teacher, he was deceitful and “act[ed] as if he were unable to do it”. More than his academic results, or even his behaviour itself, what was identified as having triggered Juan’s retention was a matter of character. In this way, the teacher identified an unbearable moral flaw in the boy that separate him from recognisable studenthood. When describing Juan’s case during the Class Transfer Meeting, Martina portrayed him as an “intelligent”, “charming”, “manipulator” and as someone who “acts as if he cares about you, but at the end is not true”. Educators also reproved Juan’s social behaviour towards younger children at the school, stopping him playing with them. I perceived the majority of the staff’s intense anxiety and rejection of Juan. When educators talked about Juan, they seemed to be referring to a corrupt adult rather than to a twelve year old student. As he was no longer recognised as a meaningful student in this educational space, and was also unrecognisable as a child since the only possible place for a child in a school is as a student, he became a threatening presence endangering school boundaries and orders, and even the integrity of its members.

While the ‘normal(ised)’ children accept the fundamental deprivation implicated in the possibility of belonging to the institutional culture, a child like Juan transgresses his dependence to the symbolic universe of the school by not only rejecting some limits and rules but also by exposing the precariousness of those rules and even ‘taking advantage’ of them. By this motion, and beyond his intelligibility as learner, he is rendered an abject student; an unthinkable and intolerable figure evicted from the school’s systems of recognition; in other words, he is unrecognisable within the subjectivating school discourse. Traces of this ‘miss-

affiliation' can be found in the description of Juan as having "a very weird attitude", being "tough to read" or "living in his word, in a parallel reality". Signs of his abjection can be found in the small and apparently insignificant daily events that constituted Juan's story and determined an outcome in which his whole permanence/existence within the institution was compromised.

It is relevant to notice that, far from revealing the boy's inner character (as claimed by the educators), Juan's abject position is a performative expression (Butler, 1990) of the symbolic universe of his school. The disturbance the abject exercises over systems, orders, positions, rules and limits, depends on the identity of these structures. All members of Colegio Jesús Misionero, described the institution as 'high performance', meaning that academic demands were high and that the school achieved better scores in the standardised test than other, similar institutions. As a school, it was intensely invested in competitive education logics in an already highly neoliberal educational system. The recognition system embedded in neoliberal values not only requires learning attainments but also demands an optimal student characterised by her/his efficiency, responsibility, self-sufficiency and internal motivation to learn (Bradbury, 2013). Such a student is willing to recognise their level of achievement using the school's evaluative tools and to give themselves over to the competition system. The regulatory technologies that define the school processes of subjectivation are subjected to this expectation. Juan's 'disengagement from the school' – his transgression to the institutional *laws* - was a disavowal of these moral standards and a hazard to their sustainability. Outside the neoliberal and 'performative logics' (Ball, 2013) defining meaningful discourse at this school,

subjects became ‘unreadable’, and ‘weird’, they stepped outside ‘reality’ and, ultimately, became unrecognisable and threatening beings.

Stories like this were not uncommon across the schools I visited. Disengagement from (neoliberal) meritocracy logics and undisciplined behaviour – the two crucial elements to Juan’s abjection - were repeated over and over in different educational contexts as the grounds of students’ attitudinal and moral deficits. Young people retained at the higher levels of primary school shared the ‘abjection mark’ of being described by educators as uncommitted (and threatening) to the productive and disciplinary logics that configure the neoliberal school’s institutional existence.

Unproductiveness

Across the upper primary grades, students from the retained spectrum were generally portrayed as failing to conform to the neoliberal meritocratic logics of students’ worth – measured through evaluation and competition – that cast social opportunity as a matter of effort and personal choice. ‘Productivity’ here is not (mainly) about achievement or final results but an individual’s disposition to engage in schoolwork and examination. Disengagement or lack of commitment towards the educational process - as the reason of retention - were usually analogue to ‘laziness’ (or euphemisms), while positive references to ‘commitment’, ‘effort’, and ‘responsibility’, were associated with grade promotion.

The following conversation with Pablo, Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta’s Headteacher, illustrates how this logic was articulated.

> Students who should be retained are those who do not make an effort to be promoted during the year, those who do not work. There are students who have difficulties achieving good grades, but if they make an effort and everything ‘ok, you earned a 4,0 [minimum grade to approve]', and they are promoted… because they showed interest. Those students let’s say, within their limitations, showed interest. Those are the students who are worth it. In contrast, the ones who did nothing during the school year… why would we promote them? (…) The main reasons for grade retention are laziness and low support from the parents. *(Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta. Interview, October 2017. Pablo, Headteacher).*

Implied in this account is the idea that retention is not about children’s capacities to learn or obtain good grades but the interest and effort (or the lack of it) educators perceive them to put into fulfilling the schools’ expectations and engagement with educational processes. ‘Worth’ – or the justification of difference and opportunity within the neoliberal educational scenario - is defined by the (perceived) moral character of the students (and their families, as it will be discussed below) beyond their performance or learning competence. Even students who do not perform well can be acceptable if they commit to the evaluative logics that sustain the illusion of a neoliberal meritocracy. Those who transgress them, on the other hand, endanger the most significant tool schools have to govern children (and parents) (Ball, 2003, 2013).

The ‘inclusive narratives’ that have impacted the school context and (as has been argued) have redefined the ‘grade retention ensemble’ did not escape the logics of the ‘optimal neoliberal learner’. As the next accounts show, students diagnosed with SEN and those participating in a ‘School Integration Programme’ were *excused from* displaying academic abilities but not from demonstrating neoliberal commitments to educational productivity.

> I think the difference [between students from the School Integration Program who are promoted and those from the same Program who are retained] is their perseverance, the effort the child puts in. Because, even if I have many difficulties but I make an effort, I am responsible, I bring my school materials, and so on, those are things that will help me. But some kids don't care about it, they are not motivated, they don't visualise it, they don't consider it relevant. I think that's the difference. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, March 2018. Betsabé, Special Education Teacher).*

> The profile of students that maybe shouldn't be retained are children who are clearly diagnosed, for whom being retained will do nothing positive. On the contrary, I think grade retention will do something rather negative to them. Well, now, this type of child must also demonstrate responsibility, interest, commitment…. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, May 2018. Marta, Senior Leader).*

The inclusion discourse has rendered students diagnosed with SEN viable 'subjects of schooling' under mechanisms of social order and regulation. Although 'specialness' still carries abnormality and deficit significances (Youdell, 2006), the classification enables 'possible Others'. Students identified as having SEN and incorporated to integration programmes still remained outside recognition as a 'Same'/good/desirable learner, however, they could (in many cases) escape abjection. The difference between acceptable and unacceptable Others did not seem to depend then on learning outcomes or academic ability but on the display of neoliberal meritocracy and conformity to school.

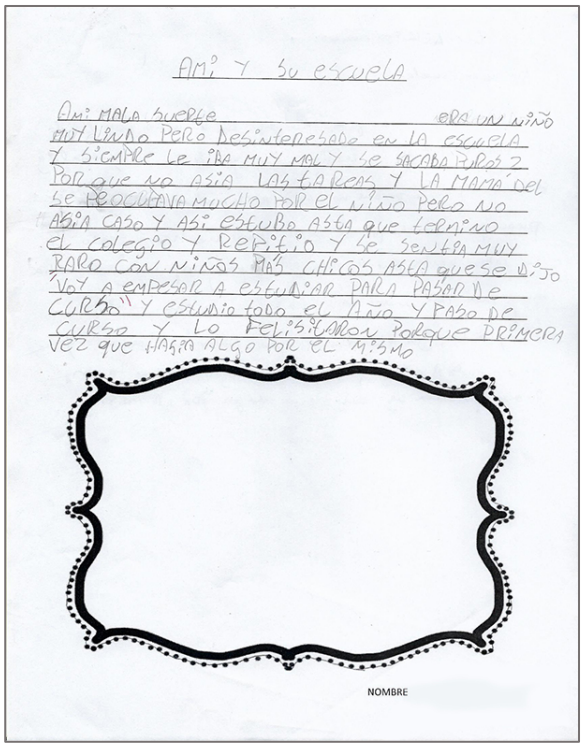
Marta's account illustrates the penetration of the 'integration discourse' even in a privately administrated school that was not implementing the School Integration Program (PIE). It also exposes the persistent implications of moralities that disturbed schools' neoliberal investments. While she appeared convinced that grade retention harmed students "clearly diagnosed [has having SEN]", this did not seem enough to

dismiss it as an option; they had *also* to display 'engaged attitudes'. What is implicit in this comment is that, under certain conditions of abjection, grade retention must be applied even when it is admittedly unfavourable for the child. This highlights the restricted convergence between 'what is best' for the school, on the one hand, and for its students, on the other hand. Although educational narratives usually justified retention processes as educative opportunities, casual remarks and experiences of daily school life exposed logics of punishment, exclusion and dispossession.

Children participated in these frameworks of knowledge. They had all been (in part) subjectivated as students by the connection between grade retention and abjection that they assumed and reproduced. Like any other, the regime of truth sustaining grade retention practices and understandings operated through a general consensus/knowledge that also (and especially) involved those bodies more directly coerced by it.

The drawings and stories generated by 5th grade students reflected this. The attitudinal and moral deficit involved in educators' characterisation of students from the retained spectrum was repeated in the representations children made of them. On the next pages, I present three students' drawings/stories that expose the association, made in several of them, between grade retention and 'unproductivity'.

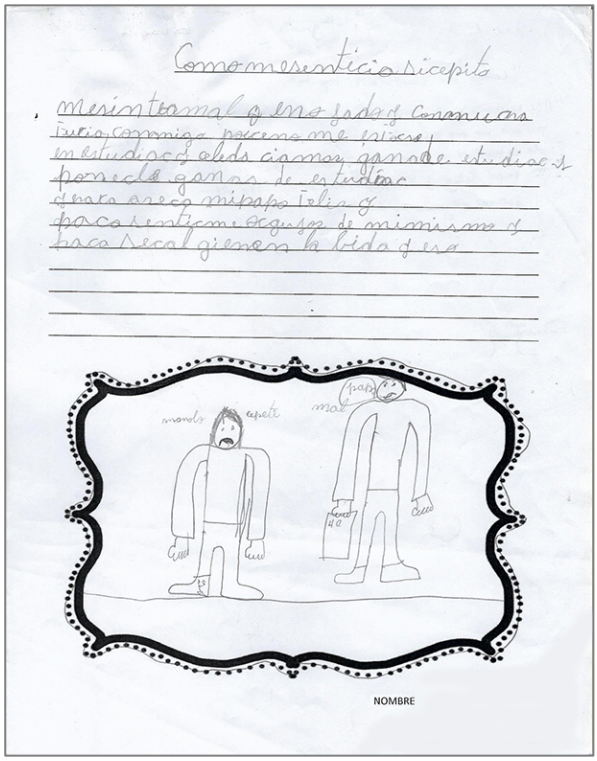
Figure 3. Escuela Los Bellotos. 5th grade student, Luna (girl).



Ami and his school

Ami Bad Luck[67] was a very cute boy, but he was unengaged with the school. He always got bad results, he only got the lowest marks, because he used to not do his homework. His mother was very concerned about him, but he didn't listen to her. And that was happening until the school year finished and he was retained. He felt very weird about being with younger children. Until he told himself 'I will start to study and be promoted', and he studied the whole year, he was promoted to the next grade, and he was congratulated because it was the first time he did something for himself.

Figure 4. Escuela Olga Poblete. 5th grade student, Orlando (boy).



How I would feel if I was retained

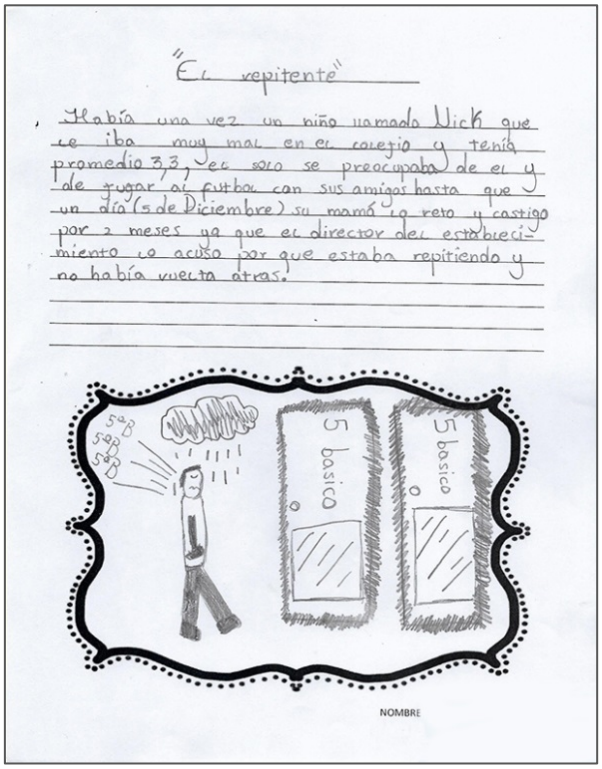
I would feel upset and angry and furious with myself because I did not make an effort to study. And it would make me want to study, and I would be willing to study and make my father happy and feel proud of me so that I can become someone in life.

Drawing Text:

- Left Figure: Manolo (boy's name) '*I was retained*'
- Right Figure: Father *'Bad'*

67 Anonymised surname.

Figure 5. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Julio (boy).



'The retained'

Once upon a time, there was a boy called Nick who was doing very poorly at school and had an average grade of 3,3[68]. He only cared about himself and about playing football with his friends. Until one day (5th of December) his mother scolded him and punished him for two months because the Headteacher warned him that he would be retained and there was no way back.

Drawing Text:

- First Door: *'5th grade'*
- Second Door: *'5th grade'*

In these three stories, retained students were read as deliberately apathetic or disengaged from the school and, more specifically, from schoolwork and assessment practices. The drawings involved show students' 'distress' when faced with retention as the consequences of their wrongdoing. At the same time, the two first stories hint that it might be possible to redeem oneself (from abjection) by submitting to the school's (previously disavowed) productive values. Almost all stories with a happy ending incorporated this kind of 'restoration pattern' in which, after having being retained, students finally surrendered to school neoliberal principles and requirements. Hope for recognition and acceptance could only be found through the repudiation of the unproductive/'non-meritocratic' abject subject.

68 Chilean qualification scale goes from 1.0 to 7.0 points, 4.0 (or over) being the approval/pass mark.

Undiscipline

Failure to align ‘self-realisation’ with the institutional goals of the school was a crucial element determining non-promotion and was frequently accompanied by the assessment of a lack of ‘self-management’. Many students from the retained spectrum were presented as neglecting the expectations of rational self-regulation, restraint and obedience vital to the ‘normal functioning’ of the disciplinary institution. Their disengagement from this order was considered a threat to educational goals, disciplinary regulations, professional positions, and even the physical and psychological integrity of other members of the school.

Chilean regulations on student promotion did not mention conduct as something that can influence retention and, accordingly, behavioural matters were not usually mentioned by educators as its *direct cause*. However, disruptiveness and undisciplined behaviour were frequently cited as part of the *characteristics* and *conduct* of students from the retained spectrum that made them incompatible with the regulatory technologies that normalised and controlled students’ bodies and activities inside the school.

A common way that retained students’ ‘self-managing flaws’ were described as perturbing educators’ practices and school order was by their exhibiting behaviours that interrupted lessons, making it difficult for teachers to teach according to their expectations. Across the schools, lessons were taught under conditions that all students had to fulfil to ensure their ‘successful’ delivery. Part of this framework was a submission to ‘performativity’ (Ball, 2003), discipline, and the educators’ authority. A primary role of teachers is maintaining control by enforcing these ‘positive and reflexive manners’ on children (Ball et al., 2012). When students

challenged these conditions they questioned the educational meaning that constituted the school and the professionals working within them. In a more practical sense, their defiance made it difficult for teachers to fulfil their role under the requirements and constraints through which *they* were subjectivated; a role which must be specially deployed (and scrutinised) during lessons. The teachers' place and practice seemed to be endangered by the 'abject' student.

The following account exposes the interactions between grade retention and the failure to exhibit 'acceptable/expected' behaviours during the lessons.

> During the course of the year, you can have an idea of which students will be retained, depending on the attitude they have inside the classroom. (…) There are common elements among students who are retained. There are categories in common that can be found; their attitude towards schoolwork is null, their behaviour… they are disruptive students. Those are the main issues. Because there are children who might be at risk of being retained due to their grades, but they have another attitude towards schoolwork. They respond positively during the lessons. *(Escuela Olga Poblete. Interview, November 2017. Óscar, 5th Grade Class Teacher).*

Again, academic performance seems less relevant to retention than engaged attitudes that, in this case, related to self-regulation and obedience. Óscar's account also exposes how perceived moral flaws related to laziness, irresponsibility or demotivation were entangled with undisciplined behaviour.

Although disruptiveness during the lessons was the most frequently cited example of a lack of self control, educators also mentioned other ways in which this 'moral flaw' was deployed. Break times and activities outside the classroom were crucial spaces in which identities and behaviours were on display. These more informal situations are usually less constrained by school regulations than lesson

time, and allow a myriad of behaviours and activities to be developed. In spite of this relative relaxation of control, there is still a framework of acceptable behaviours within which students have to remain. Those who disregard these arrangements challenge their subordination, and therefore their own intelligibility as 'possible' viable students.

The following observation from Escuela Los Bellotos provides some clues as to how the identities of children judged as lacking self-control were forged daily in 'informal' situations, and the impact they have on the judgements and practices educators displayed towards them. Along with exposing the way in which these children's viability as students was constituted, the episode features how they faced and interacted with the school's frameworks of meaning and processes of subjectivation. The implication of grade retention in these operations suggests its relevance to students' educational paths and future opportunities.

Escuela Los Bellotos
Observation. April, 2018.
School Playground

It is playtime and I am sitting on a bench in a corridor outside classrooms. Students of different ages play around. I notice a group of boys playing a game consisting of swearing while throwing a football ball as hard as possible to each other's bodies. Even when they are hit hard by the ball, they seem to have lots of fun. Since they are playing in a narrow corridor full of people, on many occasions the ball reached children who were not part of the game (in fact, one of the reasons I am watching them is because I too am afraid of being hit). At some point, the activity escalates and everything and everyone around becomes a target. A teacher appears from one of the classrooms facing the corridor, scolds them and asks them to stop. They wait until she leaves and continue the game until they hit a piece of the corridor ceiling and break it. After that, they stop the game and run away.

(Continued on next page)

Some teachers notice what has happened and a few minutes later the Headteacher arrives to evaluate the damage. She looks annoyed. When passing next to me, she comments that Luciano, Benancio and Bastián have been recognised as involved in the incident. From what I was able to observe earlier, they were not the only students who were playing. There were several more students involved. But they are the only ones identified.

In previous conversations with the 5th and 6th grade teacher, I had been told that Luciano had been on the edge of retention for the whole of the previous year, Benancio was actually retained in 5th grade last year, and Bastián is older than his classmates due to a previous retention. They were all part of a group of male students' friends who had been retained (or had come close to it) in the past and were identified by their teacher as "not the best influence". During the lessons, I have noticed that they are students who frequently resist educators' behavioural instructions and break disciplinary rules.

Break time activities involving boys throwing the ball to each other and ball games in which non-participants were accidentally hit were not infrequent in this school or in the rest of the participant institutions. These dynamics are part of the 'choreographies of schooling' (Eggermont, 2001) which commonly define and settle educational meanings and practices through unreflective collectively performed bodily rituals. However, the game these boys were playing was distinctive in its level of disregard for the rules through which these activities are aligned with acceptable educational discourses. First, their 'swearing' was in clear opposition to the school's rules of conduct; secondly, they showed a disregard for the danger of hurting other people or damaging the school infrastructure. Later, they reaffirmed their challenge to the regulations framing acceptable behaviour when they continued the game after having been asked to stop by a member of staff. Finally, they again constituted themselves outside the school disciplinary regulations by running away having broken the ceiling. The bodily practices of these students not only involved a physical

rupture of the school ceiling but a symbolic (partial) departure from the subjectivating constraints of the schooling space. The movements of resistance and capitulation implicated here invite an analysis of the scene informed by the notion of 'affective choreographies' (Youdell & Armstrong, 2011). This approach incorporates the a-subjective stand of Deleuze and Guattari (2004) focused on pre-personal bodies that are preceded by affective flows, detached from thought, emotion or interpretation, and interested in the capacity of the encounter between bodies - and the affective intensities produced by this - to unsettle or bound striated spaces.

The affective flows circulating during the ball game were not restricted to the players. The amalgam of bodies involved included every other possible ball target, the students who shared the school space, the teachers and authorities of the school, even me as observer. Although positioned as different sorts of bodies, we were all collectively implicated in the production of meaning in the scene. Hierarchies, identities, relations of power, and movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization were all indelibly engraved on it.

The material implications of the ball game to the school equipment are a relevant starting point for analysing this episode through an 'affective choreographies' angle. School infrastructure was an issue of particular relevance in Escuela Los Bellotos. During conversations with the staff, the inadequacy of the educational space was a recurrent topic. Different sorts of material precarities were also identified during the observations. Probably the more relevant of them was the lack of space to accommodate the bodies the school contained. Offices, classrooms and common areas were often insufficient or too small for the number of people who used them. The playground area was a small, cement field crowded with groups of

children and adults. During the breaks, every corner of the school – from the stairs to entranceways and corridors – were occupied. Playing a ball game in a cramped and overcrowded corridor was made necessary by these circumstances - the repercussions of the game would probably have been different in a more spacious environment. The rugged interaction between the flows of affectivities involved in the ball game and the material components of the school not only challenged the striated arrangements of limited school space but also revealed the huddled conditions that confinement led to. In these moments, this school's identity as an appropriate and safe educational space, was unsettled and questioned. Furthermore, the transgression of the physical boundaries of the school also disrupted the passive acceptance of the conditions of precariousness and overcrowding that its members were subjected to every day. The school was simultaneously signified and disputed as an abject field (Grinberg, 2011). The smooth territory opened by this resignification of the school space was, however, quickly overthrown by the dominant circulating interpretations of these students' actions as a reflection of their individual flaws. This succession of constraints and disruptions to the educational discourse and the subjectivation process was an important element signifying the scene.

The material rupture of the ceiling also embodied a further fracture from educational orders and representations. The school as a place of discipline, rationality and hierarchical care was resignified as a field of fun emphasising spontaneity, physicality and aggression. The ball game proposed a use of the educational milieu that interrupted the self-regulation imperative as a guiding principle of pupils' behaviour. In parallel, the deployment of intermittent and 'inclusive' (a-subjective) aggression through the game exceeded the terms of the schooling,

disrupting the grooved identities of students and educators, and their respective hierarchies. The bodies actively participating in the game were positioned in a place of physical dominance over the rest of the bodies that surrounded them. The apparent loss of control was actually a redistribution of force and power. The seizure of power through aggression – especially when it is exercised by children instead of adults – escapes striated educational regulations.

To students from the retained spectrum, this type of aggression towards schools' boards and hierarchies provides a rare opportunity to resist the injurious positions in which they have been placed. Similar to the way in which these children used laughter to resist and challenge the pain that the impact of the ball had on their bodies, they also defied, through their anti-school positioning (Youdell, 2011), the material and subjectivating violence the school and its educational system exercised over them in separating them from their classmates, interfering with their educational progress, and calling into question their intelligibility as acceptable and included members of the educational space. In a context in which students' abjection is usually associated by educators, politicians, educational policies and the mass media with aggressive acts, it is helpful to reflect on the ways in which children and young people (especially for those made aberrant within the school context) might scatter destructive educational assemblages when symbolic paths of recuperation are blocked or put out of reach.

The breaking of the school's ceiling simultaneously marked the climax of the deterritorializing intensity and the urge for reterritorialization. The boys' flight from the scene, the intervention of the teachers, the appearance of the Headteacher and the identification of the students, involved the reinstatement of unsettled educational

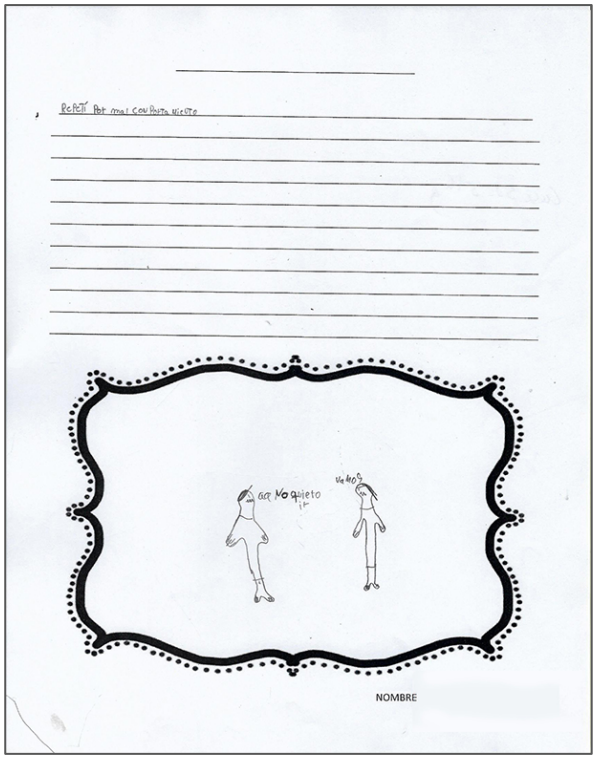
subjectivities, meanings and relations of power. The teachers' hierarchical, judgemental and corrective position was rearticulated, at the same time that the boys' actions were set as disciplinary infringements of the striated limits of proper student behaviour. The individualisation and naming of some of the students involved in the game was a critical step in this movement of recuperation. Collective intensities were erased while individual deviations were underlined. By this operation, the deterritorializing productivity of the encounter was not only disputed but also overturned. Here, a significant point to note is that, of several students playing with the ball, only a small number of them were *recognised* as authors of the damage. They were students who had been already characterised as morally inadequate and from whom ill-disciplined behaviour was to be expected. They were not just any students but intelligible authors of an unacceptable game that ended up causing damage to the school infrastructure. Their involvement in the ball game not only 'made sense' but it could even have been anticipated considering the striated subjectivating place in which these bodies were positioned. Parallel to this momentary lapse in which affective intensities exceed space, identity and hierarchy, reterritorialization forces perpetuated and crystallised the educational meanings that constituted Luciano, Benancio and Bastián as abject students.

At the same time that opposing striated orders of school assemblage opened opportunities in which retained students could be made less abject, the same position reinforced the regulatory meanings through which they were been subjectivated as morally and attitudinal deviants in the first place. The episode of the ball game, strengthened Luciano, Benancio and Bastián's constitution as threats to the school and 'bad influences' on other children who teachers could therefore

'reasonably' repress or punish. I suggest that what probably follows from these operations is a synchronic solidification of abject valuations and 'anti-school' identities that function together as a vicious circle closing possibilities for whom these children are and, especially, who they can be as members of the school community. Although alternative identities can be sites of opportunity, for students lacking recognition from their school environments, they do not make them immune to the symbolic and material effects implicated in their abject subjectivation within educational frameworks of meaning.

In many students' productions, undiscipline was associated with grade retention. Disturbing the lesson, staying outside the classroom, fighting with classmates, swearing and disregarding adults' orders were all behaviours that children consider part of retained students' identity constructions.

Figure 6. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Matías (boy).



(No title)

I was retained due to bad behaviour.

Drawing Text:

- Right Figure: *'Let's go'*
- Left Figure: *'I don't want to go'*

Figure 7. Escuela Andalhue. 5th grade student, Agustín (boy).



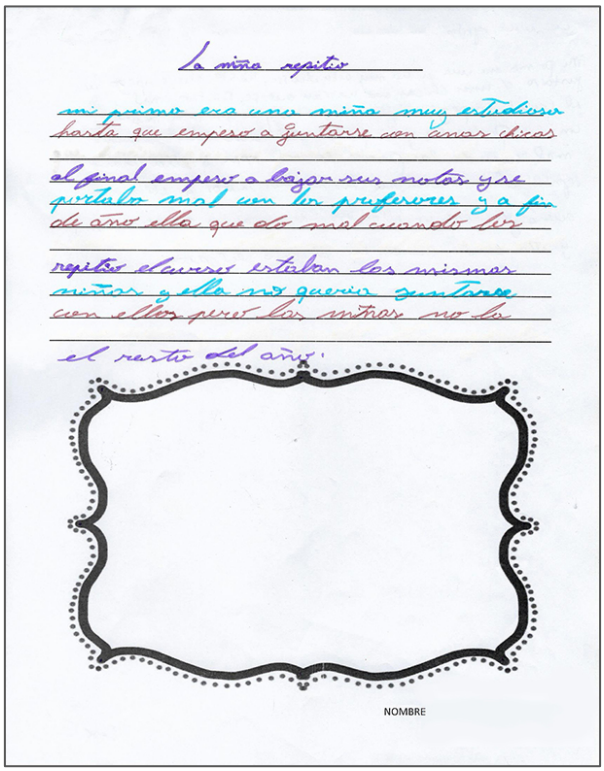
The bad boy

Once upon a time, there was a boy called Tomás who did not like to study. He used to run away from the classroom, missed the school lunch, fought with his classmates and swore at his teachers, at his classmates, at the headteacher, at the school inspectors and anyone else who crossed their path. The End.

Drawing Text:

- Left Figure: *'Moron', ´Ugly'*

Figure 8. Escuela Andalhue. 5th grade student, Aurora (girl).



The girl was retained

My cousin used to be a very studious girl until she started making friends with some girls who made her misbehave. In the end, her grades dropped, and she began to misbehave with her teacher. At the end of the school year, she got very upset when her parents reprimanded her. And when she was retained, the same children were there, and she did not want to be friends with them, but her old girlfriends did not want to meet with her, and she stayed quiescent for the rest of the year.

These productions are representative of stories in which retained students were characterised as lacking self-control and commitment towards schools' behavioural regulations. In Matías' production, for example, 'bad behaviour' (displayed in the defiant attitude of the child in the drawing) is explicitly identified as *the cause* of retention without any reference to qualifications or attendance. This association seems so strong that, for example in the case of Agustín's production, the description of the disruptive child who makes another child cries seems enough to invoke grade retention, as if the self of the boy called Tomás in the story would embody grade retention: he cannot be anything other than a retained student. Aurora's story incorporates the issue of an 'external negative influence.' Not only retained students are bad influences on other students, but this story proposes that 'negative friendships' can also precipitate retention. To some extent, this assertion relativises abjection by locating its 'source' outside the inner nature of the student; in this case it was almost imposed on the character. A closer look at students' productions and educators' accounts exposes a gender factor implicated in this operation.

A note on gender

The introduction of justifications of attitudinal deficits that are 'externally imposed' seemed more 'popular' when referring to retained girls than boys in the same position. Children's stories involving retained female students incorporated external explanation for deviant behaviour more often: being bullied, being in love, having stressors at home etc. This was consistent with teachers' narratives. In their accounts, 'deficits of character' were usually cited as reasons for boy's inabilities to

fulfil school requirements, while alternative explanations - such as learning difficulties, cognitive deficits, absenteeism due to a medical condition, or lack of appropriated diagnostic or specialised intervention – were more frequently used when referring to female students struggling in the school.

Female pupils were less frequently shown as retained students in children' productions. While many girls create stories about male retained students, the opposite almost never occurred. This might be associated in part with students' actual school experiences. Around the world - as in Chile - boys in primary school are retained more often than girls[69]. In parallel, girls' avoidance of representing female characters (or 'themselves') as retained might express a distinction in student identities available to each gender. Perhaps the fact that boys are retained more often, are more usually portrayed as repeaters by other students, and their retention is more often attributed to inner rather than outside causes, reflects an intersection between binary gender stereotypes and desirable learners' subjectivities. Many qualities described by Youdell (2006a) as conventionally attributed to 'acceptable students' (in opposition to 'unacceptable' ones) are 'typically' associated with female individuals.

> …the good student is likely to be marked by qualities, at times in contradiction, of obedience, politeness, eagerness to learn, inquisitiveness, acquiescence to adult authority, restraint, cleanliness, asexuality, helpfulness, friendliness, good sense and common sense, childishness, maturity. (Youdell, 2006a, p. 98)

These features, typically associated with school disciplinary values are also socially implicated in notions of femininity and girlishness. On the contrary the 'moral

69 Unesco Institute of Statistics, 2017 (data.uis.unesco.org).

deficits' described by the educational communities participating in this research as linked to grade retention – such as laziness, disrespect, opposition, disruptiveness, impulsivity and aggression between other – are typically associated with anti-school/anti-authoritarian masculine identities (Youdell, 2011).

This does not imply that female students cannot be characterised in these terms. Some of them were. However, as this was not recognised as their expected inner nature, the causes of their 'deviation' were therefore frequently sought outside themselves. Attitudinal and moral deficits seemed to 'make more sense' in the case of boys, which made them more readily readable as innate and constitutional. Boys seemed to be more viable as 'abject students' than girls. Bradbury's (2013) notion of "non-authentic" good learners could be operating here in an inverted way. She argues that teachers perceive the educational success of some minoritised students as inauthentic since it is conceived of as associated with external factors instead of innate and internal causes (as it is understood in the case of white students). In a similar (but opposite) way, the individual deficits that tended to be associated with educational failure in this research – especially those related to ill-discipline - seemed more 'authentic' to the school community in the case of male students. This differential perception of students' possible identities according to gender could be having a significant role on the operations that 'make' male students more accessible as abject identities legitimately subjected to retention.

Impossible/abject families

Family characteristics were also a common ground through which primary students were constituted as subjects of schooling. Family inadequacy and defective parenting styles were definitions extensively and consistently entangled with educators' perception of who students from the 'retained spectrum' were and provided reasons for their educational failure.

Contemporary society positions families as an important part of childhood governance. Broadly, social adjustment is considered a natural outcome of a *normal* family while any incapacity to fulfil social expectations is understood as the result of inadequate family life (Rose, 1999). Schools are places where these beliefs on the transmission of normality and adequacy through families are enacted. Educators use their perceptions regarding children's families to discern who their pupils are, predict their educational outcomes, and guide their practices accordingly (Ball, 2013; Bradbury, 2013).

The idea that children's 'natures' and behaviours mimic those of their carers was extended and accepted without question across the participant schools and their members. Students were frequently considered 'extensions' of their families, not only in early years, but also within the final years of primary school.

> My impression is that children are the mirror image of their parents' attitude and their commitment towards the school. *(Colegio Santa Evangelina. Interview, November 2017. Salomé, 5th Grade Class Teacher).*

> I endorse all the studies indicating that family environments define a very high percentage of students' learning. I mean, that inherited learnt cultural matrix is obviously significant. That's why today education is more challenging in vulnerable contexts. *(Colegio Santa Evangelina. Interview, October 2017. Sergio, Headteacher).*

> Educators discuss the situation of a 4th grade boy whose reading and writing skills are considered insufficient to progress to 5th grade. A teacher intervenes in the argument saying "His sister learnt how to read in 5th grade. It is a family issue. His parents learnt to read late too." The debate continues and educators agree that, even though he has the qualifications to be promoted, he should not progress to the next grade. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Observation 'Special Staff Meeting' to Evaluate Students at Risk of Retention. November 2017).*

As these pieces of evidence suggest, educators' ideas, feeling and impressions regarding families and students were interchangeable; pupils were conceived and recognised through their home environments. At the same time, the school staff made strong judgements regarding students' families. When discussing the home situation of students struggling at school during staff meetings, educators from different schools made comments such as "the mother is harmful to the child", "grandma has zero authority", "the mother is pathetic", "I can't stand that mother", "student's parents are very primitive". On many occasions, these negative perceptions of students' caregivers were automatically transmitted to the child, *creating* abject students as the natural result of their abject families.

When educators were asked if students from the retained spectrum shared any common traits, they usually responded by characterising their families. Those family environments were typically described as "dysfunctional" or "highly vulnerable". This included families in which domestic violence had been reported, primary carers who had problematic relationships with alcohol and/or drugs or were in conflict with the law, as well as parents who worked long hours and had little time to spend with

their children or were not present in their lives for other reasons. There were also many students from the retained spectrum who were identified as having single mothers or young mothers with several small kids, or who were being taken care of by other family members (usually the grandmother) or even guardians external to the family. Children from social care were usually discursively placed in this 'highly vulnerable' group.

A repeated narrative among educators was that these students experienced the violation of their children's rights at home. Teachers and authorities in the school mentioned that retained students' carers did not care about them, did not support them emotionally, or give them inappropriate responsibilities (such as doing housework or taking care of their younger siblings). In parallel, these families were portrayed as disengaged from their children's educational processes. Educators claimed that they did not stimulate or support learning, failed to ensure school attendance and did not engage with the school. They were generally described as irresponsible carers who did not recognise the value of education for children's lives. Part of such a portrayal of retained students' families is on display in Beatriz's account below.

> The vast majority of students who are retained or are at risk of being retained have very similar situations at home. They have in common the abandonment of their families. I mean, some of them do not have their families. For example, we have students who live in social care and all of them are in the process of being retained this year. (…) And, on the other hand, there is the abandonment of those who are with their families but have parents who do not care about their children. I mean, the family prefers the child to take care of a younger sibling, or to do the housework, or they are just overwhelmed and don't know what to do. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, October 2017. Beatriz, Senior Leader).*

Family abandonment was to Beatriz (as to many educators) a situation shared by retained students. This circumstance was attributed to a deliberate parental attitude and moral flaw: they “do not care about their children” or were even non-existent. These guardians were perceived as disengaged from their childcare duties and, as part of this, from their child’s educational experience. Furthermore, they were not only deemed to be uninvolved in their children’s schooling but were also portrayed as jeopardising it by, for instance, favouring their commitment to other tasks felt to be inappropriate for a child as they would compete with their engagement with school. Often educators described these carers as deliberately resisting aligning their expectations, attitudes, and behaviours with those valued by the school; a position of insubordination similar to that which was described in the previous section regarding their children. These families were portrayed as having turned down their presumed moral duty to transmit the norm/correct social aspirations to their children (Rose, 1999). The structural conditions behind the circumstances and the dynamics of these families were frequently overlooked. Even in schools serving highly vulnerable populations located in neighbourhoods that concentrate severe social problems, references to those social constraints were scarce in comparison to citations of individual/family moral deficits. Even when structural disadvantage was acknowledged, the possibility of overcoming its impact was commonly considered a personal rather than a social matter.

There were, however, divergencies between the configuration of such narratives and the circulation of meaning in different phases of the primary school. While young retained students were usually configurated as victims of their unfit carers (as well as their bodies), towards the end of primary school they become ‘part

of' their family's abjection; they embodied what was wrong with their caregivers. The perception of older children as an extension of their families was, in this sense, reinforced.

In the case of Miguel, for example, his father's parenting style was described as negligent and therefore detrimental to his educational performance. Miguel's class teacher commented that when the child was cared for by his father his school achievement fell, while the contrary happened when he was taken care of by his mother. This comparison illustrates how Miguel's father's presumed inadequacy acted *upon* him, but was not *part of* him; he was made an extension of his carer within a victimised register which did not necessarily mean duplication.

In Juan's case, on the other hand, he seemed to have become the abjection that was enacted and attributed by the school to his primary carer. Juan's school difficulties and disengagements were substantially attributed to his "complex family situation", his "problems at home" and his "complicated relationship" with his caregiver. Juan's class teacher, explained to me that he had an extremely vulnerable upbringing with a story of abandonment and severe parental neglect. According to the teacher, Juan's then main guardian did not have good communication, or a good relationship with the school. Martina had a very negative evaluation of Juan's caregiver's parenting skills and her capacity to take appropriate care of the boy. In parallel, different members of the school community described her as "irrational", "mad" and "paranoid", and one of them commented that "talking with her is like talking with a door." In addition, there was a legal 'issue' going on between Juan's carer and the school. I was not able to fully understand what was happening, but I got the impression that she had made a formal complaint against the school. Both

carer and child seemed to disturb the symbolic orders of the school and were positioned as threatening identities who shared a place of abjection. Juan was not seen as a victim of his carer, rather, the School and its members were seen as victims of them both. The discomfort educators expressed about Juan's carer seemed to have been very boldly transferred to the child.

Echoing Ball's (2013) observation that 'defective children' are constituted as a product of social heredity of moral flaws and low aspirations, abjection seems here as an inherited-contagious trait. Within this framework of meaning, grade retention stands as a spontaneous consequence of an inherent, shared, and infectious aberrancy while operating as a socially accepted practice of punishment and reinforcement of young people's vulnerability.

By contrast, 'defective' pupils - particularly those considered 'immature' - might be 'possible students' if their families, and especially their mothers were evaluated well by educators. Pupils' deficiencies could be 'compensated' for by *normal*/virtuous mothers. Their virtue lay in their acceptance of the school's perception of their children and their alignment and active involvement with school requirements that were declared to alleviate their child's perceived deficits. In the same way that carers are constituted as contributing factors in students' abnormality, they become targets of regulation as potential agents of their children's 'restoration' (Harwood and Allan, 2014). Educators appreciated carers who cooperated with the school, provided students with 'the right support', and facilitated their job. Moreover, they appreciated the children of these carers. On many occasions, educators expressed more willingness to support students whose families were involved with the school in ways

that were considered appropriate by the institution. During the interview with Adela, the 1st grade class teacher at Escuela Andalhue, she elaborated on this issue.

> In general, with immature students, an option is to make a commitment with the tutors. If I notice that a child is a bit immature, is having problems, but I see engaged parents, I can make a 'commitment letter' with them. 'Look' [I say to them] 'We will make a 'commitment letter' and you will teach your child during the holidays'. 'Yes, I commit myself to do it' [they say]. 'Take this work for the holiday, take this book and work with your child this many days' [I say]. You give this advice to the mother, and when the child comes back from their holiday, they are ok. (…) It comes naturally to me helping a child that is struggling but has committed parents. I will stay 15 minutes more with them after the lesson. *(Escuela Andalhue. Interview, November 2017. Adela, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

In this account, the educational difficulties of children from 'good' families (or 'virtuous mothers') are perceived as being a temporary, manageable, and delimited problem of performance (instead of insuperable constitutive deficit). According to Adela, parents who accept responsibility for their child's normalisation can have a redeeming effect on their abnormality/deviation. She saw potential in those students so she opened opportunities for them, she had expectations and hopes, she 'invested' her time and energy so they could learn. At the same time, immaturity claims' ambiguity is made evident. Immaturity is cast as an internal feature separated from the school and, simultaneously, as completely subordinated to pedagogical intervention. Together, these premises make the transfer of pedagogical work to parents not only reasonable but inevitable.

What is most interesting in Adela's account was what is unsaid. By describing her practices to support 'immature students' whose guardians are evaluated as engaged and helpful, she also acknowledged what is done (or disregarded) when

this condition is not met. The other side of her 'natural' inclination to care for the children of committed parents is an abdication of responsibility/care/education for children whose families lack such recognition. By talking about a 'Same', Adela is also incorporating that Other whose double failure (in this case developmental and familial) makes them unworthy of hope and protection from the school. Having been rendered 'impossible' as a student, the transit routes between bad and good educational identities has been severed. As long as these children remain in positions that exceed meaningful school discourses they will not 'belong' to the educational milieu and, therefore, there is nothing that 'education' can do for them. This 'professional knowledge' on the attribution of responsibility regarding schooling trajectories makes the pursuit of equal opportunities for all not only impractical but a nonsense within the circulating educational discourses.

When both the student and her/his carer(s) were concurrently and 'coherently' constituted as abject, grade retention was often seen as not only unavoidable but also as 'fair'; the 'failure' of these student pertains to their families, not to the school. This discourse is displayed below, in Sonia's account about the causes of grade retention in primary school.

> Some parents are not committed to their children's educational process, they just leave them in the school. (…) Faced with this, we have to be consistent and recognise that there are things we won't be able to achieve. The school should establish some boundaries, we should accept some limitations… because I am doing my best, but if the other party does not respond, what should I do? (…) Some teachers suffer when they must make the decision to retain a student because they have done everything in their power. However, in most cases, they encounter parents who don't come to the school, who don't bother

(Continued on next page)

> doing homework, don't send the needed work materials. (…) Grade retention in this school always has a substantial ground. But I also say, and I argue that grade retention is due to the lack of responsibility of students' families who do not put in their half of the [educational] process. *(Colegio Santa Evangelina. Interview, October 2017. Sonia, Senior Leader).*

This account illustrates the belief that if parents are not committed to the school – in ways defined by educators – there is little that can be done to avoid a child being retained. The idea of a 50/50 distribution of the responsibility to, or influence on the educational process between schools and families exposes the justification many educators used to link children's educational experiences to their judgements of their family characteristics and contexts. That educators could expend their best efforts and even 'suffer' in the process of retaining a student, but be able to 'accept' the inevitability of some children's retention if they had unsuitable carers was seen by Sonia as a position that the school inevitably needed to take.

In parallel, the role played by the school in rendering these pupils in positions of impossibility was typically overlooked. The fifty (or whatever) percentage that might correspond to the school's influence on the education of children was frequently omitted from educators' accounts regarding who has responsibility for students' retention. Furthermore, it seemed irrelevant when conditions the school placed on (or asked of) the families were not fulfilled. In such cases, for educators, their role in students' educational progression seemed limited to 'evaluating' the adequacy of their and their carers' performances and identifying 'hopeless cases'.

Within the British context, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) have explored the logics of 'education triage' which render some students unsuitable for special intervention in the context of scarce resources available in the educational

environment. While in these authors' study, gender, race and social class were personal traits that influenced the creation of 'hopeless cases', the evidence from primary schools in Chile exposes the relevance of family 'moralities/rationalities' in guiding processes of students' differentiation and resultant relegation. In this way, the dominant discourses of meritocracy and entitlement are not only located in the individual child but also in their family environments. These considerations expand the categories that can be taken into account when examining processes of 'educational triage' and suggest that they can be mediated by contextual aspects such as school phases, educational systems and/or the cultural milieus in which they are deployed.

Challenging family constitutions

It is important to note that educators' perceptions of family deficiencies/problems as a distinct characteristic of retained students was not consistently sustained during my observations and fieldwork.

As an example, during an 'orientation lesson' in Escuela Los Bellotos 6th grade class it was made evident that retained students were not exclusively those who experienced difficulties at home. In an activity in which some children opened up about their problems, none of those who mentioned experiencing severe family issues were students from the retained spectrum. Another example came from the parent meetings. Several educators claimed that parents' participation in school's activities was a sign of educational involvement, and complained about the absence of carers of students from the retained spectrum on these occasions. However, in all three schools in which I was allowed to observe these meetings, I noticed that many

retained students' carers did attend and some of them even participated as delegates to their class. Meanwhile, many parents of students who had never been at risk of retention failed to show up.

Moreover, some cases, such as that of Juan, exposed the arbitrary nature of the notion of 'family engagement' for students' educational processes. What educators recognised as such commitment was an alignment to each school's particular demands, expectations and valued principles. Some carers seemed involved in their children's schooling in ways that were rejected or disregarded by educators. This was interpreted as them not caring about students' educational experiences when they did care but not in the way which had been requested or was valued by the school. Ultimately, their unintelligibility as 'acceptable families' or 'committed carers' was a function of the school's perceptions of its own needs.

This does not mean that students from the retained spectrum experienced no family difficulties or vulnerabilities, nor that all their carers accompanied them closely in their schooling process. There were several indications during the fieldwork pointing to the fact that part of those children did indeed have very difficult home circumstances, as reported by the educators. What I question is not the difficult living situations experienced by many retained students, but the process by which the production of retained students as impossible subjects of schooling is entangled with – and made sense through - the constitution of family abjection, and how such abjection reflects schools' perceptions and demands.

Conclusion

Schools are subjectivating spaces that create the student deficits they pretend to describe, according to social frameworks of knowledge and particular symbolic and material needs. The introduction of inclusive norms and narratives in Chilean primary education has scattered and reterritorialized neoliberal frameworks of success and failure, and through them, the grade retention ensemble.

In lower age phases, ‘deviation’ has been colonised by a pseudo-scientific ‘immaturity discourse’ that produces impossible students from an alleged biological insufficiency. During these years of schooling, grade retention is articulated as a mechanism for normalising those seen as victims of abnormal bodies. In the upper grades, retention strengthens its coercive character to recast children who are not only impossible to recognise as acceptable students, but who are also configured as disturbing identities within the schools’ orders. These children are not understood as victims but as active agents of moral deficiencies that hinder neoliberal productivity and disciplinary commitments.

Despite their differences, within the grade retention ensemble, both immature and morally deviant constitutions operate by posing schools’ needs as the needs of students whose allegedly defective selves place them in inevitable opposition to the (self)righteous/neutral system of meaning in ‘inclusive’ neoliberal education. This configuration releases schools from their responsibilities in relation to educational failure and exclusion (which does not occur when appealing exclusively to an inclusive logic). While schools – and ultimately the educational system – are exempted from their responsibilities, families (and especially mothers) are often

portrayed as the instigators of students' deviance and subsequent educational failure. Retained students are made sense of within the configuration of deviant caregivers who transmit deviance or fail to compensate for it. Within these arrangements, children's vulnerability is not only punished but also created and reinforced.

Within the subjectivating power of the grade retention ensemble, what many educators define as an 'educational opportunity' might instead operate as a place of dispossession; a place that delimits impossible/abject identities trapping students within these terms. Differentiation, categorisation, hierarchy, and understandings of deviation and normality implicated in these dynamics can be considered part of the self-surveillance fabrications (Foucault, 1990, 1991) and governing strategies (Rose, 1999) that seize the docility of all bodies involved. The following chapter explores the disciplinary arrangements entangled with the grade retention ensemble.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCIPLINE AND NORMALISATION WITHIN THE GRADE RETENTION ENSEMBLE

Introduction

The previous chapter has argued that the production of impossible/abject subjectivities within the grade retention ensemble is not a reflection of young peoples' learning outcomes or personal features but an expression of a perceived misalignment between them and the schools' goals, needs and available routes of recognition. In this sense, and as the previous chapter started to delineate, the remedial pedagogical function 'officially' attributed to grade retention seems to pale in comparison with its disciplinary use in enforcing school's 'normal functioning'.

This chapter interrogates disciplinary components of the grade retention ensemble and addresses the governmentality functions of grade retention's rationales and practices in the contemporary neoliberal educational milieu that make them meaningful. In this endeavour, primary schools are considered as disciplinary institutions configured by technologies of disciplinary power that produce subjects and meanings (Foucault, 1990, 1991). The analysis also considers the work of British scholars who have actualised the Foucauldian perspective to examine governmentality processes in contemporary education, including: Ball (2013), Bradbury (2013), Rose (1999), and Youdell (2011).

The chapter starts by elaborating four critical disciplinary arrangements involved in the grade retention ensemble: the primacy of evaluative logics and ends

over learning processes; the need to impose educators' hierarchical authority; the use of (disavowed) violence within daily school operations and relationships; and the enforcement of restricted behaviours through disciplinary methods. A following section explores grade retention as a disciplinary force in the relationship between students' families and schools. Finally, previous reflections are extended to address the way in which grade retention's disciplinary force becomes an exclusionary device that distributes students' bodies across (and even out of) the schooling system and participates in the configuration of educational segregation and marginalisation.

School promotion as a disciplinary rite of passage

The technologies of power (Foucault, 1990, 1991) that sustain the disciplinary regime of primary schools populate classrooms, playgrounds, offices and every space in which educational relationships are defined and unfold. The dialectic relationship between promotion and retention is part of the overt enforcement, as well as the concealed daily dynamics that impose such regimes.

Preparation for the 'First Reading Gala' at Escuela Andalhue provided an opportunity to explore these mechanisms. Reading Galas happen in many Chilean schools: families of 1st grade students are invited to school to see their children's reading accomplishments at the end of their first year of primary school. The rehearsal of one of these rites of passage in the excerpt on the following page, exemplifies critical disciplinary components which were present in many lessons and extracurricular activities across the participant institutions.

Escuela Andalhue
Observation. November, 2017.
1st Grade Classroom

There are a few weeks left until the end of the school academic year and the 1st grade class is preparing its performance at the 'First Reading Gala'. In order to display their recently acquired reading abilities, the class will read and sing a popular child-like Chilean song called 'A White Kitten'. During the lesson, children sing the song several times rehearsing for the event.

Students know the song by heart but because it is the Reading Gala, the teacher asks them to pretend they are reading the song from the sheet of paper printed with the lyrics. The teacher teaches them how to perform as if they were reading the song. She shows how to sing while looking at the paper and instructs them to keep their "eyes on the sheet". She also congratulates the students who imitate reading most convincingly.

The lyrics of the song are the following:

It is said that over the moon
there is a white kitten
who gets angry with children
who do not behave well

I would not like
to make the kitten angry
and be reprimanded by it
for not studying

This scene provides a very graphic display of the normalising processes by which disciplinary power align institutional goals with children's desires and aspirations. In this lesson, students were not practising their reading skills - which was probably the explicit and formal aim of the activity. Rather, they were incorporating school expectations and understandings of normality and deficit.

The lyric of this popular song contains fundamental and ubiquitous maxims from the lives of all school students: ‘behave well’ and ‘study’. They are presumed to be pre-existing rules of performance that children must know and embody. By singing this song, young students were coerced into subjugation to a performance in which self-worth was conditional on values of self-management, obedience, responsibility, and hard work. Furthermore, at the same time children assimilated the ways in which they had to present themselves as ‘possible students’, they learned to expect and naturalise negative reactions from their environments/teachers if they failed to adjust to these demands. Punishment was normalised and prescribed as a natural consequence of transgressing these ‘maxims’.

In the extract, as the 1st grade students repeated over and again this childlike song, they simultaneously internalised and enacted the educational principles contained in its verses. Educators exercised strict control over the students’ bodies and expressions while also enforcing self-surveillance. ‘Behave well’, in this context, involved docile compliance, restraint, and efficiency. Being an acceptable student on this occasion had more to do with learning how to impersonate a ‘successful learner’ than actually being one. Even a child who had reached the expected reading skills level would fail if they were not able to represent ‘the reader’ in the required way. In this sense, the recognition of the teachers’ authority and compliance with their demands seemed a more significant condition for promotion than the accomplishment of the learnings outcomes that were being represented.

Along with this, the children’s individuality and pace were obscure by a veil of fabricated heterogenous success. There was only one way that progression could be demonstrated, and these students had been asked to perform it at the First Reading

Gala. The heterogeneity and diversity of the learning experience was erased while final measurable and manifest outcomes became the focus. The spectacle of success and progress displayed here 'proved' (in a theatrical way) that the school had successfully instructed students into these 'common sense' maxims of educational success. In that way, the class remained a good class, the teacher remained a good teacher, and the school remained a good school. Within these terms, promotion was legitimised and sanctioned.

The following sections examine the disciplinary arrangements delineated here, propose further lines of analysis and elaborate their entanglements with the grade retention ensemble.

'Study': Enforcement of submission to the evaluation process

The Reading Gala consecrates the educational success of 1st grade students through the public, playful and dramatic display of a final evaluation. Parents are invited to perform the roles – typically executed by educators – of judges and the certifying bodies of educational success. The staged act not only shows that children have learned to read but also that they have learned to successfully navigate the assessment's logics and practices in the primary school.

Across the schools visited, education's evaluative components had a constant and pervading presence. Schools seemed to be organised and defined by the power of examinations. Lessons' goals, school members' interactions and the general educational experience were articulated in terms of the next exam. The motivation to learn and teach seemed captured by those terms.

Accountability logics and assessment practices have consistently been described as pivotal disciplinary technologies that turn children into objects of scrutiny and governance (e.g. Ball et al., 2012: Bradbury, 2013; Youdell, 2011). Educational standards, and other policies stimulating the logics and practices of improvement and productivity, contain three central techniques of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991): hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, and examination (Ball et al., 2012). Examinations fulfil the role of 'rituals of power' that make students visible while masking power (Foucault, 1991; Ball, 2013). The educational culture of testing extols surveillance while transfiguring oppression to a human need that must be satisfied (Usher & Edwards, 1994). Within this context of permanent measurement, learners' individuality is transformed into a visible set of attributes and a field of knowledge (Ball, 2013).

During the lessons I observed, the pervasiveness of the evaluative component curtailed creativity, free expression and the potential joy and amusement of the learning process. Experimentation, discovery, and an openness to novelty and error were all subordinated to the primacy of evaluative ends. On many occasions, as exposed in the following excerpt, this made pedagogy slow, dull, unchallenging and coercive.

Colegio Jesús Misionero
Observation. November, 2017.
1st Grade Classroom

It is the 1st grade science lesson and children must come to the front to present the research they have done on different Chilean animals. Every student has a cardboard poster they have created with photos and supporting information about the animal; this is placed on the whiteboard to support their oral presentation. Jimena, the 1st grade class teacher, remains at her desk (located at the front of the class) from where she asks the exhibitors questions and makes notes in her notebook as she evaluates each presentation.

When it is Jessica's turn to present, she talks about a bird from Easter Island. Her presentation focuses on the mythical stories surrounding the bird. She has a colourful board full of images and relevant information. She has learnt many things about the birds' legends and seems very confident and happy to be presenting. When she finishes her presentation, the teacher seems unimpressed and starts to ask her questions: "ok, but what does the bird eat?", "it is domesticated or wild?" "how does it reproduce?" "which environment does it live in?". She adds "You weren't asked to talk about the bird's mythical story, but about the things that are written down here" (pointing the teacher's qualification notebook).

Jimena continues reading the list of things that she asked the students to talk about and that Jessica did not include in her presentation. "What happened with those things? Things that you should have included in your presentation" she asks Jessica in an annoyed voice. The girl replies "My parents forgot to include that". The teacher keeps reading her notes and repeating her questions: "how does the bird reproduce?", "it is domesticated or wild?", "what does the bird eat?". The girl looks at her teacher with an expression that says she does not have a clue how to answer. Jimena says to her "Don't look at me, I don't know. It is you who had to research the bird".

Then Jimena calls the next student, who places her poster on the whiteboard. Jimena points out the new poster and addresses Jessica saying: "Come here. Look, all the things that you didn't talk about". Jessica nods silently. The joy with which she had delivered her presentation has evaporated.

Here, the provision of education, the teaching-learning process, and the emergence of the subject of schooling cannot be conceived separate from the evaluative system of meaning. Assessment procedures have established relations of domination by scrutinising and defining what/who is possible, normal and desirable, and what/who is not. 'The truth' about Jessica – as 'the truth' of every student – is inscribed in these terms. As the final goal and the guarantor of normality and acceptability, assessment defines rigid and limited frames within which students can move to fulfil the institutional expectations. As children need to align themselves to this narrow space of possibility, differences and singularities are severely constrained.

In this environment, classrooms become places that inhibit creativity and self-expression. Every student's action must be a reflection of a defined teacher requirement. As Jimena had expected, most students included the whole list of information she had asked for in their presentations. Only when students had gone through all the elements she had asked to have incorporated (without deviation) did she seem to approve their presentations. In the face of any deviation or omission, she was explicitly frustrated and annoyed, and students were publicly reprimanded and compared with those who had performed as requested. This way of operating (repeated over numerous lessons) made lessons monotonous and unstimulating. There was only one very precise way to be and to act that students had to adapt to. The satisfaction of this unique, desirable way of being was connected to a positive evaluation and vice versa. Assessment and comparison were particular techniques used to enforce the required attitudes and actions. In this way, more than ensuring learning experiences and processes, the teachers were positioned as evaluators of

the fulfilment of defined expectations. As all students needed to achieve these narrow expectations, it seemed that the goal was to make children uniform by moulding them according to the teachers' and schools' demands. The power to teach, explore, care, and produce learning seemed less fundamental to the act of teaching than the power to measure, judge, correct, and sanction.

A significant point to make is that, as the Reading Gala and the previous excerpt suggest, students' intelligibility within accountability rationales and assessment practices was not necessarily about 'capacity' or learning progress. In a context that had introduced the logics of inclusivity (including making curricular adaptations to meet students' needs), productivity was less a measurement of 'objective' learning outcomes than an assessment of students' commitment to evaluative logics (ultimately, submission to the school's pedagogic regime). 'Studying' or 'making an effort' were evidence of students' desire to attain neoliberal meritocratic goals - the illusion of 'fair' distinctions of students' worth - to acquire a positive school identity.

Independent of learning outcomes, when educators align students with the terrors of performativity to which they themselves are also subjected (Ball, 2003), they enforce an organisation of the school's interactions based on uninterrupted monitoring and recording, the strict partition of time and space, the imposition of restricted rhythms and goals, and the comparison, categorisation and hierarchisation of pupils' educational and personal identities. Measurement's content - either learning, effort, or the interlocking of both - is less important than the normalising function of the measurement itself. Ultimately, what seems to matter, is harmonising students' obligations of self-realisation with notions of normality, acceptability and

excellence defined in terms of schools' values and needs. In the example above, and in the same vein, the 'effort' that the school required was not 'any effort' (which might have rewarded Jessica's creative efforts), but an 'effort' consistent with the schools' expectations (represented here by a checklist in a qualification notebook).

Study (or 'making an effort') becomes a synonym for caring about evaluation, and caring for evaluation is fundamentally caring about what the school needs (beyond learning, grades, dedication or drive). Productivity ultimately equals docility. Many teachers tried to reflect student's alignment to school requirements in their academic outcomes. Even students receiving insufficient qualifications might be able to progress if they compliantly fulfilled the (necessary) role of failure within the school's orders and prerequisites.

Such 'docility' was imposed through a dynamic process in which the capture of knowledge and desire was entangled with more traditional and intimidating techniques of external enforcement. Grade retention was produced in this context as an external coercive device. Across educational levels - and especially in the lower grades - I witnessed how teachers stressed ideas about promotion and retention during lessons as a way to sustain the centrality of the evaluative processes. Also, during the interviews, educators acknowledged that, from the beginning of primary education, students were taught that if they did not show the correct dispositions towards the examination process, they would be forced to repeat the year. Along with this, pupils received the message that, in this process, capacity and 'effort' naturally translated into academic results.

> We use grade retention as a kind of threat. [We say] 'Look, we will take the test and those who get a bad mark won't progress to third grade, they will stay in second grade'. We use that with the small children and it works, it really works. (…) Some teachers are like [imposing a harsh voice]: 'Hey! You got a bad mark, you will be retained'. But you can also be more like [imposing a gentle voice]: 'look, this is not a great mark, you need to make an effort and maybe you will… because otherwise you will stay in...'. It depends on the teacher. Because you can traumatise a kid with that, you can make them suffer the whole year. *(Escuela Andalhue. Interview, November 2017. Adela, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

> Unfortunately, I cannot let that child progress to the next grade. And I have already told him. Besides, he doesn't have a good attitude, he acts as if he kind of doesn't understand things… kids like him are rogue. But I have said to him 'if I don't see you having a good work disposition, I won't pass you to the next grade'. *(Escuela Olga Poblete. Interview, November 2017. Óscar, 5th Grade Class Teacher)*.

These kinds of threats were usually intelligible as an integral part of pedagogic practice. The threat of retention was sometimes employed as a general warning to enforce the evaluating practices and externally motivate the entire class to study. At other times, it was used to intimidate particular students identified as lacking the expected attitude. Although teachers recognised that grade retention can be 'unfortunate' or mobilised in ways that 'traumatise students', they normalised the use of such admonitions as part of the 'regular' educational process.

In a context in which traditional corrective and punitive means – such as physical punishment or expulsion - were restricted by regulation and social norms, grade retention was embraced as the ultimate tool by which teachers might regain control over educational processes by transforming evaluation into a disciplinary force.

> Grade retention is a control mechanism 'if you don't start to make an effort, you will be retained', a negative message. I feel that it is one of the last control mechanisms still in place at the school, and teachers certainly apply it. (…) Teachers use grade retention to put pressure on students: 'bring the homework', 'give me your work'. It is a mechanism in a context in which the evaluative culture is not installed. The evaluation is not part of the teaching-learning process. Looking at the evaluation as a control issue, grade retention is the most powerful weapon. No child wants to be retained. (…) Given that families do not transmit the importance of education to students, that students are not motivated to learn, that other control mechanisms such as definitive exclusion have been removed, retention seems necessary. In a complex social context like this one, and with the limited resources of the school, it is difficult not having traditional methods of control like retention. (…) Promotion is a terrain in which the teacher is still the one who calls the shots. I don't judge it, I don't question it. I don't agree with it, I wouldn't do it, and I try to talk to them when they act like that. But I also understand what they do from the logic of 'if you don't work, you will be retained', 'if you don't attend the lessons, you will be retained'. And, to every kid, grade retention matters. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, October 2017. Luciana, Headteacher).*

In Luciana's account, the official narratives that traditionally sustained and justified examinations and accountability have been withdrawn. Evaluation is not conceived as a tool to measure learning or enhance the teaching-learning experience, neither is the practice of retention portrayed as a strategy to assure a satisfactory learning process. They are instead recognised as control mechanisms that teachers use to push students into specific behaviours, especially those related to engaging in schoolwork. Grade retention is identified as "the most powerful weapon" to sustain the disciplinary power of evaluative logics and enforce 'commitment' to the school. Although the Headteacher disapproved the disciplinary use of grade retention, she accepted it as necessary. For her, imagining a school in which educators did not 'call the shots' through coercive methods seemed

impractical/impossible. In this way, the normative function of grade retention was valorised and became self-evident.

During the interviews, I usually started with questions about the function of grade retention in the school, and I finished asking what would happen in a scenario without grade retention. Usually, even those who initially dismissed retention practices as unimportant expressed great concern faced with the possibility of their elimination and the implications they imagined this would bring to the disciplinary relationships upheld by the evaluative culture.

> If everybody were promoted to the next grade no one would study. Who would do the homework? Students would be like 'I won't go to the school if I don't want to', 'I am not doing my homework, I don't like this subject, and I will still progress to the next class'. The pressure to study would disappear. Because at the end there are children that say 'I don't want to be retained, I want to finish the school', and they study, they do their work. *(Colegio Santa Evangelina. Interview, October 2017. Susana, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

> If grade retention were annulled tomorrow, students would get lazy. They wouldn't copy from the whiteboard, they wouldn't care about the tests, they would be rude with us because neither they could be expelled from the school. *(Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta. Interview, October 2017. Pilar, 6th Grade Class Teacher).*

> Without grade retention all the children would be like 'I am not studying because I will pass to the next grade anyway'. They wouldn't make any effort. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, April 2018. Guardian 2nd Grade).*

These reactions to the possibility of a school in which all students were automatically promoted – repeated in interview after interview – expose the fundamental role that grade retention has in 'making' primary school a place in which

education is submitted to performativity and neoliberal meritocratic logics, and where learning is a far from joyful, intrinsically satisfying experience.

Grade retention upholds the field of variation and difference that evaluative norms and standards need to operate (Usher & Edwards, 1994). Not only does it differentiate between those who fulfil the school's expectations and those who do not, but also between those who are normal/desirable/intelligible and the impossible/abject subjects who must be mended or excluded. The anguish educators expressed at the possibility of automatic promotion seemed to relate to the imagined disruption to the production of distinctions of worth and organisational hierarchies that sustained the illusion of a correlation between effort, ability and academic outcome.

'Listen to your teacher': Enforcement of teachers' authority

By conferring power to the evaluative process, grade retention becomes a mechanism to enforce educators' authority.

Schools are disciplinary institutions in which differential positions and hierarchies are enacted (Ball 2013; Rose, 1999; Youdell, 2011). Traditionally, the adult world, and particularly the members of the school staff, have been in a position of power over children and young people (and their families). The 'normal' functioning of the school has usually implied that students must be submissive and compliant towards educators while educators are expected to hold authority.

In recent decades, the discourses sustaining this authority – not only in the school but also in society in general – have been increasingly questioned. On the one hand, institutions today have less power than they use to have over citizens; this

also applies to the school. These educational spaces went from being powerful institutions that ruled over students and families to services providers for a demanding population aware of their rights. On the other hand, the adult world has also lost authority in relation to children. Traditional authority, based on the exercise of violence over children and assumptions of adult superiority, has lost legitimacy. Parents' control over their children has diminished and relations between educators and pupils have also inevitably changed. This had led to a diminishing of the power of authority figures in educational spheres, and also to new modes and strategies – perhaps more subtle and diversified – of domination.

Diverse members of the school staff strongly resented these changes which they felt stopped them doing their jobs. Some of them were nostalgic for a past in which the violent enforcement of discipline was accepted; a time in which adults and teachers were respected and feared as authority figures. Indeed, educators mentioned how now they were afraid of students and their families, and the social and legal powers they had recently gained. In several educators' accounts, these 'new' student/family powers' seemed to position them as enemies of their teachers and the school values they uphold.

> The problem is that our students don't place importance on study. They think 'my parents will come, will make a complaint, and I will be promoted to the next year'. And I have seen it happen. Last year there was a particular case in which I witnessed how that happened. (…) Because they feel that they have that power. Nowadays, carers have that power and students too. If you say to a child 'you didn't bring your notebook today', they accuse you! In first grade! I compare the 1st grade I had five or six years ago, and it was entirely different from the one I

(Continued on next page)

> have now. Now, there is no respect, nothing. On the contrary, the kids I had years ago were different, and the parents too. Today I have 35 children and 15 of them have behavioural problems. And when you tell the parents, they get mad at you…they come to the school and assert a claim against you. Or they consider that everything you do is wrong. *(Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta. Interview, October 2017. Paulina, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

In her account, Paulina resents this new educational scenario in which students and carers can deviate from the school goals and resolutions, disagree with educators, and even make complaints against them. According to her, carers and children not only feel they have such power, but they actually have it; she has seen it operating in the school. Paulina associated these new attributes to a lack of respect towards the school and its professionals, and to pupils' behavioural problems. In her remarks, power was conceived as a 'zero-sum' game were students and families have gained power at the expense of schools and educators. This idea of a new 'redistribution' of power within the educational context was pervasive across the schools. Several educators reported feeling vulnerable, helpless, and overwhelmed by these changes.

An area of great concern for teachers and school authorities was the possibility of guardians intervening in decisions regarding the promotion of students, a domain that had been traditionally reserved exclusively for school staff. Different interviewees told stories in which carers had gone to the teacher, the school authorities, and even the local, regulating agencies to pressure them to promote their child. As in Paulina's account, this still seemed to be restricted to particular cases, however, these stories appeared to be causing significant anxiety and discomfort among the staff. This seemed to be related to the fact that educators' authority is now

mostly sustained by their power to evaluate and judge progression. When they sensed that this faculty might be taken away from them, they felt destitute.

In a scenario in which educators felt powerless and unprotected because they feared losing their hierarchical authority, their remaining power to threaten and punishing was of paramount importance. The power to qualify - and ultimately to retain students - was acknowledged as valuable to that purpose.

> There are teachers whose view is like ‘I am the teacher here’, and the only means they have to be the authority is the qualification. Unfortunately, nowadays the educational system and the teachers are negatively evaluated by our society, a teaching career is looked down on. Besides, they don’t have much authority, students can be disrespectful with them… So, in the end, the only way teachers can validate themselves is ‘I am the one who marks you, and if I qualify you poorly, your bad grade will be there’. Because the teacher can qualify as they please. (*Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, October 2017. Beatriz, Senior Leader).*

The weakening of traditional hierarchies seemed to have reinforced grade retention’s function as a disciplinary mechanism that reinstalls segmented lines establishing distinctions and orders between adults and children, and between the educators and the students and their carers. The assessment field appeared as a unique space in which ('powerless') teachers could still feel safe and in control. This was somewhere where they could act ‘as they pleased’ and regain the social and educational authority they had lost. Furthermore, educators’ professional validation was invested in their evaluative function and the consequences and arrangements that derived from it.

Óscar: Allowing the progression of a student who did nothing during the year is detrimental to us as teachers because we delegitimise ourselves with our students… your pedagogical practice losses legitimacy.

(…)

Alejandra: How effective do you think grade retention is? In which cases it is useful and in which cases not?

Óscar: It is useful when it stops teachers from losing validation and credibility with the students. We have to validate our work. Not retaining a student who doesn't work it is not very favourable. Not for you, nor for the rest of the students. It affects your practice. Students won't look at you in the same way after that. *(Escuela Olga Poblete. Interview, November 2017. Óscar, 5th Grade Class Teacher).*

When I asked Óscar about the effectiveness and convenience of grade retention, I was trying to explore its functions regarding the students. However, he answered me by establishing its significance to the school and particularly to educators' authority and professional credibility. His answer emphasised the social/institutional – rather than the individual - role of grade retention. He positioned the practice as part of professional value and the establishment of hierarchical orders. The idea that allowing progression without a display of the required dispositions would diminish a teacher's practice and endanger professional validation, seemed to part of a conviction that professional capability, legitimacy and authority rest in teachers' jurisdiction over qualifications and progression. This demonstrates how the circulation of power that emerges from grade retention is not only negative and coercive, but also productive. It produces professional worth, it

organises the educational field in particular ways, and it engenders drive, gratifications and feelings that forge educational relationships.

Grade retention's disciplinary social function enforcing educators' authority is solidified when it becomes a method of correction aimed at individuals who endanger the positions of those in power. During the fieldwork observations, I consistently noticed that students from the retained spectrum tended to be those who challenged school authoritarian orders. This happened with particular frequency in the upper levels of primary school, as exposed in the account below.

> A common characteristic of students at risk of being retained in the educational level I work is their opposition to the adult in charge; to authority in itself. *(Escuela Andalhue. Interview, November 2017. Antonia, 5th Grade Class Teacher)*.

Despite recent changes and movements towards different power configurations between children and adults and between the school and those who attend to it, Antonia's remark exposes the pervasiveness of the traditional discourse in which the adult – here an educator – is assumed to be the undisputed authority figure in educational relationships. In parallel, grade retention was seen as an acceptable strategy for use over 'rebel' students thereby sanctioning the teacher's authority. It produced the abject (in opposition to the normal/moral body) as one against hierarchical educational relationships (in opposition to the compliant). Once again, a close look at the school shows how practices and logics of retention went beyond the simple calculation of acceptable marks and percentages of attendance.

‘Bow down’: Naturalisation/concealment of violence

Just as the enforcement of authority through direct violence has been delegitimised in recent years, the use of violence as a generalised pedagogical tool has also ceased to be acceptable in educational contexts. Violent educational relationships and the forceful imposition of discipline (the norm decades ago) are now less acceptable and are condemned in official educational discourses. Although some educators explicitly resented the loss of control that coercive methods gave them, the majority incorporated the idea of an education free from violence in their narratives.

Despite this, the observation of daily practices in schools and classrooms, provided a more complex picture. While in some educational spaces ‘violent traditional methods’ seemed absent, in others, aggression was still used to dominate students; verbal threats and harsh reprimands were still evident in interactions with students failing to fulfil behavioural or attitudinal expectations. Disqualifications and physical abuse were less common, but they retained a role redressing and punishing deviant behaviour. While ‘on paper’ this approach towards students had been eradicated, in practice it was still authorised and applied in several educational contexts.

Although elements of this violent disciplinary stance seemed to operate at all stages of the primary school, they were particularly evident in lower grades. In Escuela Los Bellotos’ 1st grade class, violent practices and encounters seemed to have been naturalised as a strategic disciplinary device.

Escuela Los Bellotos
Observation. November, 2017.
1st Grade Classroom

The break has ended and the 1st grade class is getting ready to start the lesson. Luisa (1st grade class teacher), Loreto (teaching assistant) and Berta (trainee student) are present in the classroom today.

As usual, Luisa leads the lesson. She starts it by saying: "Nobody eats chewing gum, because you already know what I do when students chew gum… I stick it in your hair". The teacher asks the students that are chewing gum to come to the bin at the front of the room to throw their gum away. A few students stand up and throw their chewing gum in the bin. One girl, Liliana, keeps chewing despite the teacher's request. Luisa insists that she must throw the gum. The girl walks to the bin and pretends to throw the gum away, but keeps it in her mouth. When she comes back to sit down at her desk, other students accuse her of having kept the gum in her mouth. The teacher says to her "You are a filthy pig" but Liliana acts as if she has not heard Luisa. The teacher approaches Liliana, grabs the girl violently by her head and pulls her head back putting her fingers in Liliana's mouth to remove the gum. After this, the teacher continues reprimanding Liliana who maintains her defiant attitude. A few minutes later, Liliana stands up and walk toward me trying to start a conversation. The teacher says to me "Please, don't talk to her, I am really asking you". I remain silent, but the girl stays next to me wanting to talk. Luisa asks Loreto (the teacher assistant) to take Liliana out of the classroom, "I can't stand her here anymore" she says. Then she adds "Let her mother come and do to her what she said she was going to do to her". Berta, the trainee student, adds "Unfortunately I also heard what the mother is going to do to her". And Loreto takes Liliana out of the room.

In this interaction, the enforcement of Luisa's demands - and the reinforcement of her authority - was achieved through verbal and physical violence and exclusion. Liliana was mistreated by her teacher in front of three other adults (including me) and the whole class. Nobody seemed impressed. The verbal and physical abuse seemed to be accepted as the natural course of action following

Liliana's 'misbehaviour'. This brutal display of power resembles what Foucault (1991) defined as the traditional coercive methods of the sovereign. The imposition of force, the disproportional strength used to subjugate Liliana's body and the concentration of power in Luisa, resembled a monarch's 'power over life.' Powerful, punitive demonstrations like this seemed to coexist in this classroom with methods of normalisation such as self-surveillance and social control.

The 'monarchical' teacher's approach also seemed entangled in further relationships in this classroom. The rest of the students and the teachers present (Loreto and Berta) were located simultaneously by Luisa in positions of subordination and complicity in the display of violence. In this scene, everyone seemed implicated in the aggression towards Liliana, not only as witnesses but also as participants: the students who accused her, the teaching assistant who took her out of the room, and the trainee student who acknowledged a predicted punishment that might come later at home. I was also immersed in this violence when, by my silence, I rejected Liliana's approach. It was possible that she had approached me expecting me to protect her as an adult figure new to the violent dynamic that seemed to reign in the class. Maybe she was pointing out to the teacher that an outsider was witness to the situation. In any case, my passivity further reinforced Luisa's authority and normalised her aggressive approach. This classroom had become a hostile space in which violence was accepted and naturalised as a tool to sustain the teacher's authority and enforce desired behaviours.

Although there were significant aspects of this episode that can be understood from this 'monarchical perspective', there were other elements that need further consideration. The explicit acknowledgement of the brutality by which a 'sovereign'

sustains their power was missing here. Neither Luisa nor the other actors seemed to recognise the violence of this exchange. During the interview with Luisa (before this observation) she explained to me how she approaches children through “the pedagogy of tenderness”. She described it as a teaching method in which affection, care, emotional support, humour, laughter, mutual trust, and constructive relationships were key elements; she conceived her practice in these terms.

Slavoj Zizek’s (2008) work on violence provides useful ideas to disentangle the operations involved here. He argues that the violence we see easily and recognise as a perturbation of the ‘normal-peaceful state of things’ executed by a discernible agent is only one form of violence; one that he calls ‘subjective violence’. He suggests that there is also an ‘objective violence’ which is not evident because it is inherent in the ‘normal-peaceful’ background of our lives. This includes ‘symbolic violence’ which is part of social domination intrinsic to patterns in everyday speech, and a ‘systemic violence’ related to the political and economic system and its forms of domination and exploitation.

Analysing the last excerpt as a ‘monarchical display of power’ means we focus on the ‘subjective violence’ which, according to Zizek (2008, p. 2), deflects us from a more pressing problem: the objective violence that sustains social agents’ acts of aggression and inures us to some forms of it. From this perspective, we can understand the previous encounter in terms of traditional authoritative relationships that (as mentioned early) are still in place at the primary school, and the technologies of oppression and reward present in neoliberal educational relationships (Ball, 2013). These are the significant forms of violence that ‘frame’ Luisa and Liliana’s interaction but are hidden by their naturalisation in the school context.

These ‘background elements’ that sanction violent practices coexist with discourses of children’s rights and advanced pedagogy such as those implicated in Luisa’s narrative. Zizek (2008) addresses these contradictions when he reflects on the synchronicity of the discourse of rights and freedom (democracy) and the practices of exploitation and domination (capitalism). Far from being perceived as a contradiction, our society accepts the last as long as they can be sustained within the ‘rights narrative’. Violence is then concealed under a veneer of equity and rights. Similar operations sustain the contradiction between Luisa’s practices and narrative. Her so called ‘pedagogy of tenderness’ renders Luisa and Liliana’s interaction an act of ‘unrecognisable violence’ as it is ‘wrapped’ in acceptable definitions aligned with official pressures towards non-violent education. The same principles that make violence (discursively) unacceptable allow its practice by the suppression of its recognition. In this sense, explaining this episode by labelling Luisa as a violent singular individual seems an incomplete (even impossible) way to address what happened. Teachers, like children, have to navigate available/required positions enmeshed in the matrix of discursive, emotional and material forces that constitute them (Ball, 1994). In this context, what seems pressing to consider, are the conditions by which this teacher has been positioned as an educator in a place from which she feels compelled to behave aggressively towards some students while the violent acts involved remain unspeakable and unseen.

Despite its ‘unrecognisability’, objective violence is still a display of power that operates as a mechanism of intimidation and dissuasion making an affective impression on us. The ‘unspeakability’ and ‘invisibility’ of violence does not mean that it does not have an affective correlate from which it appears and functions. The

Deleuzo-Guattarian definition of ‘affect’ is useful to consider how this kind of violence produces bodily sensations that profoundly change relationships and capacities to act without the need for it to be consciously elaborated and reported (Patton, 2000; Youdell & Armstrong, 2011). I review this affective component in more detail in the next chapter. However, in the meantime, it should be noted that the inadvertent character of ‘unthinkable’ violence does not make it any less effective. On the contrary, it has profound effects/affects precisely because it goes unrecognised. It governs us, it tells us who we are, and it defines our position within the social milieu, with no chance of appeal.

Furthermore, the unrecognisability of violence and its productive power are related to social (and educational) patterns of domination. This means that it is conditioned to whom/what the receiver of the aggression might be and who/what might become its next target. The ‘educational insensibility’ towards the aggression Liliana suffered (above) happens precisely because it is directed specifically at her. Not all students’ misbehaviours generated violence, nor were all students subjected to it. The naturalisation/unrecognisability of violence was generally imposed over those bodies identified as unable to follow expectations, requests, orders, and rules. From Zizek’s perspective, it can be argued that the systemic violence involved in neoliberal education generates excluded and disposable students. Those who are constituted as incompatible with competitive and meritocratic logics are made the ‘acceptable targets’ of violence, or, in other words, the targets of acceptable violence (objective violence). Aggression then is exercised over children that are unintelligible as subjects of (neoliberal) education.

Frequently, students from the retained spectrum were conceived in those terms. Liliana was a student who had been identified by her teacher as at risk of retention. Although she had the grades to progress to the next grade, her attendance level was low. At the end of the school year, she was the only student in the class who was retained. Not only in this class, but in most of the classrooms I observed, students from the retained spectrum were the preferred targets of educators' disciplinary aggression. Unreadable as they were within the school's system of meaning, the institution and its members seemed to fail to recognise their educational and protective role towards students from the retained spectrum. As well as being impossible as learners and students, these pupils were rendered unviable as children and subjects of rights.

Kristeva's concept of abjection (1984) illuminates the entanglements between violence, discipline and injurious identity constitutions in the grade retention ensemble. When abject-retained students transgress educational meanings, orders, logics, and values, the 'living universe' in which members of the school are constituted comes under threat raising violent and passionate reactions. 'The nausea' is the impression Kristeva uses to represent a violent force of separation (condemnation and eradication) that emerges in proximity to abjection; it is a movement directed to restoring and preserving the order in which subjects have meaningful existence. The previous scene is an illustration of how this 'nausea' operates in the grade retention ensemble in primary school. Not only through her actions but in her very identity, Liliana represented a threat to the sanctioned practices, hierarchies and discourses of the school. The threatened institution resisted her through the deployment of a disproportionate and unrecognisable

violence. In Butler's terms (2003), Liliana was located in a place of dispossession. As her educational existence had been denied, so was the 'objective' symbolic and material violence directed towards her. In these terms, the deprivation, marginalisation and brutality that followed – and were so clearly displayed – seemed not only possible but inescapable.

Abjection is performatively configurated within these terrains of accepted/unspeakable destructiveness. Objective violence constitutes us - it is not a simple response to an 'already made' constitution. To students from the retained spectrum, it is not just that the belonging to the 'injurious category of retention' makes them targets of violence. The aggression they endure seems productive of their impossibility and abjection and creates the conditions that forward their further exclusion. Their dispossession operates as a definition of who they are and whom they can expect to be; violence operates performatively. In the case of Liliana, one might wonder if the hostility that she was subjected to in the classroom and the exclusions she endured were not related to her low attendance at the school. Within the grade retention ensemble, the identity definitions and the educational experiences seem entangled in intricate and multidirectional ways.

Students' family dynamics also seemed implicated in mechanisms of dispossession. In the story above, Luisa and Berta suggested that Liliana's mother would punish the girl in ways that were 'unfortunate' to hear about. The mother became an imaginary accomplice - and even a future perpetrator - of violent interactions. Irrespective of how much students' families engaged in punishments and violent practices in response to what happened in school, it seems important to

note how some educators endorsed the extension of aggression to students' homes as part of the legitimised consequences of the disturbance of educational orders.

In parallel, it is interesting to consider how the normalisation of this violence was engrained in the educational discourses held by the same students. In several drawings and stories made by them, parental punishment was displayed as an expected reaction from carers when they were made aware of their child's retention. The drawing of a 1st grade student from Colegio Jesús Misionero, presented below, exposes this association.

Figure 9. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 1st grade student, Jessica (girl).

Speech Bubble: *"Oh, my parents will hit me if they find out that I was retained in the school".*



In this drawing, the 'thought' of two angry adult figures before a sorrowful child is complemented by a 'dialogue' in which the student laments at the prospect of being hit by her parents when they realise that she has been retained. The violence implied by this drawing, as connatural to the condition of impossibility/abjection that

grade retention entails, seems commensurable with the educational system of meaning that many primary students experience in their daily school life.

Furthermore, the dispossession retained students are subject to not only defines their individual educational identities and experiences but the ways in which schooling is experienced by all its members. According to Kristeva (1982), despite movements towards its eradication, the abject identity is never erased. It persists in its function of reinforcing power and sanctioned meaning by demarking the borders of what is acceptable and what is possible in the social milieu. In the previous scene, the violence experienced by Liliana was also a definition of limits – and finally a threat – for every student in the class. The incident operated as a warning showing every student what can happen and what their educational identities can become, if they step outside the borders drawn by Luisa. The disciplinary power of violence is then related to the possibility of becoming its next receiver/victim. Even if students cannot read these kinds of disproportionate forces of subjugation as violence, they can still be affected and moved by them.

As a matter of fact, students from the retained spectrum were also the preferred and most 'acceptable' targets of aggression from other children. In Colegio Jesús Misionero's 5th grade classroom, Juan (the boy who was about to be retained in 5th grade for the second time) was consistently teased, humiliated and physically harassed by his classmates. Despite this happening often and overtly, Martina, Juan's class teacher, never intervened. She did pay attention and reprimand Juan when he was not paying attention in the lesson. She also interceded when other students were victims of these kinds of aggressive behaviours. However, when the bullying was directed towards Juan, she consistently overlooked it.

The compliance and normalisation of this type of aggression highlights the implication of established educational identities in the distribution of objective violence. Hostilities directed towards Juan need to be considered in the context of his 'retained identity' and his continuing lack of recognition as a rightful educational agent. Not only did the mistreatment retained students received from educators 'encourage' a hostile approach towards them, but teachers also seemed more tolerant of aggressive interchanges among students when those rendered impossible/abject were the target. In this universally experienced educational system, the message seemed to be that, when someone is retained, aggression towards that person is acceptable in the school environment. The large number of student's drawing and stories that normalised peer violence against students from the retained spectrum (e.g. figure 18 and 26), expose how these aggressions were not only possible or tolerated, but 'made sense' in the discursive formations and relations of power in primary schools.

Ultimately, grade retention itself can become a violent act. The idea of grade retention as a fair device of dispossession when applied to undesirable identities, manifest its instrumentalisation as a violent exercise. In our conversations, some participants acknowledged that, beyond 'official discourses' portraying grade retention as a therapeutic/remedial endeavour, the practice can function as a 'simple' retaliation over impossible/abject subjects.

> I believe that it can be the case that a student is too disruptive during the lessons and the teacher bears them a grudge, and if there is the chance that the student fails, the teacher will provide zero help to him.

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> Yeah, that happens. As it also happens the opposite. If a child is not doing great but the teacher appreciates him, he will surely help the kid. We are human beings. *(Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta. Interview, October 2017. Pablo, Headteacher).*

This account, demonstrates the broken narrative of grade retention as a benefit and as an opportunity, turning it into an operation reserved for those students for whom teachers 'bear a grudge'. Student's transgressions of school orders were followed by a punitive demonstration in which educators created the 'optimal conditions' for the punitive dispossession of disruptive pupils from educational opportunities. This not only reaffirmed teachers' power to decide students' educational experiences and destinies but also conferred on them the power to cause suffering.

Here, grade retention is clearly a violent action. Its objective is to damage the transgressive body that has produced distress or has endangered the orders and meanings of the school. The final remark, in which the Headteacher justified educators' retaliatory actions on the basis of them being 'human beings', suggests that he acknowledged (to some extent) that the use of retention in this way could constitute malpractice. However, in parallel, he normalised the misdeed towards 'transgressive' children as a 'human' action undertaken by teachers. Both educators and students were considered doing something 'inappropriate', but while 'humanity' excused teachers, the same it was not granted to children from the retained spectrum. Moreover, teachers' humanity was asserted – and positions of domination established - at the expense of the precarisation of these pupils. Their injurious designation as 'disruptive children' seemed to make their dispossession acceptable, and even expected, within the educational discourse. Once again, the injurious place

in which students from the retained spectrum were located made them the ‘natural’ - almost ‘instinctive’ - targets of violence and, in this case, such violence was the action of retaining them in itself.

Although nowadays the official educational discourse condemns the use of violence within the educational milieu, during the research violence remained a technology of disciplinary power used to subdue abject identities and govern educational subjects. Educators, carers, and students all seemed to be potential participants in hostile educational dynamics. Nevertheless, this violence was usually denied through mechanisms of concealment and justification entangled with the subjectivation process operating over students’ identities. Furthermore, the grade retention ensemble remained embedded in a disciplinary milieu in which violent intensities and relationships were deployed, and participated in the emergence and maintenance of monarchic and objective violence by the constitution of dispossessed identities, by the formulation of narratives that justified and concealed aggression, and by the production of violent mechanisms of punishment.

‘Behave’: Enforcement of ‘good’ conduct

The ultimate goal of the enforcement of evaluation and competition, the reterritorialization of educators’ authority, and the use of violence, is to secure control over students’ bodies and activity. Children’s ‘good behaviour’ is an imperative across educational spaces that is enforced by sustained (previously discussed) processes of supervision, self-surveillance and coercion. Desirable behaviour varies according to schools’ cultures, educators’ pedagogical approaches, the age of

students, and other elements. However, across the classrooms I observed, there was a generalised disciplinary focus that subordinated pedagogy and learning and restricted students' spontaneous bodily actions to their minimal expression.

From the age of six, children were (repeatedly) asked to sit still on their chairs and work quietly on the teacher's activities for 90 minutes at a time. These activities were usually very restrictive. There was just one way to do them right – following the educator's precise instructions. What children did, thought, and felt during the lessons seemed prescribed, with no space for deviation. Lessons were given in a horizontal manner. Teachers were generally in front of the class, and students worked individually at their desks. Conversations, exchanges and movements additional to those demanded were forbidden. Pupils not performing precisely as requested were scolded and threatened in multiple ways. A significant part of student-teachers interactions was based on reprimands, threats, and requests to behave as instructed. In this context, teachers usually expressed a negative mood; both teachers and students often seemed to want to be somewhere else. On many occasions, especially in the lower grades, when children were allowed to go out for their break, they ran and shouted frenetically – finally able to express themselves spontaneously.

In many lessons, as in the following excerpt, educational exchanges and activities were almost exclusively oriented towards discipline. Within this dynamic, educators' pedagogical function was secondary to their disciplinary-authoritarian function.

Escuela Los Bellotos
Observation. November, 2017.
1st Grade Classroom

At some point in the lesson Luisa, the 1st grade teacher, says she wants to give instruction to the students for the next activity, but first, she wants them to be quiet and still. Students are still completing the previous activity. Therefore, many of them are enthusiastically drawing and are not very keen to stop what they are doing. The teacher asks them a few times to stop drawing and when she notices that some of them are not following her request, she starts to scold them angrily. Several minutes pass and she keeps raising her voice more and more, waiting for all students to be completely immobile and listening to her. Benjamín keeps drawing in spite of been told off a few times. Annoyed, Luisa addresses the class saying "Look all to Benjamín, he keeps drawing". Other students start to ask him to stop drawing, but he continues. Luisa asks another student to take away Benjamín's book and pencils to force him to stop. She does it. Luisa says to the class "You will be promoted to 2nd grade, you have to do what I request you to do".

Finally, she asks the children to draw a heart in their notebook and place the people whom students love the most inside it. Students start to draw and Luisa walks around the classroom checking the drawings and making comments "And where are your mother and father?", "your heart is so small that there is just room for a cat and a dog?", "You really have an empty heart?", "Poor mothers and fathers that are not in those hearts". Then the teacher says "Draw me". Many students answer "Yes!" to her request. She looks at a student who has not included her in the heart and says to him "And I am not in your drawing?" with a sad voice. Hearing that, another student says to her, "Now I am going to start drawing you!" Luisa also checks the kind of pencils pupils use to draw. She scolds them if they do not use the right colour or type of pen/pencil "You did it wrong because you used a pen and I did not say that you should use a pen". In parallel, she constantly shouts them in a harsh voice to discipline them "Brian sit down", "Do you want me to get mad?", "Leonel take your hand out of your mouth", "Bianca, don't do that again", "Brian!", "Lucas don't move so much", "Brian, really, is very annoying, I am getting very angry", "I don't want to see anybody moving", "everybody freeze and be silent", "Brian, you got me…", "Go to your seat before I throw one of my boots at you, take you to the hospital and don't see you any more", "Now I am going

(Continued on next page)

to say who is suspended because I don't want anyone standing up", "I will not promote students who don't sit down right now to second grade".

When students do say something that Luisa considers wrong, she imitates them using an idiotic voice. At some point, she says (referring to me) "The lady who has come today is a doctor. She is an otolaryngologist, and she will insert a syringe in the ear of children who don't listen and will take it out of the other ear to clean them… do you want me to start with you Laura?". Some students look at me incredulously, others look scared. Then she stops and says "Wait, I have a problem" and she smells the chair in which Blas was seated. She calls Blas to the front and talks to him in secret. At the end of the conversation, she says to him in a loud voice "bathe".

Students in Luisa's class were submitted to an uninterrupted 'behavioural training'. Activities seemed more of an excuse to normalise behaviour than a pedagogical encounter. Every expression and choice – from whom students recognised as the people they love to the type of pencil they used – were rigidly governed by the teacher. Autonomous definitions or stances, as well as spontaneous bodily movements, were constituted as obnoxious deviations needing regulation. Stillness and silence were maxims that needed to be followed as general rules to be observed whatever the activity. These rules were enforced by constant 'calls to order'. Reproaches, humiliations and threats were typical ways in which such 'calls' were delivered. Especially in the lower grades, incessant reprimands were a key element in the classrooms observed. Possibly, the sedimented seizure of knowledge and inclinations, as well as the internalisation of the norm/normality, might make these traditional coercive techniques less necessary in the upper grades.

Interchanges among students as well as relationships between teachers and students were submitted to disciplinary forces. Like Luisa, teachers frequently

encouraged children to impose discipline over peers who perceived to be misbehaving, or generated situations in which students policed one another. Pitting students against each other in order to enforce discipline was a frequent strategy. Often, teachers placed the responsibility for some students' behaviours on other students or punished the whole class for the misbehaviour of one or a few. Anti-authoritarian behaviour was usually defined as anti-social. Public humiliation - as when Luisa labelled students 'idiot' or 'smelly' in front of their classmates – were coercive methods that required peers to witness and tacitly approve the disciplinary arrangements.

Every relationship at the school seemed captured by disciplinary terms. Even my position (as above) was commandeered. When Luisa used my presence in the room as a threat to control the students, my position in the classroom also became disciplined. She made me part of the disciplinary relationships and interchanges that defined the classroom climate. Moreover, Luisa set the rules I needed to follow in order to be an acceptable (adult) participant in the class. She defined my position and the interactions I might possibly have with students according to terms made available and demanded by the educational assemblage; i.e. disciplinary terms.

The harsh way these children were constantly threatened was another common characteristic of the lessons observed. Punishments and threats such as losing playtime, getting a negative letter home, having to go to the Headteacher's office, being suspended, as well as more creative ones such as having a boot thrown at you or being punctured with a needle in the ear were constantly evoked. Along with these, grade retention was explicitly used as a threat to reinforce control over children's bodily expressions. As in the previous observation, there was a clear

message that behaving exactly as told was a prerequisite for promotion. Non-compliance to this demand triggered constant threats of non-promotion. Although promotion regulations in Chile stipulated that progression depended exclusively on academic results and attendance, teachers frequently claimed to have the power to decide progression depending on students' adherence to expectations of behaviour. The previous observation is illustrative of this: the two times the teacher mentioned the rules of grade promotion, she associated it with docile behaviour (behave as demanded and stay seated).

Students in lower and upper primary grades had absorbed this association. The idea that 'misbehaviour' is (or can be) the cause of grade retention was depicted in several pupils' drawings and stories of 'a student who has been retained'.

Figure 10. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 1st grade student, Javier (boy).



Thought Bubble: *"I did not do my homework and I misbehaved".*

Speech Bubble*: "I misbehaved".*

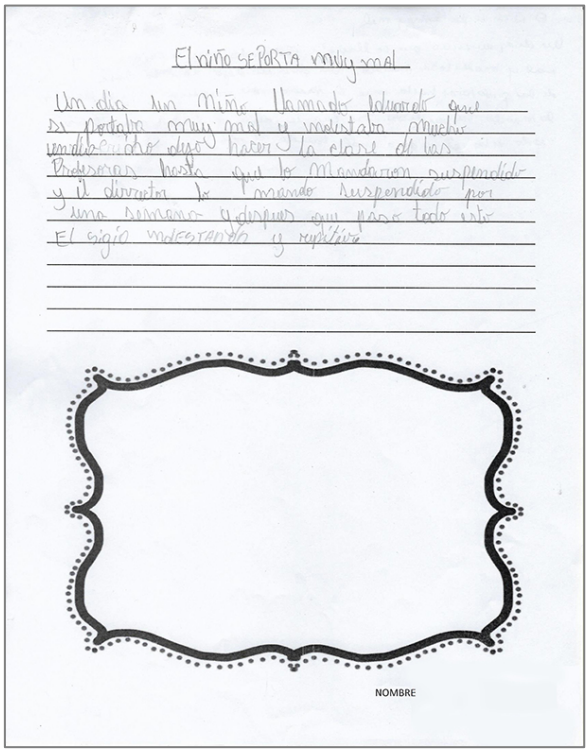
Figure 11. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 1st grade student, Margarita (girl).

Thought Bubble: [Unclear writing]

Speech Bubble*: "I don't care. If I behave well, I will not be retained."*



Figure 12. Escuela Andalhue. 5th grade student, Amelia (girl).



A boy behaving very bad

One day, a boy called Eduardo who used to misbehave and disturb the lesson did not allow the teachers to teach the lesson and he was suspended. The Headteacher suspended him for one week, and after that, he kept disturbing lessons and he was retained.

Diverse students' writings and drawings included stories in which school progression was denied for disruptive and misbehaving bodies while gifted to those who managed themselves as required. To transmit this idea, teachers explicitly fabricated and reinforced this misunderstanding as they enforced discipline. In this way, grade retention worked as a threat even beyond its 'official limits' (defined by attendance and achievements).

Educators' imposition of a connection between 'disruptiveness' and 'grade retention' relied on their conviction that without this threat, students not only would become 'lazy' but also 'unmanageable'. Beyond the enforcement of performativity and neoliberal meritocratic logics, grade retention was considered critical to the production of submissive and restricted behaviour. Below, Escuela's Pintor Roberto Matta Headteacher illustrates this idea.

> Alejandra: What do you think would happen in the school without grade retention?
>
> Pablo: Without grade retention classrooms would be a monkeys' party. There would be no order, there would be no discipline. There would be no way to get them. It would be chaos. (*Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta. Interview, October 2017. Pablo, Headteacher).*

Many school leaders and teachers share this dire image of schooling without retention. In the material and discursive constraints of the school, grade retention appears as a crucial tool for controlling and managing students. Not only does this refer to a group of *exceptionally* undisciplined students, it extends over all of them. From this perspective, educators are able to 'get' students and avoid generalised and complete chaos only because of the dissuasive function of grade retention; educative

endeavours, it is imagined, would be severely endangered in its absence. This picture shows, not only the extent of education's thrall to disciplinary dynamics and the way grade retention is used as a tool to enforce them, but it also opens a window onto some educators' apocalyptic fantasies of a school without the coercive power to impose discipline.

It is not only education that is portrayed as (exclusively) defined by disciplinary investments. As Pablo's remarks here and in the previous section suggest, the very possibility of recognising students as human beings seems also to depend on them.

In another part of the interview, Pablo deepened his understanding of the way in which grade retention works to prevent classrooms from becoming "monkey's parties".

> Alejandra: How do students react when they realise that they are at risk of being retained?
>
> Pablo: This country works only with pressure. We, Chilean people, if we are not pushed, we don't care. (…) This is the country of pressure, of the whip, of control. There is no self…. Not like countries from another sphere where people self-regulate. Here is not like that. Here you have to apply pressure. It is the only way kids get scared. (…) Facing the pressure, they usually react, and those who don't react are retained. *(Escuela Pintor Roberto Matta. Interview, October 2017. Pablo, Headteacher).*

The definition of grade retention as a classroom management tool stems from the conviction that students' (naturally) flawed natures need to be closely controlled and that such regulation must be implemented by force. In Pablo's accounts, grade retention appeared to be a quasi-civilising force asserted over indomitable creatures. This suggestion contains an assumption that children are unable to develop

constructive/desirable behaviours in an educational environment free from intimidating external pressure. In this context, grade retention was described as an indispensable “whip” to govern students by force and intimidation.

Finally, the construction of children as members of communities/families with cultural or social problems that make it impossible for them to become ‘educated’ without intimidation was not unique to this Headteacher; it was an idea seen across the education system. Not only does this shape relationships between educators and students, but it also influences exchanges between schools and children’s guardians and families.

Disciplining families

Schools tend to have a moralising orientation towards student’s families. Educators expect carers to display parental styles and dispositions towards their children’s education aligned with the normalising register described above. As this expectation seems never fully satisfied, carers are conceived of as in need of governance and coercion so they can develop the ‘right’ expectations, values and behaviours. In a context in which schools’ domination over students’ families has increasingly weakened (as discussed earlier), grade retention appears to be a key component of these governing relationships.

A first element participating in this dynamic was the belief among professionals (in all schools visited) that they served a ‘non-ideal’ community. Educators usually perceived that, in their schools, they dealt with a large number of families whose lack of parental skills, appropriate expectations and correct

educational standards imperilled their educational mission. In schools serving populations defined as ‘highly vulnerable’, children’s apparently ‘dysfunctional families’ (more than structural conditions) were associated with conditions of social deprivation that hindered learning and educational success. They were constantly compared to idealised aspirational middle class parents who, it was imagined, all had the right expectations and attitudes towards their children’s education. On the other hand, in institutions serving the middle class, comparison to a ‘normal-ideal’ was established with reference to an upper-class social group attending private schools who represented the acceptable identities and aspirations that the school staff considered to be regretfully elusive to middle-class families.

Whereas guardians tended to be portrayed as morally weak, undeserving, and impediments to children’s education, the school was located culturally on the ‘right side’. This created a patronising atmosphere in which the morality of the community schools served - perceived as sustaining marginalisation and disadvantage – had to be rejected while the ‘appropriate’ values with which the school and their educators were identified had to be promoted.

Given that educators saw a generalised ‘failure of discipline and aspiration’ (Ball, 2013) in students’ families as compromising children’s and the school’s chances of fulfilling their educational goals, grade retention became a technology of power with which to discipline the family unit. To a significant extent, retention functioned in this way without enforcement. As the following account shows, it generally operated as a generic and non-specific threat whose mere existence was a sufficiently powerful tool to align caregivers with school expectations.

Alejandra: Do you think students' attitudes or caregivers' attitudes would change if grade retention were abolished?

Aníbal: It would change. It would change because 5th to 8th grade students' caregivers don't place any importance [on the school]. If I give them the message 'there will be no students retained in this school', parents would be like 'fantastic! from now on I will completely disengage myself from my child's learning process'. Parents would think 'now they will be autonomous, and there will be no consequences'. *(Escuela Andalhue. Interview, December 2017. Aníbal, Headteacher).*

Here, caregivers, in general, were portrayed as lacking an 'inner inclination' to engage in their children's education. According to this narrative, grade retention is a necessary overarching threat coercing all families to display 'acceptable' educational values and aspirations. From this perspective, retention becomes a generalised 'compensation policy' (Matus, 2019) involved in the alignment of 'defective' communities' moralities to the dominant culture of the school.

Where the possibility of retention in the abstract failed to persuade parents to adopt the required engagements, direct threats were formulated. Different actors across the schools mentioned how they used grade retention as a warning to 'scare' or 'awaken' particular carers in order to bring their behaviour in line with educators' expectations. In many cases, they reported this being enough to align their approach to the school, their position of care and their intimate family life with schools' expectations, desires and needs.

An example of this was the use of grade retention as a mechanism to 'persuade' parents to allow psychotropic medication for young students. Across schools, participants disclosed parents' reluctance to medicate their children, especially during the lower grades of primary education. This opposition was

interpreted by educators as a lack of care for the child (negligence), as a sign of a weak commitment towards the school and the student pedagogical process (educational disengagement), and/or as an inability to understand the problem (ignorance). They dismissed the possibility of parents having valid reasons for being cautious about medicating young children or being guided by a caring attitude towards them.

In this context, grade retention was used to pressure 'negligent/disengaged/ignorant' parents into early medication. During an interview with Mercedes and Mónica - two school leaders of Colegio Jesús Misionero – the trivialisation of carers' concerns about children's medication, as well as the entanglement between the threat of grade retention and the 'cooperation' of parents who had previously resisted medicating their children were exposed.

Mónica: Here the issue of medication, Aradix [Methylphenidate] or other medication to improve concentration…

Mercedes: ….it is a battle. It is like 'the school is drugging my child'.

Mónica: Yeah, 'you are drugging my child'. There is a very negative perception of children medication...

Mercedes: ...a bit of an archaic notion about it that lasts until the child starts the medication and parents realise that their child flourishes. Because you did not have to scold him anymore, because he was able to concentrate during the class, and their grades improve. But until then it is a battle.

Mónica: Parents are highly reluctant to medicate their children.

(Continued on next page)

Mercedes: What happens is that from preschool they start 'I am not going to medicate my child, I am not going to medicate my child, I am not going to medicate my child', until the student is in 2nd grade and they are at the edge of being retained.

Mónica: Yes. Because also there is a behavioural issue…. Not only do they struggle academically but also behaviourally. The discipline, the school rules… So, then, finally, parents bow their head and conform. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, October 2017. Mercedes, Headteacher, and Mónica, Senior Leader)***.**

In this conversation, educators focused on how parents who had consistently resisted medication over many years finally 'bowed their heads' when their children's progression was at stake. Grade retention became a technology of control and normalisation of parents' and children's relations to medication. In this statement, the power position of the school over the individual educational process is hidden. The only agents appear to be the "archaic" parent and the struggling child whose position as 'subject to schooling' is endangered by parental resistance to medication. However, evidence from the same school revealed their active participation in the manufacture of the risk of retention for students/families exhibiting 'medication rebellion'. It was not uncommon in some schools to take measures that furthered academic failure as a way to prove the imminence of retention if medication was not accepted, or to actually hold back students to push parents to consent to psychiatric treatment later. As Harwood and Allan (2014) notice within the Anglo-Saxon context, schools are not only spaces involved in the description and display of psychopathology but also in its generation.

The case of Miguel illustrates these dynamics. During my time in the school, Miguel was on a strict regime of psychostimulant medication to 'treat' the ADHD he

had been diagnosed with. The treatment had started after his 'immaturity triggered retention' in 1st grade, which was ultimately provoked – according to his teachers - by his struggle completing tests without help. According to the educators, the school's decision to stop providing Miguel with extra support during examinations was associated with his mother's refusal to medicate him.

> During the first semester [of Miguel's first time in 1st grade] he received lots of support because he did not finish the tests on his own. He is the typical immature child, who doesn't finish the assessments. So, we had to stay with him during the breaks 'write here', 'do this', 'do that'. But in 2nd grade things are quite different. We talked to his mother but she didn't take this issue seriously, the fact that he had to be treated, that he actually had to take medicines. Given this, we talked to the mother again, and we communicated to her that we would not keep giving Miguel extra support during the second semester, that he had to function alone from now on. After that, he just stopped answering the tests, and finally, he was retained for having low grades. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, November 2017. Jimena, 1st Grade Class Teacher).*

This account suggests that the management of Miguel's difficulties in finishing his tests alone would have been different if his mother had given in to the school's recommendation that she medicate her son. After Miguel's retention, and despite her reluctance, his mother finally accepted that medicating her son might help him avoid further punitive actions.

Not only regarding this issue, but in a general sense, testimonies collected from different school actors and across educational grades suggested that grade retention (as a threat and as a practice) was an effective technology for disciplining parental attitudes and, by extension, children's bodies. Early medication was just one of many examples of grade retention's power to pressure 'non-ideal' families into the

biopower regulations the schools considered fundamental to transmitting ‘normality’ and ‘optimising’ children’s education within their parameters. Thus, in the context of a deterritorializing influx of traditional orders, evaluative logics and progression decisions appeared as opportunities and fertile ground on which to reterritorialize teachers’ status and sovereignty in the family unit.

‘This school is not for you’: Students and families disciplinary exclusion

Grade retention not only functions to discipline students and families within their schools but also to discipline the ways in which their bodies move and rest across the educational system. Grade retention is situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body (Foucault, 1991) by which students are physically and politically tamed and distributed. When ‘students’ souls’ fail to be disciplined in the school context, their ‘human bodies’ are arranged and forced to hover according to the subjectivation processes and power relationships they are part of. For children attending Chilean schools – like many around the world - this framework corresponds to the contemporary neoliberal educational discourse. Within that discourse, students from the retained spectrum are rendered abject and, as such, are exposed to school exclusion and related forms of educational dispossession. Students across the schools visited illustrated this process in their drawings and writing.

Figure 13. Escuela Andalhue. 1st grade student, Ana (girl).

Speech Bubble*: "Because I was expelled from the school".*

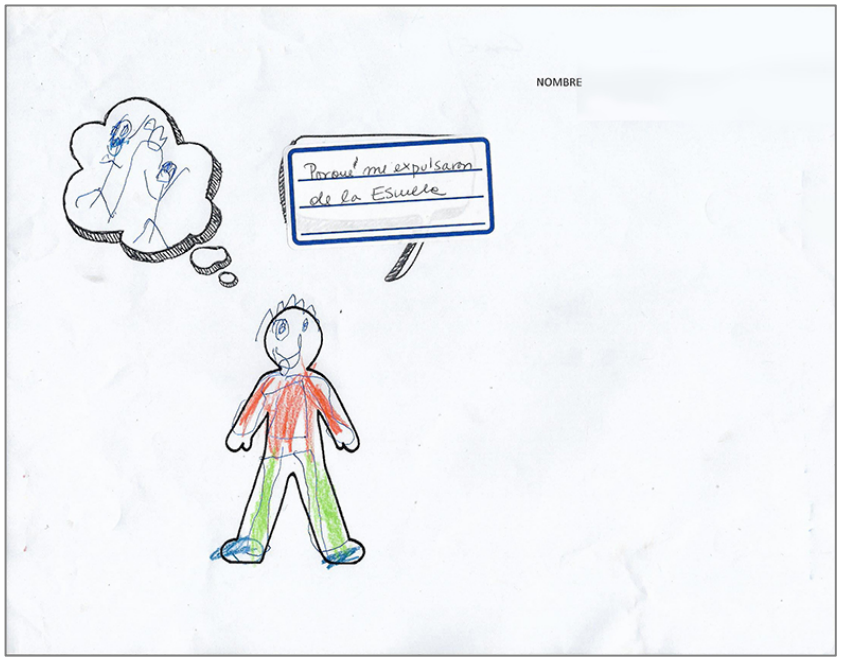


Figure 14. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Jerónimo (boy).



The story of a retained child

Once upon a time, there was a boy who was retained because he was not able to concentrate during the lessons. He was about to be retained for a second time, and if that happened, he would be expelled from the school. And that was what ended up happening.
The End.

The power of grade retention as an exclusionary device presented in the stories before was concretised in Chilean education laws. Although the general educational law forbade schools from expelling students because of low achievement or special educational needs, the norms of promotion explicitly established that the rights of students to remain in their school after having been retained only applied after their first retention. Decisions over the permanence of pupils who had been retained for a second time during primary education were left to the school.

This discretion produced variations between schools' approaches to grade retention. While in some of them the permanence of retained students was never questioned however many retentions they had, in others, second a retention led to almost automatic exclusion. Colegio Jesús Misionero provided an example of a private subsidised institution in which repeated retentions triggered removal arrangements. The following remarks from one of its educators illustrate this.

> Yesterday we talked to Jaime [second grade retained student]. He doesn't want to work during the lesson. He looks the material we give to him and he says 'I won't do this because I already did it [the previous year]'. The Deputy Headteacher and I talked to him and we explained what would happen if he repeats again – in this School we do not accept repeated retentions in the same grade – he will have to leave the School. (…) Jaime was told that if he doesn't change before June, he will have to leave the School after the winter holiday [middle of the school year]. Or, he changes now, from today to June, or goodbye. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, March 2018. Macarena, 2nd Grade Class Teacher).*

This conversation with Macarena – consistent with other interviews with members of this school – reflects how the exclusion of students from the retained spectrum took place under the purview of the promotion legislation in force. In this

educational community, the promotion policy had been interpreted so anyone repeating years twice in the primary phase *had to* be excluded. The 'law' of the 'text' had been decoded and translated to a practice in ways that compelled this school to dismiss retained students. The professionals who enacted these practices conceived their actions in the context of the inevitable rules of the school and/or legislative definitions. Furthermore, in this school, the exclusionary force of grade retention was so severe that it made it possible - even 'sensible' - to expel a child in the middle of the school year. Although this use of the promotion regulations went beyond the letter of the law, it was permissible within the ambiguity that the interpretation of exclusions allowed.

In these ways, grade retention disrupted children's educational paths beyond what was formally regulated and generally acknowledged. It is without doubt that the informal and subtle ways in which grade retention excludes pupils from their schools are related to their sanctioned forms. However, the many unofficial dynamics which led to retention interrupting learning seemed even more pervasive than those regulated by law – and more frequent than official registers of retained students would suggest.

Educators from different schools reported that, after having been told that their children were at risk of being retained, some carers took students to another school in the middle or even towards the end of the school year hoping that they would perhaps be promoted in their new school. In some cases, those children were not even enrolled in an alternative school. Educators explained that some carers preferred their children to lose the year and be recorded as out of the system for that year than be labelled as retained students. During my conversation with parents of

the 6th grade class from Escuela Los Bellotos, two of the six participant parents admitted having taken that route with their children to avoid their being formally identified as retained students.

The Headteacher from Colegio Santa Evangelina elaborated on this phenomenon in the school context in the following account.

> Sergio: Something that happens sometimes is that when parents realise that their children will be retained, they take them out of the school. They prefer their children not to finish that school year so they can start the next year in another school without being in the registers as having been retained. Instead, they appear as if they dropped out of school that year or had attendance issues… they disguise the situation in that way. Or they are taken to a school less… I don't know if with lower academic requirements, but a school where they can be promoted.
>
> Alejandra: And those students are retained at the end, or they are allowed to progress to the next grade in their new schools?
>
> Sergio: Many of them are promoted. Not all of them are retained. On some occasions, we have students who look to be enrolled here and they do not recognise this or do not present all the required documentation. And when we look closer, we find out that there is a year in which they do not appear in the system. And that's because they were about to be retained and their parents decided to take them out of the system and enrol them again as if that year never existed. It is a widespread phenomenon nowadays. *(Colegio Santa Evangelina. Interview, October 2017. Sergio, Headteacher)*

In his account, Sergio described how the grade retention ensemble participated in the movement and flux of bodies within the educational milieu; from one school to another, and in and out of the system. These movements seem

entangled with the discriminatory processes engendered by grade retention subjectivating operations. At a symbolic level, the position of having been completely outside the system seems more acceptable that having been inside it and have been made abject by the process. At a practical and material level, there was evidence suggesting that having been retained hampered opportunities for obtaining future educational financial support while 'voluntary' withdrawal did not have this effect (Richards, 2017). Furthermore, the 'educational failure stigma' can be a blot in the official existence of a child as a subject of schooling which – in a system, like the one Chile, in which (at least until 2019) schools could select the students they admit - can dispossess them from educational opportunities.

Although these movements aimed at securing children's educational rights, on many occasions they had the opposite effect. Participants reported that, after being removed from schools that had positioned them injuriously, some children remained outside the system for more than a year. In some cases, the emotional, academic, and social burden of reintegrating themselves into the educational system when they were overage and injurious constitutions evolved into their permanent exclusion.

Within the Chilean neoliberal approach to education, students' mobility across schools has been welcomed and promoted as a mechanism that enhances the efficiency of the educational market as part of children's and carers' 'freedom' to pursue their best educational avenues. In 2011, more than a quarter of 4th grade students in Chile had changed schools at least once (Zamora, 2011). Despite the positive neoliberal expectations regarding educational mobility, research has painted a more complex and less encouraging picture. Students who move from their original schools not only have more academic difficulties than those who stay in their original

schools but also tend to move to schools who have been described as ‘less favourable educational environments’ (Zamora, 2011). Ultimately, and contrary to the neoliberal promise, the flux of students within the educational system seems more likely to marginalise students than maximise educational opportunities.

Although educators’ remarks, as previously shown, portray these pupils’ mobility as a parental decision independent from the school, the evidence gathered in this study suggested that schools play a considerable part in this dynamic. Students from the retained spectrum (and their carers) were systematically told that the schools in which they were studying were ‘not the right place for them’.

‘Advising’ children and parents to leave the school was a normalised practice often justified in terms of a ‘concern’ regarding students’ steady progress and avoiding children being retained. When children struggled to get good qualifications, some schools understood this as a failure of the child to conform to school standards and recommended their carers look for an educational environment less academically demanding to prevent retention. In subsidised schools without a School Integration Programme[70], students with Special Educational Needs were threatened with retention while ‘invited’ to enrol in schools that, having the Programme, would be able to provide them with the ‘special’ support ‘they needed’ to facilitate their promotion. When the carers of students from the retained spectrum were seen as disengaged from the ‘educational project of the school’, they too were advised to avoid grade retention by taking their child to a school ‘more suitable to their expectations and possibilities’. When children who had been held back in the same school had problems adapting to their new classes, once again the problem was

70 Within the Chilean educational system, the School Integration Programme for supporting students with Special Educational Needs is mandatory in public schools and elective to schools privately administrated (in spite of the State funding they receive).

attributed to their unsuitability and suggestions of changing schools were made. In these terms, students' bodies were materially controlled, directed, accepted or excluded according to their position of differential status, depending on their 'normalcy' (Matus, 2019).

There seem to be many assumptions operating behind these informal mechanisms of exclusion. The first is that grade retention is a practice to be avoided. This understanding clash with widespread 'official' narratives in which grade retention was described as a useful and beneficial experience for the child. Secondly, educators seemed to assume that children transition smoothly between schools. In general, teachers were convinced that students from the retained spectrum that they have advised to leave the school had an easy and positive transition and did well in their new educational environment. However, the same teachers reported that many of the students from the retained spectrum that they received from other schools struggled to adapt to their new contexts. Only in those cases did they recognise the difficulties of having to start over unwillingly in a new place under the label of retention.

Another assumption behind suggestions and pressure to change schools was that when students struggle at school 'the problem is the child' while educational practices and arrangements were hardly questioned. Both the child and the school were seen as fixed entities whose immutable identities were simply incompatible. This brings us to the fourth premise: every school has a particular 'public' that they are able to educate; not every school is for every child. There was (and remains) a segmentation of the educational system that meant there were types of schools for types of students (and families). According to this logic, educators might consider that

some children's current educational spaces were 'harmful' and 'unsuitable' for them, leaving them frustrated, demotivated and stressed. It followed that, when parents resisted suggestions for a change of school to avoid retention, they were dismissed and portrayed as negligent or ignorant.

These rules of intelligibility and relations of power circulate in the highly market-oriented and privatised Chilean educational system in which selection, segregation, and exclusion are the norm (Bellei et al., 2018; Villalobos, 2016). Schools are submitted to strong pressures to use mechanisms of student selection since performing well in standardised academic achievement tests influences their ability to enrol students in a competitive market, to capture and maintain funding sources, and even to be allowed to exist under accountability demands (Falabella, 2021; Santori, 2018; Valenzuela, 2008). The extended practice of requesting enrolment and monthly fees from carers has created a highly socially and academically segregated system reinforced by the discretion afforded to schools to manage their own admission processes (Bellei et al., 2018; Bellei et al., 2010). The exclusion of students identified as academically, socially or behaviourally problematic was also part of these dynamics. Although recently there have been different initiatives to regulate selective and discriminatory practices, they have been very difficult to eradicate. Embedded as they are in the material and discursive frameworks of pervasive neoliberal pressures, they remain and operate in subtle and informal ways (Bellei, 2013a; Bellei et al., 2018).

The evidence gathered during this project suggests that the exclusionary practices related to grade retention were not only *embedded* in these neoliberal logics but were also *productive* of educational spaces and educational identities that

were consistent with them. The participating private-subsidised schools tended to be more prone to defining students from the retained spectrum as not 'suitable' for them and they pressured them to leave under the threat of retention. In addition, these schools were more likely to use the promotion legislation in exclusionary ways. Public schools, on the other hand, seemed more willing to keep students and to enrol children who had been expelled from other institutions under these arguments[71]. During the interviews, some educators recognised how, the way in which those who had been retained moved across schools defined an unequal distribution of students in the educational system that began at an early age. This reinforced a system in which the more selective and less inclusive the school was, more valorised it was within the educational system and vice versa. Schools that kept and accepted 'any kind of student' – such as those who had been rendered impossible/abject under grade retention practices and logics - were devaluated and marginalised. Those were generally public schools working with the most deprived communities.

As a result, grade retention logics and practices were involved in operations that shaped primary education as an unjust, segregated and non-diverse space, not only at the level of classrooms but also between schools and across the system. Despite having been regularly presented as a policy having only individual consequences, grade retention impacted schools' composition and identity as well as the configuration of the whole primary school system as a terrain in which the right of the school to discriminate and exclude was greater than the right of the child to an education. It had replaced other 'tools' of social order and marginalisation that had been formally restricted in recent years while their logics persisted.

71 This is consistent with previous reports showing that while a third of students' guardians in Chilean private subsidised schools claim that retained students are expelled from their schools, only 14% of carers sustain such an affirmation in public schools (Bellei, 2007).

At the same time, the huge material consequences of the exclusionary forces of grade retention on individual human lives needs to be stressed: they shape educational experiences and future opportunities. Fundamentally, dispossession is entangled with the grade retention ensemble in ways that installed some children and young people on paths that led to systematic deprivation. Ultimately, for some of them, being told ‘this school is not for you’ implied that the right to education was not for them either.

Conclusion

Grade retention operates in the primary school as a technology of disciplinary power embedded in the rationalities and power relationships of contemporary neo-liberal educational discourse. On the one hand, this discourse encompasses a conventional neoliberal regime in which schools are requested to normalise young students under traditional evaluative/competitive logics and the rigid suppression of spontaneous and creative individual expressions. Within these terms, the management of students overpowers the significance of pedagogic encounters, while discriminatory differences and inequalities among students and among schools are not only intelligible but required. At the same time, this regime has been influenced by progressive/inclusive pedagogies that have reshaped definitions of acceptable studenthood, and by social changes disputing traditional sources of authority to impose educational objectives.

In this intricate scenario, in which inclusion and equality must be performed alongside neoliberal pressures, grade retention has become an ‘acceptable’ platform for navigating educational contradictions and submitting students and families into

conflicting school demands and expectations. The violent, degrading, and exclusionary mechanisms that grade retention rationales and practices imply, stay unnoticed or disguised as ‘good practice’, remaining incontestable within the contemporary primary education milieu. Along with shaping educational relationships and pedagogical encounters under coercive deceiving forces, these operations favour an unequal and discriminatory distribution of students within the system, the marginalisation of some schools and, ultimately, the denial of the right to an education and the dispossession of human lives.

The affective economies underlying these disciplinary processes of precarisation, and their entanglements with subjectivation processes, are considered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: AFFECTS AND FEELINGS WITHIN THE GRADE RETENTION ENSEMBLE

Introduction

This chapter examines what students can feel, do and be within the affective and emotional territory configured by the grade retention ensemble. The analysis returns to the discussion begun in the previous analytic chapters to consider how bodily sensations and declared feelings are entangled with the subjectivating and disciplinary processes discusssed before.

This endeavour is inspired by previous educational research highlighting the influence of affect and the social dimensions of emotion over educational spaces and relationships. It draws particularly upon ethnographic research interested in the productive power of affective intensities in the school context (Kenway & Youdell, 2011; Youdell & Armstrong, 2011) and inquiries exploring affective aspects of the educational governmental machine (Boler, 1999; Leahy 2009, 2014). Along with this, the analysis takes inspiration from my own encounter with affective intensifies flowing within the grade retention ensemble that shifted my capacities and positionality as a researcher during this project and beyond. The Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of *affect* (1983, 2004) is used as a tool to explore the relationship between these personal sensations and the affective interchanges and mutual influences involving all bodies participating in primary education.

The following discussion argues that the affective dynamism connecting bodies and determining capacities in primary school is inscribed within intertwined

poles of joy/success/belonging and pain/failure/exclusion which are entangled with the grade retention ensemble. The productivity of this arrangement is explored through emotions explicitly associated by school actors with the issue of retention. The analysis of these reported feelings is illuminated by the theoretical work of Sara Ahmed (2014), who considers emotion a social phenomenon inseparable from pre-symbolic bodily sensations and from normalisation. Agony, joy, shame, pride, fear, satisfaction, sadness, love, and disgust are made part of an interplay that – articulating students' disciplinary constitutions – secure the orders of the primary school and their subsequent gratifications through despair and dispossession.

The affective dimension of the grade retention ensemble

Framing research within post-structural ideas led me to attempt, from a relatively early point in the project, to avoid conceiving myself as an impartial machine registering reality. Instead, I recognised my subjectivity, discursive repertoires and material constraints as deeply involved in producing the local realities I was representing. Conceding that my capacities to be, feel and do as a researcher were affecting the conceptual and practical emergence of the ensemble I was exploring was a relatively easy lesson to learn in the context of my theoretical engagements.

I was less prepared, however, to accept the bidirectionality of the generative forces of the research experience or, in other words, to acknowledge that the inseparability of researcher and what is researched would mean that *I* would be produced by research too. Finding myself *affected* by the grade retention ensemble

as much as *affecting* it – in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense (1983, 2004) - was a troublesome and enlightening revelation. Throughout this project, I became part of the grade retention ensemble. I experienced myself as vitally involved in a flow of pre-personal and pre-discursive sensations that connected bodies participating in primary school in ways that modified our mutual capacities to act and to enter into further relationships. The affective intensities I encountered in the pursuit of grade retention's productive forces profoundly influenced my dispositions and my capacities to act and engage with others. My approach to educational research and my positionality as a researcher were radically transformed by the affective economies experienced throughout this project. My attempt to articulate research that 'moves' is, to a significant extent, a tribute to such transformation processes.

Within the process of becoming an 'otherwise researcher', territorializing forces emerged. Along a creative process of self-mutation, I came across striated rules of intelligibility intensely attached to these transformative energies and capturing them. Destabilising encounters articulated within the grade retention ensemble seemed entangled to subjectivating and disciplinary arrangements. The grade retention ensemble appeared involved in the production of 'nomad' affectivities in the educational milieu and, in parallel, those same intensities seemed intertwined with the disciplinary constitution of bodies participating in it. My own experience and the experience of other actors within the primary school context seemed configurated within these distinctive terms.

Although the generative and revolutionary character of Deleuzian affect could make this interaction counterintuitive, scholars like Deana Leahy have suggested affective economies' involvement in governmental educational processes (Leahy,

2009, 2014; Leahy & Malins, 2015; Tanner et al., 2019). Leahy's reflection on biopedagogies and pedagogies of disgust considers how affects are mobilised within educational spaces to moralise and shape young's people 'health behaviours' in particular ways. From this perspective, considering the affective force of the grade retention ensemble seems an opportunity to incorporate a novel generative dimension into the analysis, while examining mechanisms that mobilise the subjectivating and disciplinary operations discussed in previous chapters.

The excerpt considered below - in which I narrate an informal encounter with a 2nd grade student – depicts a crucial moment in the journey of recognising myself as a piece of the grade retention ensemble and as a (bidirectional) participant in the affective intensities modifying bodies, capacities, and relationships within it. It also reflects an important moment of recognition regarding the relevance of the affective dimension within grade retention's production and productivity, and the simultaneous transformative and governmentality forces entangled in the circulation of these affects.

Colegio Jesús Misionero
Observation. May, 2018.
2nd Grade Classroom

The lesson I was observing has finished, and I stay back in the classroom arranging my bag before leaving. The teacher and the students have left to have lunch in the school canteen. When I am about to leave, I notice that one of the students, Melany, has stayed back too and she seems to be waiting for me. She approaches me, looks into my eyes, and with an expectancy that I was not able to identify very well but that I provisionally called 'anxiety' or 'curiosity' she asks me in a low voice, as if letting me in on a secret "Miss, tell

(Continued on next page)

me, I will be retained this year?". I reacted with surprise. I was not expecting that question from such a young student just two months after starting the school year; even less from a girl outside the retained spectrum. Neither was I expecting that level of knowledge about the topic that brought me to the school (I had (re)introduced myself to the students several visits before and over a month ago). Still confused, I asked "Do you mean, to be retained?". She answers impatient "Yes, come on, you know about those things". I say to her "I don't know and, in any case, it's still too early in the year to say. Anyway, if you are wondering about that maybe you should ask Macarena, your teacher". She listens to me and leaves (disappointed?).

This was one of the moments during the fieldwork that piqued my curiosity and desire to explore the affective dynamics operating within the grade retention ensemble. I see this short exchange as charged with an intense bodily energy that I still find difficult to elaborate and understand. Although I cannot entirely grasp what happened in this interaction, I contend that this encounter evinced strong intensities circulating within the grade retention ensemble that - dragging my body into an uncomfortable position – altered my positionality as a researcher. My own recognition within the educational assemblage was embedded in these unsettling circulations. The surprise and confusion that this encounter provoked in me were probably related to a poor acknowledgement of the sensations that my presence in the school (in association with the topic of my research) were generating. 'Melany's intervention' helped me to realise that the limited opportunities to directly interact with students – and probably also my resistance to recognising the risks associated with my involvement in the school - had made me oblivious to the affective impact that my research and the position in which I was located in the school could have generated, not only among students from the retained spectrum, but every child.

At the same time, I experienced myself as positioned in a place of dominance and power that 'moved' me in uncomfortable ways. I saw myself identified by Melany as a teacher ("Miss") who had a 'special attachment' to grade retention and who was associated with the scrutiny and governance of that role. In this encounter, we were submitted to a relation of power in which it was assumed that I had knowledge and control over the girl's educational experience. The power attributed to me was an illusion: I was not a teacher, and even if I were her teacher, I would not (or I should not) have been able to know/decide if Melany would be retained that early in the school year. However, the distortion of this impression does not diminish its efficacy. On the contrary, it charged our exchange with an indeterminacy and spectral character that made it even more powerful as a mechanism of supervision and coercion. This brief episode reveales how the very existence of grade retention introduces an affective tension to the relationships between students and teachers that begins in the lower grades, is sustained throughout the school year, and involves all students. Power and disciplinary force are entangled in this tension.

The assumptions that underlie and define this encounter seem to be part of the molar forces involved in the distinctions and hierarchies that sustained the fixed disciplinary orders of the school. Along with this, Melany took a deterritorializing stance when she scattered the rigid identity formations by which students are typically excluded from teachers' knowledge and definitions. She steped outside sedentary lines that position children in a place of ignorance and passivity and from which they are asked to accept their educational fates. Melany's question involved an appeal to expose the uncertain observation (Foucault, 1991) to which she has been submitted as a student. By this movement, she suggested a redefinition of our

relationship outside the boundaries of the dominant educational order. I was unable to respond to her deterritorializing movement. Instead, in an attempt to get rid of the discomfort provoked by the identifications and assumptions implicated in this event, I reinstalled the disciplinary hierarchy of Melany's teacher by playing along with the girl's fears and fantasies, and the 'disciplinary realities' that they constructed. Along these molar lines, drawn within the contingency of our exchange, molecular motions projected into the future, altering my positionality as a researcher, my approach to the research field, and the definitions of the components considered relevant to address grade retention's productive forces.

Altogether, my encounter with Melany and the analytical elements considered here suggest that grade retention plays a significant role in the production of affectivities within the educational milieu and that these affective flows are not only entangled with the generative encounter between bodies' powers but also with their very constitution in ways that are (potentially) disciplinary. The following section explores the dynamics involved in this liaison through my final encounter with Juan.

Juan: The final encounter

Colegio Jesús Misionero
Observation. December, 2017
Graduation and Award Ceremony, Upper Primary and Secondary Grades.

The Graduation and Award Ceremony is about to take place today in Colegio Jesús Misionero. It is the closure of the academic year and the last time students and their parents will come to the School before the long summer holidays; the mood is festive.

(Continued on next page)

The ceremony is taking place in a cement soccer court. At the front, a podium has been placed between two big floral arrangements for the Master of Ceremonies. Facing it, several lines of chairs have been allocated for students attending today's graduation. Several meters behind, a crowd of guardians and family members that have come to watch the ceremony wait expectantly.

The music starts. Directed by the Master of Ceremonies, the different classes enter the soccer field and students take their places. I pay special attention when is the turn of the 5th grade class I have been observing. I easily identify Juan as he is considerably taller than his classmates; he was retained last school year and is about to be retained in 5th grade again this year. His expression is calm and collected. Students take their seats and for the rest of the graduation I only see their backs.

The ceremony starts with a prayer which is followed by the distribution of prizes to students recognised for their academic achievements, for their school attendance or their integrity (solidarity, perseverance, Christian values, best classmate, and others). Thirteen awards are given to 5th grade students. None of them are given to those from the retained spectrum. After the awards, all the class teachers are called on the front to receive an appreciation for their job from the Headteacher. The ceremony ends with the Master of Ceremonies giving good wishes for the holiday, Christmas and New Year to everyone.

Once the ceremony is over, teachers, parents and students make their way to their respective classrooms. I follow the 5th grade class but not having explicit permission to go inside after this specific event I sit on a bench just outside the classroom and wait. Fifteen minutes later, parents and students start to leave the classroom with their Final Qualification Report in their hands. There is a cheery atmosphere. A student hugs the man seated next to me happily saying "I was promoted!" A woman approaches a group of parents who have gathered outside the classroom grinning and looking to the sky with relief while saying "he passed". Then, students start to leave accompanied by their parents and families.

After several minutes and when everybody has left, Martina (the 5th grade class teacher) comes out of the classroom followed by Juan. The boy's expression and posture denote profound sadness. He rubs his eyes in a gesture of complete defeat. It seems that he has been crying. The teacher asks him to walk with her to the School Reception were someone will collect him later. No one from his family has come to the ceremony. The boy walks behind her dragging his feet,

(Continued on next page)

with his back hunched, and his face looking the floor with an expression of pain. His whole body seems about to collapse in distress and agony. On their way, he stops at the toilets and washes his face. While observing this scene I feel deeply moved. I notice a tight knot in my throat and a pain in the chest that will accompany me every time I recall this moment for months.

After leaving Juan in the Reception, Martina walks into the playground where a proud father asks her if she can take a photo of him and his daughter. They pose smiling and showing the Qualification Report to the camera. Their happiness contrasts painfully with the previous scene.

When I come back to the School the following academic year, Juan is not there anymore, neither in 5th nor in 6th grade. Having been retained he has left the School.

The Graduation and Award Ceremony described here can be seen as an affective choreography (Youdell & Armstrong, 2011) in which the bodily intensities that are a constitutive and integral part of the grade retention assemblage were clearly on display. The affective flows that are produced and operating in schools' daily lives within this ensemble, are highlighted at this event which enacts the final definitions of progression.

Ceremonies of this kind are conventional events embedded in Chilean educational logics and practices. Most schools in the country hold an event such as this at the end of every academic year. In them, the whole school community gathers to close the previous educational year and look forward to the next. They are normally connoted as a happy moment in which students, carers and educators celebrate the accomplishments of the past year. Attainment and progression – core values of the event – are contained symbolically in the act of distributing the Final Qualification Report that defines each student's promotion to the next grade (or not).

In general, everybody is aware of the content of these reports – at least of the final decisions on progression or retention. However, they remain eagerly anticipated and received as news in a way that highlights the choreographic element of the individuals' performances involved here.

Every participant at this event played their part in this ceremonial occasion: the pleased successful student, the proud (or relieved) parent, the satisfied teacher, and the sorrowful retained student and their absent family. This staging and role distribution, happening across time and place, are more than a collection of separate individuals enacting an educational tradition consciously and independently. Rather, these ceremonies can be viewed as an amalgam of bodies that are collectively and tacitly moved in ways that perform the meanings and power relationships of the schooling system. In a sense, this makes the graduation event no different from the mundane daily school interactions. However, this special ceremony of educational success and progress highlighted and crystallised knowledge, practices, subjectivities and affectivities that had sedimented, not only the experiences of the previous academic year in each institution, but decades of educational encounters across the country (and probably beyond).

These 'performances' are not guided by explicit knowledge but by eruptions and bodily sensations that emerged from the exchange between bodies that affect one another in their choreographic interactions. The Graduation and Award Ceremony is an affective occasion (in a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense) in that it is embedded in flows of social intensities that are beyond particular individuals and discursive frameworks at the same time as they are constitutive of bodies and subjectivities (when codified symbolically).

The Graduation and Award Ceremony was a collective experience that unified bodies in a shared sensation of joy, success and belonging. In their encounter with each other (and with the material consequences of educational discourse) these bodies smiled and laughed, they came close to each other, they congratulated, they hugged, they celebrated, they sighed with relief. On the one hand, these affectivities were beyond subjective recognition. On the other hand, they constituted embodied subjectivities and corporeal capacities while configuring 'the successful community'. The definition of the place bodies occupied within the community, and their opportunity to even have a place in it are related to the affective intensities on display. The absence of Juan's family during the graduation ceremony as well as the child's withdrawal from the school the following year appeared intertwined with the social flows that had affected them.

Failure and exclusions were constitutive of the dynamics by which the successful collective was generated. The abject bodies enacting failure were as necessary for its articulation as they were rejected: the bodies that cried, dragged their feet, agonised, bent their spines, and were not missed when they had gone. These flows and operations were required and disallowed at the same time. In the scene in which Juan washed his face, we can conceive a simultaneous gesture of acceptance and expulsion of his own affective intensities and his (not) belonging to the community.

I recognise a dimension in which the movements and encounters entangled in this excerpt constituted experiences and bodies beyond discourse. Social fluxes of energy precipitated within the encounter between embodied subjectivities, floral decorations, and music; sited positions, prayers, and prizes that were only available

for some; Christmas greetings and qualifications reports; arms that hug, shoes that shuffle, and water that runs over tears; and between other elements influencing and changing one another outside unitary definitions and discourse. In parallel, I found these intensities embedded in symbolic registers and participating in the production of those orders in a way that conferred a performative dimension on them. The affects involved in the experience that physically push Juan to the ground defined a social and educational reality expressed in a corporal register. It is plausible then to propose that the performative interpellations that regulate and mould bodies in ways that introduce them to the social fabric are – to a significant degree – affective. The bodily intensities that I have tried to capture here, through concepts of distress and agony, flow in the context of Juan's abjection and are also constitutive of it in the same way that what I have named 'joy' was entangled with the production of the 'successful student'. Subjects were intelligible within these affective dimensions. In this way, the process of recognition and normalisation operating within the grade retention ensemble needs to be considered in the context of associated affective forces.

Visceral responses (such as those described above) not only shaped bodies and transformed their positions and faculties, but they were also foundational of feeling (as personal and symbolic crystallisations of meaning). These feelings can be conceived as an expression of the ways in which bodies were affected. The pain and sorrow identified as implicated in Juan's experience of the graduation ceremony can be understood as the emotional counterpart to the material precarisation (or reduction on his body power to acting) that took place in relation to his retention. These feelings were not only expressive but also constitutive of who he could be and

what kind of exchanges he could experience within the educational context. They were also entangled with the high spirits and cheerful emotions that swirled around him. The emotional performance of bodies within this ceremonial choreography were mutually dependent.

The subjectivating and emotional character acquired by affective intensities once captured into symbolic registers are disciplinary. Changes to students' capacities to act, feel and be seemed not external to normalisation and control. Juan's scene is an example of the territorializing capacities of social flows. The affective intensities implicated there had a material effect on bodies' proximities and positions that reinforced the striated organisation and subjectivities of the disciplinary school. They drew a distinction between intelligible 'subjects to schooling' and abject identities that consolidated dominant educational meanings, representations, knowledge and orders. 'Affective molarities' can be implied in this encounter in so far as the implicated bodily sensations and their influence over bodies' power seemed to be part of the hegemonic governing process that distributed coercion and dispossession (Butler, 2003; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013) within the educational milieu.

A final aspect to consider is my own affective engagement as a researcher. The ceremonial event previously exposed, and my interpretation of Juan's experience as part of it, not only profoundly moved me in the moment, but changed me permanently. I had to recognise my abiding implication in the flow of affects in which the educational assemblage and the grade retention ensemble were embedded. I had to conceive myself as an affective body constantly moved while doing research. And I had to acknowledge that those alterations were inevitably

reflected in my approach to the research project. As part of this, I became convinced that the stories of students from the retained spectrum should be represented in this manuscript as a political gesture and as an opportunity to de-normalise and scatter the rigid equilibriums of power that secured their reproduction. Besides, I tried to make sense of the pressing bodily sensations that had shaken me in such potent ways. Through that process, I recognised something profoundly disturbing in becoming part of an affective arrangement in which joy and satisfaction were built upon children's emotional damage and despair.

Feeling compelled to explore this further, and acknowledging the complexities of working analytically over elusive bodily flows of collective energy that resist seizure by disciplinary definitions, I turned to *declared feelings* within educators and guardians' narratives and children's drawings/stories as ways to explore the dynamics nurturing the intertwined poles of joy and pain.

Disentangling the emotions nurturing intertwined poles of joy and pain

From a very early stage of the fieldwork, I noticed that participants frequently linked grade retention with a myriad of emotions. Although I never directly asked about the feelings related to grade retention, members of the schools I visited frequentedly mentioned them. In parallel, children's productions also often incorporated emotions. Several 1st grade students' drawings have an emotional reference and in the 5th grade, most of the stories and vignettes allude to feelings.

Fear, sadness and shame were consistently explicitly identified as significant ‘actors’ in the grade retention ensemble by different members of the school communities.

I undertook the task of examining ‘declared feelings’ associated with grade retention, engaging with the theoretical contributions of Sara Ahmed (2014) on the social implications of emotion. She erases the distinction between ‘affects’ (pre-symbolic bodily sensations) and ‘emotion’ (declared recognised feelings) by arguing that they happen together and cannot be separated. The conscious emotions (or the recognition processes), she asserts, always refer to physical impressions bonded to past (unconscious) experiences. These bodily memories do not simply belong to the subjects but are social, cultural and material. From this perspective, emotions are examined as social phenomena. They are not conceived as being ‘in’ the subject or ‘in the object’ but are produced in the encounter between them. Ahmed explores the effects of such encounters; what emotions do in the ‘moment of contact’ between bodies. Such contact is shaped by past histories and reiterations of previous encounters in which the ‘objects of feeling’ (the entity to which the feeling is associated) have accumulated affective value to the ‘subject of feeling’ (the entity that feels). In their circulation, objects become ‘sticky’ (saturated of particular affects) as sites of personal and social tension. Although emotions are generated by this circulation, objects are perceived as their cause – as if particular emotions were intrinsic to object qualities. Thus, emotions become ‘sticky signs’ of particular objects that rely on a history of articulation/associations but are also actualised in every new encounter. These new encounters are performative as they create new impressions

upon the surface of bodies and, by this movement, they constitute and generate them.

From this perspective, emotions give others their meaning and value. They define bodies' orientations towards other bodies and they create boundaries and borders between them. These movements are also involved in the construction of social norms. They are implicated in the formation of ideals, and the definitions of right and wrong, as well as shaping bodies in ways that enable some capacities and actions and restrict others. How comfortable we can 'feel' in our body depends on our relationship and alignments to the normative ideals. Bodies that 'fit' extend into the space easily and harmoniously while those that 'do not fit' collide with the external/social milieu in ways that draw attention to bodily surfaces in the form of pain or discomfort.

Following Ahmed's approach, we can try to understand which emotions become 'stuck' to grade retention to the point that their association to it becomes socially accepted or obvious (and therefore deployed within educational narratives). We can also explore the roots and effects of those emotions. We can interrogate which conditions are in place for them to emerge; which circulations, movements and orientations derive from them; how they performatively generate the subject of schooling and shape the retained student body; and in which ways these dynamics are involved in the definition of social ideals and norms. Ultimately we can try to incorporate all these elements to further our understanding on the disturbing bond between educational gratification and dispossession in primary school.

Fear

One feeling that can be thought of as 'stuck' to grade retention is fear. This emotion was usually recognised by members of the school as a critical emotion associated with the prospect of being retained.

> [The threat of grade retention] is a useful control mechanism because everybody is afraid of grade retention. All students are afraid of it. Even those who say to you 'I don't care about anything' don't want to be retained. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, October 2017. Luciana, Headteacher).*
>
> What you usually do is show students their grades and you say to them 'with these grades you will be retained', and they get scared and change their behaviour. *(Escuela Andalhue. Interview, November 2017. Antonia, 5th Grade Class Teacher).*

Here, fear was identified by the interviewees as produced by student's expectation of a potential encounter with grade retention as an 'object of feeling'. According to educators, the elicitation of this emotion oriented pupils away from the object; students distanced themselves from the dispositions that could potentially make them candidates for retention while turning them towards the educational expectations and ideals (objects of love). This movement not only functioned to affectively charge educational normativity and disciplinary endeavours but also performatively defined the way in which educational bodies inhabited space by setting positions of domination and subordination within their exchanges.

Questions that remained open were: what injuries are anticipated by students in relation to the 'grade retention object,'? and which past experiences had moulded and sediment this association? The 'declared' evidence did not provide straightforward answers. On the one hand, educators did not explain the reasons they had for connecting retention and students' fear. On the other hand, as they

referred to ‘a student who had (already) been retained’, children’s stories did not address ‘anticipatory fear.’ Some clues regarding the ‘fearful value’ with which grade retention had been saturated can be found in the accounts presented in Chapter Five regarding the way in which the schools’ disciplinary mechanisms were deployed. The naturalisation of violence towards retained students is an illustrative example. The consideration of other emotions ‘stuck’ to grade retention can also facilitate better understanding of what made students afraid when they imagined an encounter with grade retention.

Sadness

The emotion most frequently recognised by educators, parents, and children as being ‘generated by’ grade retention was sadness. Crying and getting depressed were identified as ‘typical’ reactions for a child who had been retained. When teachers were asked what they thought their students would show in their drawings and stories about ‘a student who has been retained’, most of them expected expressions of sadness. This expectation was confirmed by students’ productions. As the examples on the next page show, many of them incorporate grief and tears.

Figure 15. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 1st grade student, Manuela (girl).

Speech Bubble:
"[The student] *is very sad because she was retained".*

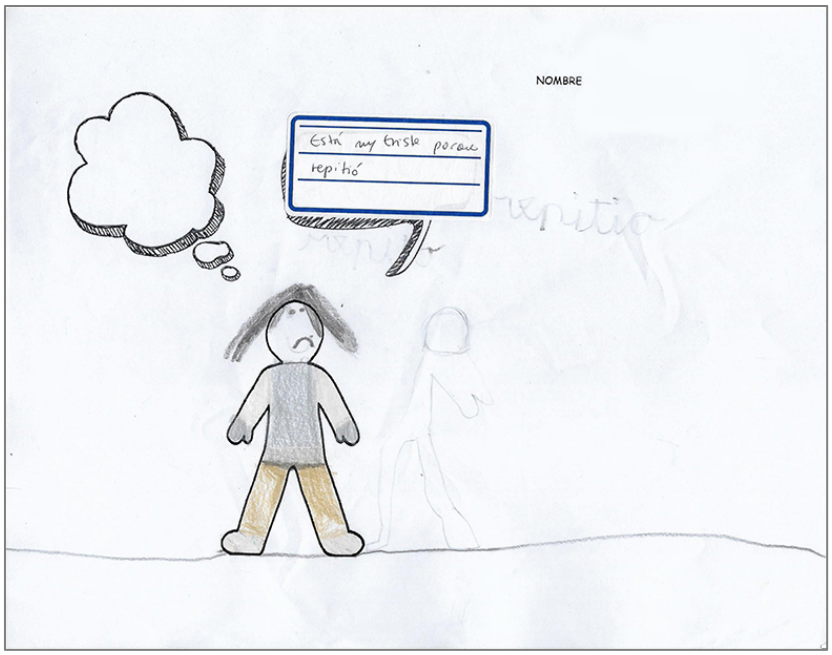
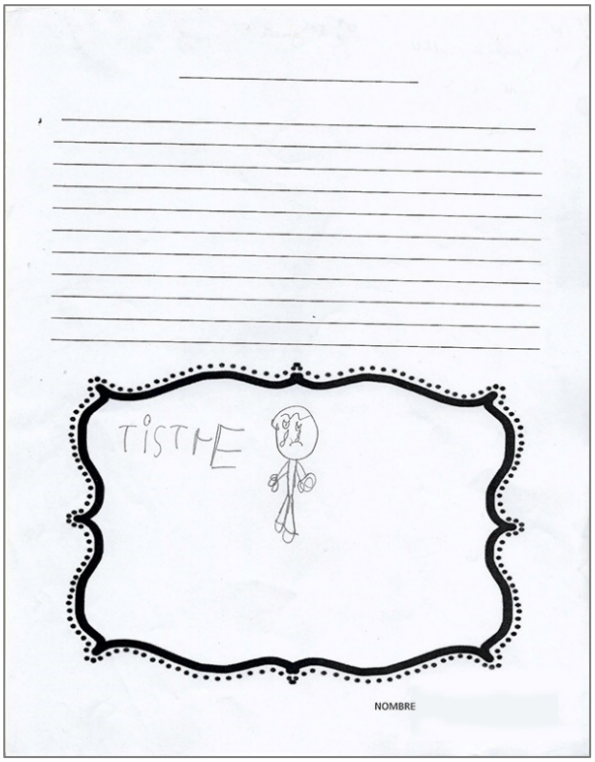


Figure 16. Colegio Olga Poblete. 5th grade student, Osvaldo (boy).



(No title)

Drawing Text:

'Sad'

Ahmed (2014) proposes that the orientations we take towards objects depends on the predictions we make of the emotions that they will provoke in us. The collected stories and drawings contained children's expectations with regard to the encounter between a student (who might potentially be them) and grade retention. They did not need to come into contact with the 'retention object' to 'know' how they would feel if they did. Grief seemed to be the primary affective value that grade retention had accumulated in its 'historic' circulation within the school. Even for 1st grade students, sadness was a 'sticky sign' of grade retention although they were unlikely to have had much 'first-hand' experience with the practice. However, they had already conceived of grade retention as a 'saddening object' based on the social sedimentations of meanings and expectations attributed to it. In the case of 5th grade students, who had had more experience with those sedimentations, 'sadness' was often the focal point of their stories and drawings. This emotion was not only frequently explicitly named in students' stories but was also incorporated in the bodily expressions of the pupils in their drawings. Tears, sagging shoulders and 'inverted mouths' were repeatedly used. Sadness was embodied by the retained students portrayed in these productions.

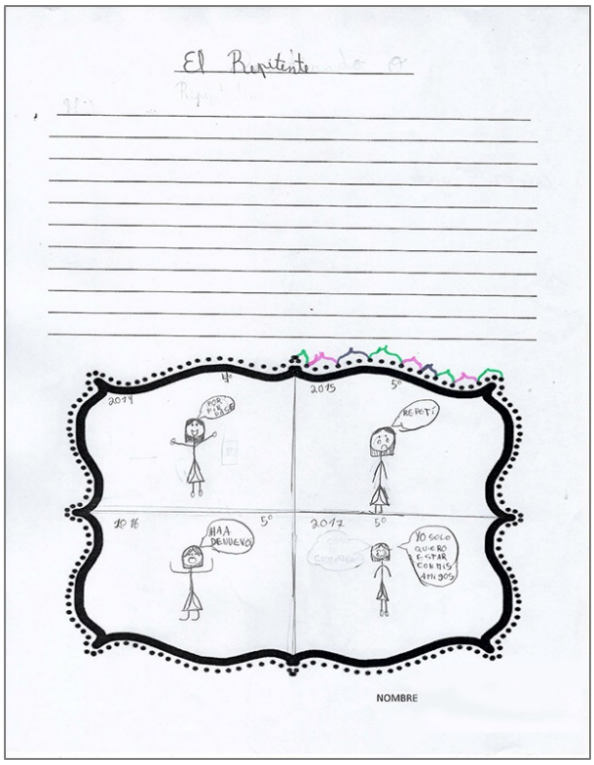
This anticipation of grief probably played a significant role in the articulation of grade retention as an object of fear. Fear and sadness 'constructed' grade retention as an object that students should avoid. From there, it might be argued that the disciplinary strength of grade retention rested in the intersection of this orientation and educators' power to authorise or deny it, and the constitution of the student as a 'frightened subject.'

A pressing question that emerged from this analysis required the examination of impressions that rendered grade retention socially recognisable as an object that 'made' students suffer; that is, what kind of repetitions made sadness a sticky sign of grade retention?

Parents and educators consistently attributed retained students' sorrow to the loss of classmates and enduring friendships. The separation from their peers and the need to integrate themselves to a new class was described by some of them as a very difficult and stressful process. On top of that, school actors recognised a strong social stigma lodged against retained students. The rejection of retained students by their peers was extensively normalised across the schools. Some educators considered that such rejection was 'inevitable' while others recommended that retained pupils move to a new school to avoid or mitigate social exclusion (although in my experience in the field, the age difference and the information provided by the same teachers generally made students aware of previous retentions when new classmates came from another school).

Many students' narratives featured this association between the sadness attributed to being retained and its social consequences.

Figure 17. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Josefa (girl).



The Retained

Drawing Text:

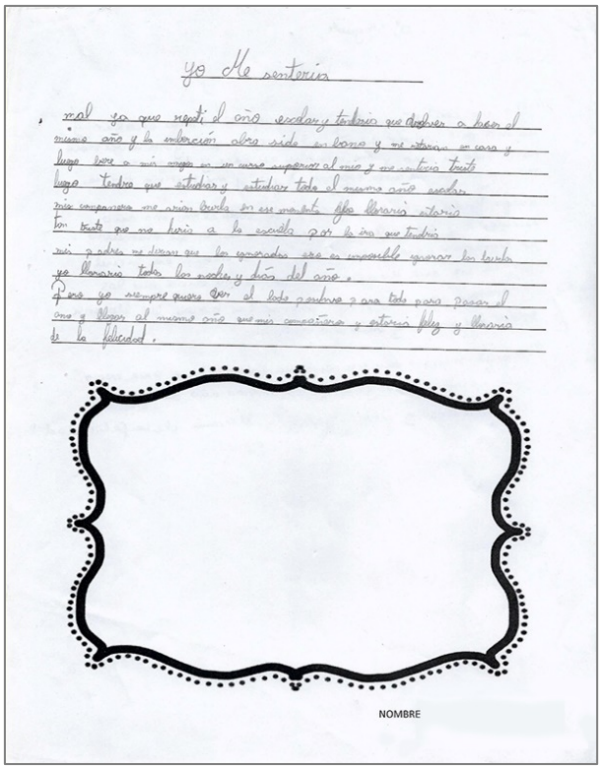
Upper Left Square: 2014. 4th [grade]. *'Finally. I passed [to the next grade]'*

Upper Right Square: 2015. 5th [grade]. *'I was retained'*

Lower Left Square: 2016. 5th [grade]. *'Wah, again'*

Lower Right Square: 2017. 5th [grade]. *'I just want to be with my friends'*

Figure 18. Escuela Olga Poblete. 5th grade student, Omar (boy).



I would feel

[I would feel] bad if I were retained since I would have to do the same grade again, and the investment would have been in vain, and I would be reprimanded at home. I would see my friends in a class above mine, and I would feel sad.

Then, I would have to study again in the same grade. My classmates would bully me. At that point, I would cry. I would be so sad that I would not go to the school due to the rage I would have. My parents would advise me to ignore them, but it is impossible to overlook being teased. I would cry every night and every day of that year.

Nevertheless, I always like to see the positive side of things. To be promoted and to get to the same grade where my classmates are. I would be happy, and I would cry with joy.

These two productions were typical of many stories and drawings that depicted the burden of losing classmates and friends (together with other loses that are elaborated later in this chapter). In the first story, the retained student was portrayed crying and complaining over a repeated retention preventing her from being with her friends. In the second story, the separation from friends was given a 'happy ending' when the retained student was able to progress and 'reach' the class he had been in before. This turn of events is very unlikely in Chilean schools since the progression of two grades in one school year is very rare (and hardly available for a child who has just been retained). Chilean retained students have no chance of experiencing this final, happy twist.

The second story also mentions the vulnerability retained students are left with in relation to their peers. The bullying of retained students seemed to be a common, accepted and even expected practice. The section on the naturalisation/'invisibling' of violence developed in the previous chapter elaborates this idea. What seems important to notice here are the affective consequences of such violence against these students' socialisation processes and the further dispossessions that follow, and how they determine children's orientations towards the 'retention object'.

Shame

The 'social limbo' in which retained students are left was also identified by different members of the school to engender shameful feelings. In this way, shame seems an additional 'sticky sign' on the 'retention object' expected to be feel by those who 'come into contact' with grade retention.

> Fifth grade students are aware of grade retention, and they fear it. More than fear, at that age they are ashamed of being retained. Smaller children are not conscious of it, is like that they just change their classmates. But at this stage, it's like 'I am not as good as my friends, and I will lose them'. At this age, to be accepted by their peers is the most important thing*. (Escuela Andalhue. Interview, November 2017. Antonia, 5th Grade Class Teacher).*

> I think that in 5th grade students have a better knowledge of what grade retention means. And they feel more ashamed about it. I mean, not because it is something to be ashamed of, but they looked at it like 'jeez, what would my new classmates will think of me? Because I am older than they, and they already know that I was in the upper class before'. *(Colegio Jesús Misionero. Interview, March 2018. Macarena, 2nd Grade Class Teacher).*

> One of my daughters used to say to me 'I will not be retained, how shameful!'. She was always telling me 'It would be so embarrassing, my classmates will be in the next grade and I will stay in the same. No way mum, I wouldn't attend that school anymore'. And that makes her want to study, because she finds that to be kept in the same grade would be too shameful. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, April 2018. Lourdes, 2nd Grade Carer).*

In the previous accounts, the feeling of shame is linked with students' social bonds. Ahmed (2014) suggests that shame is an inter-corporeal and social experience in which exposure to others is wounding. 'The ashamed' identifies itself with an external witness and, by this process, it becomes object and subject of feeling at the same time; it becomes an object of feeling to itself. The other is not 'any other', it is someone who matters to 'the ashamed', either because they are interesting or because they are loved. In this sense, shame is not only a negative response to another, but it is also an encounter of love. Students from the retained spectrum see themselves through the gaze of a whole community that matters to

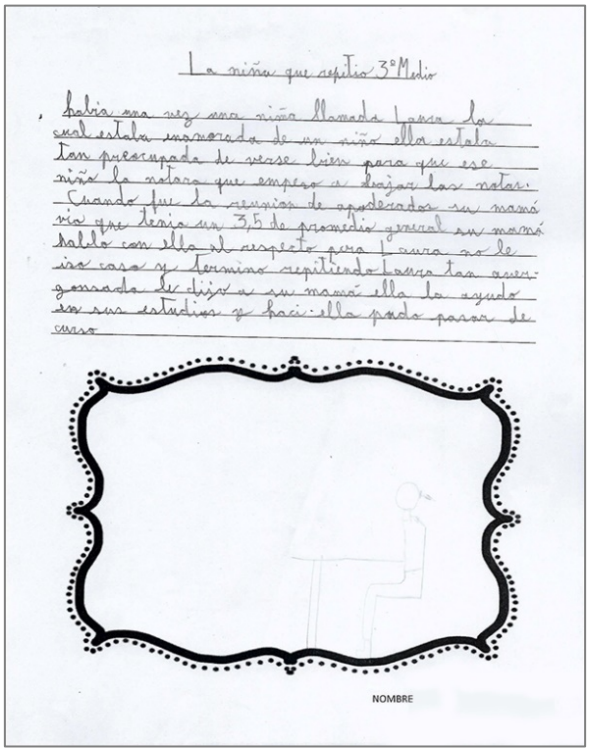
them. This community implies retention, and those who were retained, as failures. As previously shown, such reflections are deeply hurtful. Furthermore, the retained face the witnessing of their peers; not only of their current classmates and friends but also of the classmates (and potential friends) that they will encounter in the next class. The friends they are forced to leave behind and those who are about to become their new group of reference are ‘exposed’ to their failure, and by their identification to those whose acceptance ‘is the most important thing’ the retained students face the failure of themselves to themselves.

The ‘gaze’ of their community and reference group also represents the social ideals and normative imperatives students are requested to hold in order to belong to the educational community. Love is intertwined with those ideals and norms. On the one hand, shame is the affective cost retained pupils must pay to relinquish them. On the other hand, shame affirms retained students’ commitment to educational ideals and rules since it ‘proves’ that although they have ‘betrayed’ them, they recognise this and regret it. These operations not only produce the retained students and define how their bodies are shaped within the educational space, but also condition every child’s affective bond to educational ideals. According to Ahmed (2014), the feeling of shame enforces social ideals and normative commitments through love. Our affection becomes a powerful disciplinary tool that prevents us from failing those we love. The previous account from Lourdes illustrates these disciplinary operations in practice. She described how her daughter feared the embarrassment of having to face her peers after being retained and how this made her want to study.

At the same time, shame compels those who have neglected social commitments to rebuild a position of positive recognition by the reestablishment of

the norm. Ahmed (2014) suggests that the 'ashamed' can restore social acceptance if they are able to show that their failure to 'live up to' those who love (and measure up to the social ideals) is only temporary. Many children's productions incorporated the idea of a remorseful retained student who at the end of the story repositioned her/himself in an acceptable way by a process of (re)alignment to educational ideals. Happy endings generally involved students who changed their behaviours to fulfil school requirements and, thereby, were finally promoted. The story below exposes shame in these disciplinary mechanisms.

Figure 19. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Jacinta (girl).



The girl retained in Year 12

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Laura who was in love with a boy. She was so concern about her looks because she wanted to be noticed by that boy, that she started to get low grades. When the parents meeting came, her mother realised that she was failing the year. Her mother talked to her about it, but Laura did not hear her, and she ended up being retained. Being very ashamed, Laura talked to her mother, and she helped her to study, and thus she was able to get promoted.

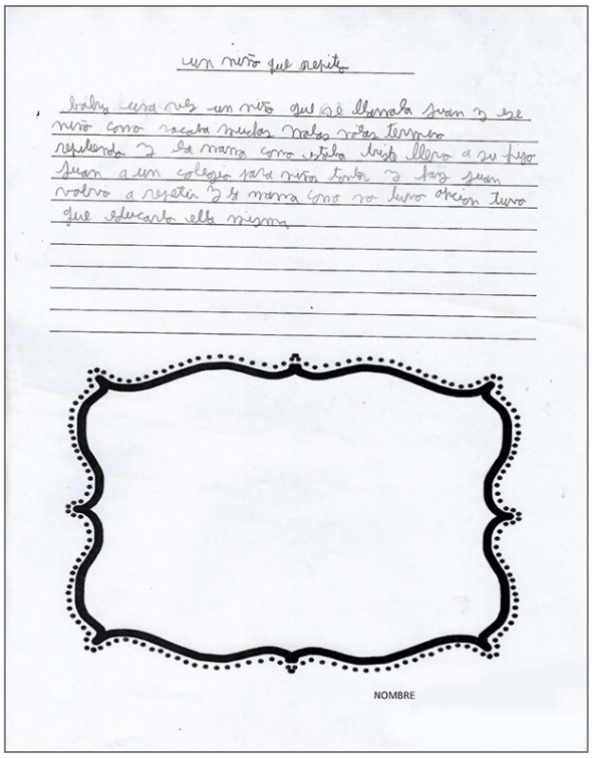
This story illustrates the 'restorative-disciplinary function' of shame. Laura, the girl in the story, failed as a responsible and committed student (educational ideals) and as a responsible daughter (beloved ones). The result of these betrayals was her retention and the shame that followed. It was that shame that generated the change

that restored her alignment to her social and educational commitments. She ‘demonstrated’ that her betrayal had been only temporary, and by this movement, she redeemed herself as an acceptable student worthy of promotion.

Redemption, however, can be elusive to many retained children. The stories of Miguel and Juan – elaborated throughout this manuscript – illustrate how difficult it can be for a retained student restore social and educational acceptance. The social stigma of being identified within the retained spectrum did not simply fade once the students started their new class or were promoted the following year. Not only had they ‘acquired’ a shaming identity within the school order, but as a material consequence of grade retention, they were permanently displaced from their original class and would remain older than their new classmates; they remained forever in a space of dislocation regarding their peers. According to many of the educators I interviewed, retained students’ overage becomes more evident in higher grades and causes struggles in their future social and educational adaptation. The mark of their failure remains an open and visible wound throughout the rest of their school trajectories.

The state of immutable failure haunting retained pupils was represented in many children’s productions. Frequently, their stories included students who were repeatedly retained, who had to leave the school after being retained, or who ended up permanently excluded.

Figure 20. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Joaquín (boy).



A retained boy

Once upon a time, there was a boy called Juan[72]. As he got many low qualifications, he ended up been retained. And his mother, as sad as she was, took her son to a school for dumb kids. And there Juan was retained again and her mother did not have other option than educate him herself.

As this production illustrates, the state of irreparable breakage and inaccessible restoration in which retained students were portrayed seemed to be connected to an 'impression' of inferiority. Adjectives such as 'dumb' ('tonto'), 'jackass' ('burro') and other negative and offensive expression were used in stories and drawings to describe the way in which retained students defined themselves and also the way in which other students perceived and named them. These shaming and pejorative terms were present in children's productions across grades and schools. Even 1st grade students incorporated them in their drawings.

72 It is important to clarify that the name of the boy in this story is not the same of the student who was retained in Colegio Jesús Misionero 5th grade class, since 'Juan' is not his name but a given pseudonym.

Figure 21. Escuela Olga Poblete. 1st grade student, Oliver (boy).

Speech Bubble: *"I am a hueón"* [pejorative Chilean term meaning 'fool', 'idiot'].

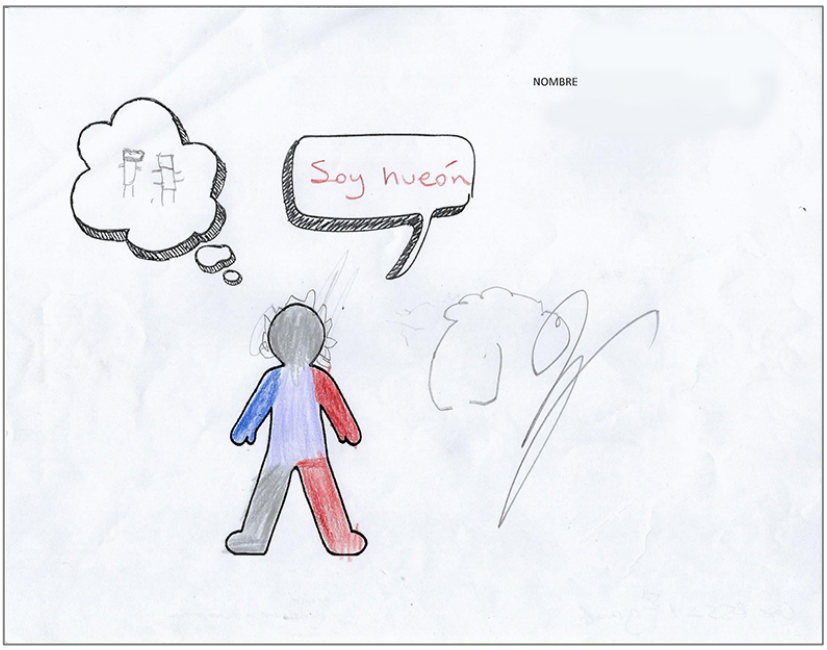


Figure 22. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 1st grade student, José (boy).

Speech Bubble: *"I am dumb".*



The second production shown here was made by a student who was described the following year (2nd grade) as at risk of being retained. I do not know whether he had been considered as within the retained spectrum before and, if he was, how aware he was of it. I never found out whether he had actually been retained at the end of 2nd grade. What I find significant here is what can happen to children who experience these sticky signs as attached to their own bodies. How is inhabiting the body of the 'dumb' experienced? What do these children think about themselves? What do they feel? What are the consequences to their development and their educational trajectories? Without providing a definitive answer to these questions, we could provisionally suggest (following Ahmed) that these children cannot comfortably 'inhabit their social/educational skin'. The regulative norms might 'impress' upon their bodies their failure to satisfy the collective ideal in ways that restrict what they can do and how they can experience their educational world. Failing to reproduce acceptable social scripts locates them out-of-place within their pedagogical environments. Feelings such as sadness and shame can be seen as expressions of this discomfort.

Another significant aspect to consider regarding the previous drawings is how early children begin to locate 'the retained' as an injurious position. Although 1st grade students are just starting their formal education, many of them have already developed negative ideas related to grade retention and those who are retained. This is a crucial aspect to notice since some teachers interviewed – as Antonia and Macarena in the remarks above – suggested that small children are not aware of what grade retention means and that they experience easy, painless transitions to their new classes. These assumptions were not only contradicted by many students'

drawings but also by my experiences in the schools I visited. During my observations, grade retention was explicitly incorporated in disciplinary interactions and relationships between the teachers and their young students (and carers). Furthermore, I witnessed small retained children struggling to trying to integrate into their new classes. The idea of the harmlessness of grade retention in the early years and the denial of the emotions and hazards that young students can experience in relation to it, seems to operate as a misleading force defining the use and approach of educators regarding the issue in low grades.

In my conversation with Leonor, Escuela Los Bellotos' psychologist, this discrepancy between some educators' views on grade retention and students' experiences of it was made explicit.

> It usually happens that grade retention diminishes the self-concept and the self-esteem of those who are retained. Because grade retention has a negative connotation, it is like 'you were not capable', 'you didn't know enough', 'you didn't make enough effort'. And those are things that, not just the parents but everyone connate retention in those terms. So obviously at the beginning children must face such a significative failure, because it is something that is experienced with an intensity that we, as adults, do not experience. We are like 'ok, you were retained, it is not a big deal'. But it is not like that. It is very tough, it is very significative. (…) Overall, it is about frustration, about the acceptance of failure, the diminishing of the self-esteem, their self-image as a student, the inevitable social rejection they experience. (…) Then, when they start the new school year, they experience – as it would happen to anyone – the fear, the feeling of not knowing what will happen 'I am going to be accepted or not?', 'how I locate myself in the new class?', 'I am older than the rest, how that is going to be like?'. *(Escuela Los Bellotos. Interview, April 2018. Leonor, Psychologist).*

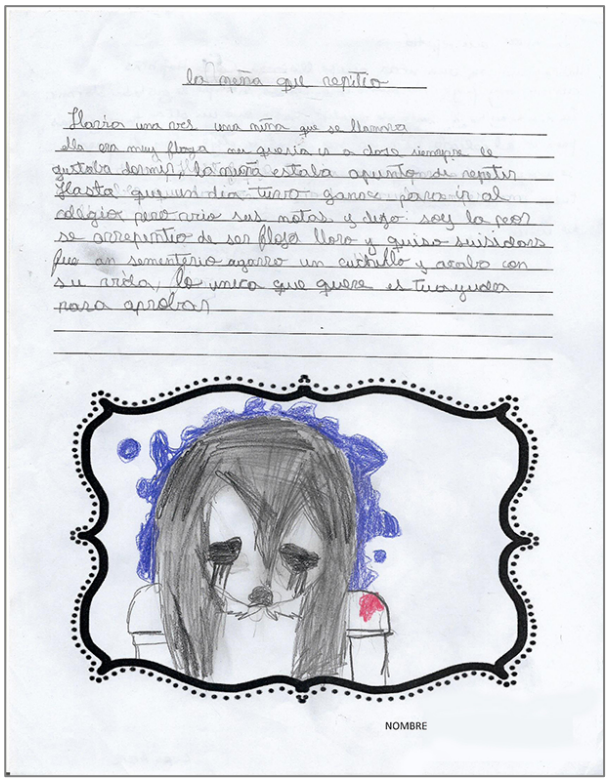
Here, Leonor accounts for the drastic consequences of students being labelled as incapable and idle, and highlights the failure of the adult members of the

school community to recognise the emotional intensities implicated in this process. Some educators seemed to have trouble acknowledging the performative efficacy of the injurious connotations that even they sustained in the way retained students felt and came into contact with others.

In her remarks, Leonor elaborated on the elements participating in the process by which students' self-concept was defined (and harmed) by the experience of being retained. Retained students incorporate the socially generalised negative connotations that they have experienced in their previous exposure to grade retention and the affective values reiterated in these encounters. They are also permanently exposed to the contingent effects that those impressions and emotions have on others. The fear that – according to the interviewee – retained students experience at the beginning of the new school year seems here entangled with the shaming gaze of their peers. Fear and shame seem to impress the surface of their bodies in ways that constitute the educational identities they assumed facing others as much as themselves.

Unlike educators, students consistently incorporated the emotional burden entailed in being retained, and the negative consequences for children's self-image in their stories. The following production of a 5th grade student provides an example.

Figure 23. Escuela Los Bellotos. 5th grade student, Lucía (girl).



The girl who was retained

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Carla[73]. She was very lazy. She did not want to go to class. She wanted to sleep all the time.

The girl was about to be retained, until one day she was willing to go to the school. However, she looked at her grades and said: "I am the worst".

She regretted haven been so lazy, she cried and wanted to kill herself. She went to a cemetery, grabbed a knife and ended her life.

The only thing she wants is your help to be promoted.

In this story, the painful emotions attributed to grade retention defined the movements and attachments of the (potentially) retained student to her own body. Those feelings made the 'retention object' so threatening to the self that coming in contact with it endangered not only its symbolic constitution but also its very material existence. The body of the non-promoted child is here an object so saturated by sadness (explicit) and shame (implicit) that inhabiting her skin becomes unsustainable. The preservation of an acceptable position involved the eradication of the self.

Although 'shame' is not explicit in the story, it can be inferred through the 'impression of inferiority' deployed in the narrative. Ahmed (2014) has suggested a

73 Anonymised surname.

connection between shame and self-destruction through the process by which shamed individuals need to expel themselves from themselves in order to turn away from their self-attributed badness. The ‘social plausibility’ – elaborated in this and other students’ productions – of retained students being captured by such harrowing emotional intensities that they contemplated suicide, contrasts with the casualness with which many educators approached retention practices and their effects.

Claims of redemption and restitution were also involved in this story. At some point, the girl was finally ‘willing’ to align herself with educational expectations and was therefore able to regain an acceptable position. However, she realised that the ‘truth’ of her student identity – and her subsequent fate – had been already defined by her academic failure. She then identified herself with the ‘retained student object’ (and its abject attachments) unleashing the process by which her self needed to be organised against itself to be (socially) preserved. Then, at the end of the story, the tale offered a way out of the tragic finale by a request of love. The only way that existence could be safeguarded was through the restoration of ties to others and the repositioning of an acceptable/normative (promoted) identity. Redemption and viability are prohibited by the sticky signs attached to the ‘retention terms’. They can only be accomplished by the annihilation or the modification of the retained body.

Disgust

The reiterative attribution of inferiority looming over retained students together with the accepted social attitude of separation towards them, suggests the involvement of feelings of disgust as an additional emotion operating within the grade retention ensemble. Significant entanglements can be conceived between the

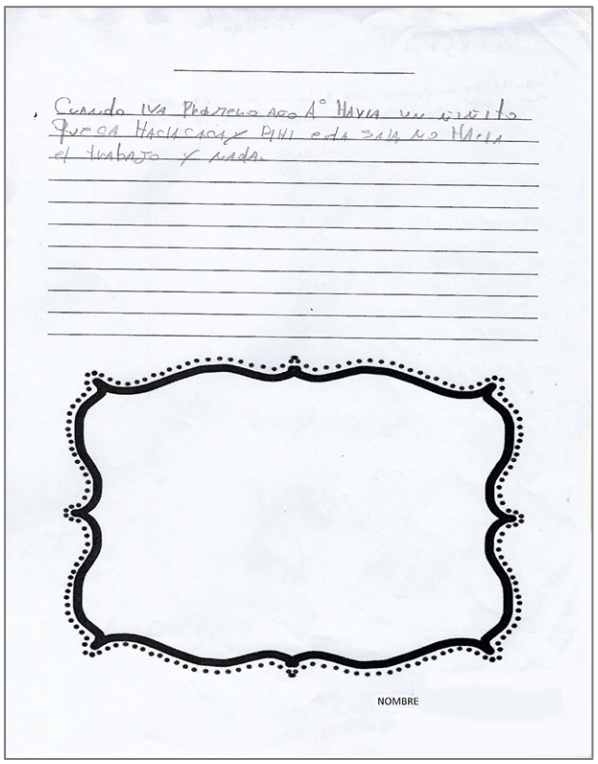
affective values previously described as attached to the ‘grade retention object’ (fear, sadness and shame) and the idea of retained students as ‘disgusting objects of feeling’.

Contrary to the common perception of disgust as an instinctive reaction towards an inherently disgusting object, Ahmed (2014) proposes that such an attribution is based on ideas that have been historically and repeatedly associated with it. The previous sections and analytic chapters provided an extensive account of the meanings and impressions that define encounters between the members of a school community and students from the retained spectrum. The subjectivation mechanisms by which they are constituted as undesirable/impossible/abject students have been identified as critical elements of this process. The sedimented injurious position in which these children are located within the educational milieu can be conceived as productive of disgust, as much as produced by it. The notion of ‘abjection’ is especially useful when elaborating these entanglements. The archaic nausea upon which Kristeva (1982) built this concept echoes the emotion of disgust. We can easily identify the ‘abject’ as an object of disgust. This feeling can be identified as the fundamental component underlying modes of abjection circulating and the social processes in which ‘the abject’ is involved.

Neither disgust nor abjection are explicitly named in association to the retained body in the staff interviews or in the students’ productions. However, we can infer their presence in the contemptuous remarks and attitudes of teachers and peers towards students from the retained spectrum, in demeaning names and expressions used to refer to them, in their social isolation and discrimination, in the acceptance of violence towards them, in the lack of protection they received from the adult world,

and the excluding movements they were submitted to. Additionally, explicit associations between these students' positions and other objects that had been previously designated as disgusting can be found in the school. The 'chewing gum' episode in the previous chapter in which Luisa calls Liliana 'filthy pig' is illustrative of these operations. The mention of human waste in the following production is another example of these chains of meaning.

Figure 24. Escuela Olga Poblete. 5th grade student, Octavio (boy).



(No title)

When I was in first grade there was a boy who used to poop and wet himself inside the classroom. He did not do his schoolwork or anything else.

Octavio's story incorporates a disgusting reference attached to the retained student's body, in association to an unacceptable unproductive educational identity. The lack of sphincter control and the failure to fulfil expectations of schooling productivity were interwoven in the characterisation of the 'retained object'. Rejection and disgust seemed to be the 'plausible orientations' that arose from this brief tale.

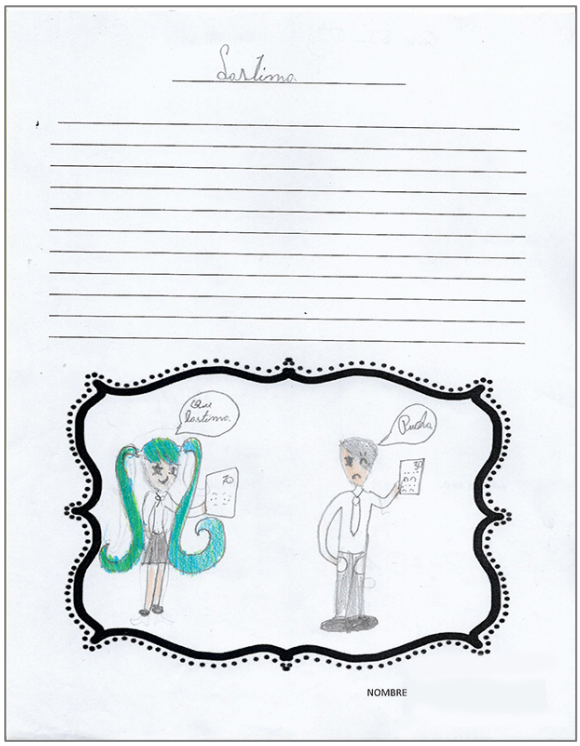
According to Ahmed (2014), feelings are not just inner or psychic states but they have material effects on the surface of bodies and the orientations and proximities between them. Disgust operates as a contact zone, in the sense that it defines a distance between the subject and object of feelings. The first tends to get away from the proximity of the second. When retained students are made abject and disgusting by the schools' communities, they are left in a position of separation and exclusion.

This orientation not only relates to the position of inferiority in which 'disgusted objects' are located but also in their threatening power. The 'risk of contamination' described by Kristeva (1982) regarding the abject is linked to this idea. The acceptable can become unacceptable by entering into contact with the unacceptable object. When the subject of feeling faces an object that has been made disgusted by past histories of contact, the emotion of disgust is required to avoid contamination. Resistance and rejection (the nausea) are movements of protection and preservation. When students outside the retained spectrum orient themselves against or away from retained bodies, they evade the risk of transmission and become 'non-abject'/'non-disgusting'. This movement of separation not only 'saves' students from becoming potential objects of disgust but also positions them as acceptable educational identities. Subjects are not contaminated but are equally transformed through this process. Students identified themselves with the ideal by establishing their opposition to those who have failed to reach the ideal (those who we have identified here as the disgusting or abject object).

The construction of these opposing positions involves more than the emergence of negative emotional circulations. In the same way that 'being disgusting' has been associated here with sadness and shame, 'feeling disgusted' can be related to the feeling of pride insofar as it connects subjects with the ideal. This emotion can be read as having a double connotation. On the one hand, it can comprise gratification and satisfaction towards the self. On the other, it might involve condescension and disdain towards the disgusting other. In this way, this is an affective response that transforms the contact zone with other bodies and with oneself.

Like the feeling of disgust, pride is usually an emotion operating in an implicit and concealed way within the grade retention ensemble. Despite this, the feeling can be identified in, for example, students' stories in which the recognition of retained students' failure – and their positionality as 'disgusting objects' – is constitutive of reversed valued educational identities (and the associated emotions). The following drawing belonged to Julieta, a 5th grade student from Colegio Jesús Misionero. She was an academically successful student who sat behind Juan and participated in the constant aggressions directed towards him by his classmates.

Figure 25. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Julieta (girl).



Pity

Drawing Text:

- Left figure: *'It's a pity'* [Holding an academic report with the highest qualification]

- Right figure: *'Oh no!'* [Holding an academic report with a low (reproved) qualification]

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This drawing illustrates how grade retention constitutes not only the abject-retained student but also the proud-promoted one. Possibly, Julieta identified herself with the cool girl whose success and satisfaction emerged 'within' the feeling of pity towards her retained classmate (who might represent Juan). The commiseration directed towards the boy (while smiling) seems more a recognition of the distribution of failure and success than an expression of sympathy. It can be argued that it is not love but disgust that prevails in this interaction. The opposed physical expressions manifested by the two characters – one that happily 'fits' with the environment while the other stands in distress and discomfort – defined the radical separation between these bodies and the respective co-construction of their educational identities. The girl has been constituted as an 'object of pride' in the context of her encounter and relationality with the disgusting object.

It can be argued that the entanglement between the feelings of pride and disgust is embedded in the platforms of association of the neoliberal education in which differential productivity and academic achievements are intertwined with identity constitutions and the emotions defined by them. The neoliberal values of individualism, comparison, and competition that discipline subjects through the establishment and exacerbation of difference seem strongly involved in the interdependence between positive educational emotions and valued identities on the one hand, and academic failure and the injurious positions that derive from that on the other.

Following this argument, the Graduation and Award Ceremony in Colegio Jesús Misionero – the 'final encounter' with Juan - was an occasion in which the co-dependency of the pairs pride-success and disgust-failure was exposed. This event celebrated students' educational success and their consequential progression to the following grade. Pride seemed to be a dominant affective intensity flowing during the event, and the feeling from which the reigning cheerfulness derived. For those who had experienced (and feared) a dangerous proximity to the 'grade retention object' the feeling of relief seemed to be another significant emotion at play.

The other side of this ceremony of progress was a rite of exclusion for students like Juan. This scene contained a corollary act of distinction, avoidance and opposition to the disgusting object, which in this case we can conceive as being enacted by Juan. The joyful atmosphere on the one hand and Juan's painful experience on the other were not opposites but counterparts. Students' identities were at play here as much as their emotions. The constitution of 'the proud student' as an acceptable identity was embedded in the same process that located Juan as a

‘disgusting object’ whose body surfaces were inscribed into the (educational) environment in forms of pain and discomfort. Emotions of pride and joy, pain and disgust were not just the result of defined subjectivities and bodies but were constitutive of them and their possibilities of action within primary education. When subjects flee from the feared, rejected object not only are they positioned as bodies that can be loved by themself (self-satisfaction) but also as individuals that can be loved by others (social recognition and acceptance). They join a community in which they are recognised as ‘objects of pride’. The Graduation and Award Ceremony is more than just an aggregation of bodies positively ‘impressed upon’ the world. It shows a whole community in which its members perceive one another as acceptable and affiliated insofar as they share pride and disgust. The ritualisation of the exclusion of the disgusting object and the exhibition of a community proud of itself can be considered as two sides of the same coin.

When individuals act upon the attribution of disgust, they engage with a history of associations that define them as subjects and also as part of a collective. The shared process of casting out and pulling away from the disgusting object generates a community that is tied together by the act of condemnation. In this way, operations producing objects of disgust are also productive of subjects and communities (Ahmed, 2014). When the members of the school community engage in actions of opposition towards students from the retained spectrum or display negative representations of them, they not only preserve their own acceptable constitution but also the acceptability of others. Not only disgust but also love and acceptance are involved in the processes by which retained students are cast out by their peers and educators. The following drawing represents the operation by which a community

identified with the educational ideal is formed at the very moment in which the surface of bodies and the contact between them is defined by the attribution of disgust towards the retained student.

Figure 26. Colegio Jesús Misionero. 5th grade student, Javiera (girl).



The Retained Girl

Drawing Text:

- Upper Left Square: In the School

- First Figure standing: A teacher calling a student (Alisia) and holding an academic report in which 'approved' is written.

- Second Figure standing: A student holding a reproved academic report and saying: *'Oh, no! I was retained. My mother will kill me'.*

- Figures sitting on the right: Students pointing out to the girl who has received the reproved academic report while laughing and saying to her *'Hahaha, you were retained', 'Hahaha, dumb', 'Hahaha'.*

The shared feeling of disgust towards retained students simultaneously constitute the members of the school community and the community. Here, the group of students who laugh and insult the retained student, the teacher holding an approved report with the highest mark to the next student, and even the (imagined) mother who will condemn/punish her daughter's retention, are all defined as acceptable individuals and as part of an acceptable community at the moment they separate themselves from the retained student. The image of the other students

physically and verbally ‘aligned’ in their hostile attitude towards their sorrowful classmate exposes the bonding process involved in the act of condemnation of bodies whose identities are defined by the attribution of disgust. In this regard, cruel attitudes and fleeing actions derived from the feeling of disgust should not be considered only as negative or individual orientations but need to be comprehended in a context in which interpersonal engagements and feelings of fear, shame, love and belonging are also involved. Such is the character of the subjectivating and normalising poles of joy/affiliation and pain/dispossession.

Conclusion

Throughout this research project, my own experience of becoming disturbed, regulated and transformed by the affective economy of the grade retention ensemble became a gateway to explore the intensities involved in the collective engagement of primary school bodies. I suggest, within this inquiry, that grade retention configures an affective territory that impacts the nature of the bonds of educational communities and what their members can feel, do and be within them. Grade retention inscribes intertwined poles of joy/belonging and agony/rejection that seem crucial to the articulation of subjectivating and disciplinary arrangements that, ultimately, define early educational experiences and possibilities.

For bodies constituted within the retained spectrum, affectivities and emotions are key elements of the process of dispossession they endure. The feeling of disgust – and ‘others’ pride’ as its contingent opposite – defines the injurious social position in which these students are located and their unfeasible recognition as intelligible subjects of education and rights. For those who have been dispossessed by feelings

of disgust, the educational experience is tinged with sadness, shame, and feelings of inferiority. Retained children inhabit an uncomfortable position that shapes their bodies and lives hindering their ability to act, to socialise and to even exist within the educational milieu. The socioemotional and material repercussions of these violations and precarities are frequently overlooked or naturalised by educators. Lacking protection from the educational system and the adult world, movements away from these uncomfortable sensations and painful emotions involve the (usually fragile and partial) restoration of a place of intelligibility by the submission to norm and ideals.

The disciplinary dimension of affects and feelings related to grade retention goes beyond children from the retained spectrum. The whole community of students is constituted and governed by disgust and fear. Disgusting subjectivities are permanent reminders of the disturbing consequences of stepping outside the rules of recognition. The abiding risk of contamination introduces a coercive tension into the exchanges between children and their educators and peers and constitute the primary student as an afraid subject of schooling. Subjectivated in this way, pupils engage in learning, evaluation and schooling from a ‘frightened position’. Their capacities to act within educational spaces are constrained by the limits of fear. Furthermore, along the feeling of fear, ‘being disgusted’ by those who do not fulfil acceptable educational positions involves educational and social gratifications. The movement of rejection and separation from those bodies implies a simultaneous motion towards the meaning systems that have made them disgusting/abject in the first place. The ‘frightened-disgusted-promoted student’ is then disciplined through their (unstable) access to positions of joy, pride, satisfaction, success, affection and belonging as the inverse and aftermath of their dispossessed retained peers.

Beyond their subjectivating and disciplinary power over particular individuals, the affective intensities stuck to grade retention saturate the educational territory with fear, sadness, shame, disgust and pride. These feelings influence the configuration of educational communities and their institutional logics and practices. They define collectivities which are tied together by acts of condemnation and marginalisation and where social and educational gratifications depend on disgusting affections triggered by permanent competitive comparisons. Ultimately, these intensities configure educational spaces that need materially and symbolically push students like Juan to the ground to function 'effectively'.

Fortunately, the affective, discursive and performative character of these territorializing arrangements make them provisional and susceptible to being unsettled. Emotions and knowledges blocking new meanings can be scattered. By engaging in these deterritorializing processes the inertia of repeated past associations impressed upon our bodies can be overcome and we can start to question what affective attachments we want to define our educational encounters and experiences. Within this emergent space of reflection we can also envision educational identities and exchanges freed from fear, sadness and shame; learning processes that do not require a spectacle of distinctions between those who succeed and those who fail; communities in which pride, joy and belonging are based in acceptance, respect and cooperation instead of disgust and dispossession; and pedagogical territories that do not constrain, but enhance all students' capacities to act, to feel and to be.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Introduction

Grade retention appears to be so transparent, natural, and necessary within primary education that we have forgotten that it is a fiction. Promotion regulations seem to convey the truth of pupils' identity, learning, progression, and future opportunities. This project has challenged the apparently 'true character' of grade retention, and suggested that it is rather constantly produced within daily governmentality practices supported by a neoliberal educational discourse. Grade retention – and the retained student it creates – does not exist outside these contingent encounters that make and actualise it. Furthermore, the idea of grade retention as a pedagogical strategy suitable for ensuring 'delayed' students receive educational opportunities – and even a meritocratic prize - is also fictional (as educational research has consistently suggested). Their effects are, nevertheless, very 'real'; they limit the capacities of retained students, non-retained students and teachers alike to act, feel and be.

We can decide to uphold these fictions. However, we cannot escape from recognising that if we do, primary educational goals and interactions will continue to be sustained by pain, injustice, exclusion, and the legitimation of violence towards children. As an alternative, we can disrupt and change these orders.

Research process overview

This study began with a curiosity to understand how an educational policy consistently defined as harmful to students and educational systems, such as grade retention, could be globally accepted and applied. It also began with the hunch that, despite the large amount of international research on the topic, an aspect of the issue remained obscure. Part of this intuition came from the realisation that the extensive evidence on the detrimental effects of holding students back in primary school had not been able to address its persistence and irrevocability in educational systems across the world. At the same time, both cultural narratives and personal experiences of early retentions seemed contradictory, paradoxical and disconcerting. My own individual story of early retention was puzzling.

This study aimed to consider these voids and questions from an innovative perspective. I have avoided considering retention as an inert or neutral policy text or simply as a wrong practice. Instead, I have explored grade retention's vitality and positivity as a dynamic and interactive force, to explore its production and productivity. In this way I questioned the productive forces forming, sustaining, and legitimising grade retention in primary schools as well as the operations and 'truths' that it configures, enables and enacts.

I have engaged in this endeavour articulating diverse theoretical and methodological tools. Post-structuralist ideas and concepts have assisted me in locating grade retention as a complex social formation defining and being defined by subjectivation processes, discourses and knowledge, disciplinary arrangements, performativity, materialities, and circuits of desire. I have used the term 'grade

retention ensemble' as a theoretical device to position grade retention - and the practices and logics entangled with it – as a productive, interactive, contingent, and non-hierarchical hybrid of these elements.

The study's methodological standpoint has developed in parallel with the exploration of these conceptual tools – beyond the positivistic approach most commonly used in the grade retention research field and also beyond traditional qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, this project has been a journey in which the pursuit of certainty, coherence and valid/true knowledge has given way to a search for complexity, dynamism, plausibility, indeterminacy, and potentiality. This experimentation and learning process has been enabled and framed by an ethnographic-style case study undertaken in Chilean primary schools. This ethnographic approach has been critical when considering mundane social interactions and daily school practices as well as the broad institutional and cultural structures in which the 'grade retention ensemble' is embedded. In parallel, Chile has made an interesting case for study. The historical validation of grade retention and other exclusionary practices ingrained in the neoliberal paradigm dominating the country's educational landscape has recently begun to be disputed and made to coexist with more inclusive approaches that have complicated and shaken educational relationships.

Finally, before delineating this research's contributions, I should acknowledge that the overarching questions formulated to guide this research have not been answered thoroughly in this manuscript. They have acted as a platform from which to explore significant aspects of school process relating to grade retention, but I have not even come close to exhausting the lines of enquiry that have emerged. Many

aspects of grade retention's production and productive forces have remained untouched. Perhaps, I was over-ambitious when I started this project. Or perhaps, giving up on definitive answers and thorough findings is a necessary part of this learning journey. Probably a bit of both.

On the other hand, the questions guiding this research were indispensable allies in the difficult task of complicating the entanglements of grade retention (and educational assessment policies in broader terms) with the production of the subject of education, the school, and the educational territory. Along with this, they have led me in the exploration and recognition of 'unremarkable' subjectivating, disciplinary and affective operations that - embedded in schools' daily processes – sustain grade retention in primary education, frame its negative outcomes as described in previous research, and uphold inequality, exclusion, and the legitimation of violence perpetrated on primary students. Finally, within this project, post-structural engagements raising questions about promotion policies have become inseparable from questioning broader definitions of educational deviation and failure, and through them, the undercover nature of social arrangements that made them possible and necessary.

Subjectivation

A vital element of this project has been inquiring about the production of the 'retained student' category. The idea that students' identities are configurated in their exchange with the schooling process is not new, neither is the notion that inequality and marginalisation are entangled in this operation. We have become familiar with

the idea that diverse policies of examination and differentiation (in which grade retention could be located) define children's subjectivities in ways that reproduce injustice within minoritised social groups (typically defined by social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and dis/ability) (Ball, 2013; Bradbury, 2013; Gillborn, 2008; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Harvey & Ringrose, 2013; Moyano, 2020; Youdell 2006a, 2011). Drawing on this literature but also offering new paths of understanding, this research has primarily been concerned with the construction of students' identities *within* the ongoing educational process and according to the possibilities, expectations and needs of such a process. I acknowledge that, on many occasions, socially discriminated subjects are precisely those who are more in conflict with the needs of schools and the primary educational system. However, this project highlights how the school not only reproduces inequality within minoritised groups but also creates novel deviant identities and discrimination in alignment with educational frames of meaning and possibility and the circulation of power that they encompass.

According to official regulations, promotion to the next grade depends on children's performances as learners; grade retention is a consequence of what students do or fail to do. To educators, on the other hand, retention seems contingent on what students are. Progress and failure are definitions of features inherent to individuals and families. In contrast, I have argued that some children *become* retained students in their interaction with educational expectations, demands, needs and frames of meanings. Students become retained – independent of what they do or what they are – if their promotion to the following grade, or even their permanence in the school, in some way hinder the school's 'normal functioning'. Levels of achievement and learning identities seem to effect progression less than students'

adjustment to institutional definitions of recognisable and desirable ‘studenthood’. In this sense, grade retention is not about a student, but it concerns complex affective, disciplinary and material relationships within the educational context. Grade retention can be defined as an ensemble in which *the retained student* is one component among many others. Nevertheless, it is a fundamental, gateway component inextricably bound to meanings and relationships in educational practice and the culture of school evaluation.

In the lower grades of primary school, recognisable studenthood is defined by the binary maturity/immaturity. ‘Maturity’ is synonymous with normality and the assimilation of educational requirements, while ‘immaturity’ conveys inherent unfitness for ‘schooling’. This division operates as a powerful discourse that establishes rules of possibility and inscribes meaning in early primary education.

Although the ‘immaturity discourse’ invokes socially powerful developmental frames of knowledge, educators apply it independently of the criteria, connotations and institutional regulations usually attached to developmentalism. ‘Immaturity’ is the name educators give to any misfit between young students’ characteristics and schools’ expectations and demands. It is used to designate any student disaffection from learning, behavioural or emotional difficulties, special educational needs, parental ‘inadequacy’, or social disadvantage, (among many other situations and perceived characteristics) that stop a child from ‘harmonising’ with the school’s needs. These labels sit less easily when naming young children’s deviance than the word ‘immaturity’. Immaturity is a way to speak about all these things without acknowledging them; it is a ‘gentle’ way to say that there is something inherently wrong with a child unrelated to the schooling process. Its benevolent surface hides

drastic detrimental consequences for those constituted as ‘immature’ and who, under this label, become ‘impossible students’. Their subordination to the educational discourses that sustain studenthood and their viability as ‘subjects of schooling’ is made unstable as is their recognition as intelligible students within their cohort. Under the pseudo-scientific immaturity discourse the responsibility of the school towards these children’s position of failure and the pedagogical actions that they could undertake to support them losses significance. Instead, many of these children are submitted to retention, transforming an apparently temporal delay into a permanent displacement.

As children progress through the primary school, developmental explanations become less acceptable ways to explain the (mis)alignment between students and educational goals. Student intelligibility in the upper grades of primary school is reterritorialized as a matter of children’s moral fabric. Upper primary students configured within the retained spectrum are those to whom educators attribute an attitudinal and moral deficit that locates them in opposition to school’s productive and disciplinary values. Although these values vary depending on the local context, the ‘optimal neoliberal learner’ is a common ideal aspiration across the system. This is a normalised student who respects authority and is obedient, docile, responsible, motivated, self-sufficient, self-regulated and productive. Overall, this is a pupil morally aligned to the school’s goals, needs and systems of meaning.

Unlike retained lower primary students (who educators conceive as victims of their biology or inadequate carers), students in 5th and 6th grades are portrayed as subjects who dramatically and deliberately oppose neoliberal goals of governmentality. Independent of ability and capacity, their dispositions and

aspirations are viewed as not sustaining neoliberal meritocracy and school conformity. This transgression constitutes them as a severe threat to institutional orders and the people submitted to them. They are made agents of their own deviance, who cannot be recognised as valid subjects of education, who corrupt the educational space, and who need to be neutralised by marginalisation and exclusion: they become abject subjects.

The construction of children as impossible students and abject subjects is entangled with the evaluation schools make of their carers and families. Unintelligible students are usually conceived as a by-product of family inadequacy and defective parenting styles. Educators generally describe students from the retained spectrum as coming from ‘highly vulnerable’ or ‘dysfunctional’ families that violate their children’s rights. The structural social constraints affecting many of these families are resignified as personal flaws and cultural deficits. On the other hand, good parenting is mainly defined by the alignment of carers with schools’ needs and values. When the child and the family are simultaneously sanctioned by educators as disjoined from school orders, students are made impossible subjects of educational rights, and dispossession is portrayed as unavoidable and even ‘fair’. Schools abdicate responsibility for their social and formative role.

Fundamentally, the subjectivating process implicated in the grade retention ensemble installs a regime of truth from which recognisability as a ‘subject to schooling’ depends on distinctions between acceptable, impossible and abject identities.

Discipline and normalisation

Grade retention is a powerful disciplinary technology that enables schools to navigate a complex contemporary educational scenario that demands enforcing traditional neoliberal goals in progressive inclusive terms. As a disciplinary device, grade retention is entangled with two fundamental pillars of the primary education assemblage: the evaluative/competitive culture and the enforcement of 'good'/restrictive behaviours. Neoliberal schools' 'normal functioning' relies on these.

First, grade retention performs the very necessary function of submitting students to evaluative logics. These logics determine that, from a very early age, children's individuality must be constantly examined, judged, compared, classified, and normalised. Although ability and learning are generally portrayed as the content of such scrutiny, this study argues that such measurements fundamentally concern students' commitment to school orders and their alignment with neoliberal meritocratic expectations (or pseudo distinctions regarding 'effort' and worth). Beyond the enforcement of accountability and assessment, promotion parameters regulate students' activity more generally. Movements and expressions perceived as disrupting schools' 'normal' functioning are contained by the threat of retention practices. Within these arrangements, the way in which children behave and face learning is strictly prescribed. Experimentation, exploration, creativity, spontaneity, free movement, singularity, and difference are restrained in pursuit of 'appropriate' dispositions and behaviour (which typically means obedience, politeness, internal motivation, responsibility, industry). Students' docility, commitment and uniformity are

not only daily requirements but the final goals of primary education. Definitions of good and wrong and children's worth are only intelligible in those terms.

Primary students are governed by this regime of truth. For a long time, educators' monarchical authority – sustained through the exercise of overt violence – was a key component of this operation. However, recently, coercive hierarchical relationships and direct violence towards children have been challenged and made unacceptable in educational contexts. While these 'traditional pedagogical tools' have been stripped from educators, the educational system continues to require them to enforce the same (or similar) disciplinary objectives than before.

In this context, grade retention has become a powerful governmentality device. Grade retention is today the 'most powerful weapon' used to coerce students into expected attitudes and behaviours. It operates as a punishment and as a threat that confers authority on educators through violent mechanisms that both 'make sense' and remain unrecognisable within the educational milieu. Grade retention is not only a coercive practice in itself but also the definition of a category of student against whom the exercise violence becomes legitimate. Grade retention inaugurates the abnormal/impossible/abject student onto a path where they become rightful objects of aggression and exclusion. All students' aspirations and desires are shaped under the necessity of separating themselves from this risk. Thus, the 'disciplined/normalised' student who sustains 'normal' school functioning is constituted in opposition to dispossessed students from the retained spectrum.

Students' families are also disciplined by the power of grade retention. Educators enforce guardians' alignment with the school's requirements and needs by demanding certain attitudes and behaviours under the threat of retaining their

children. For example, parents are pressured to force their children to adhere to evaluative logics or medication to avoid retention. Furthermore, it is a normalised practice to ‘advise’ carers to enrol their children in a school that will ‘suit them better’ under the threat of imminent retention. Many students are withdrawn from their schools in the middle of the year so they can be enrolled in a different school where promotion is more likely. Other students remain out of school until the following year (and beyond) because carers prefer them to lose the year than get labelled as retained pupils. If parents do not follow these ‘suggestions’, schools still have the legal right to exclude primary students if they are retained twice.

Some schools are more prone to exclude students under these ‘strategies’, while others tend to maintain and incorporate these children. In a highly neoliberal system that prizes performance, competition, and accountability over diversity and care, more inclusive schools – usually public schools enroling disadvantaged children - become devaluated and marginalised for being 'non-selective'.

Within the grade retention ensemble, students’ bodies are not only disciplined inside their schools but also moved across and in and out of the educational system. This generates an unequal distribution of students among schools and an educational structure constructed over exclusion and discrimination towards young children, especially towards those identified as the most vulnerable.

Affective economies

The educational territory and the subjectivities inhabiting it are configured within affective flows. Even my own positionality and capacities as a researcher are

recognised in this study as produced, reshaped and ordered by them. This personal engagement was made a gateway to explore the affective field over which subjectivating and disciplinary processes entangled with the grade retention ensemble are configurated. These processes are considered to be inscribed under intertwined poles of joy/success/belonging and pain/failure/exclusion that guard the 'normal'/normative functioning of the neoliberal primary school and define its members' capacities to feel, do and be.

Subjectivating forces that constitute students from the retained spectrum as impossible students or abject subjects are defined by the feeling of disgust. Retained students are 'acceptable' disgusting objects of feeling and, as such, they occupy a position of condemnation, separation and exclusion. The disciplinary power of grade retention is immersed in this dynamic. There seems to be no greater force binding subjectivation and discipline within the grade retention ensemble than these affective fluxes.

The disciplinary function of grade retention is sustained by the affective intensities attached to the iconic image of a (disgusting) retained student and the meanings, identities and material losses historically attached to it. The retained student is constituted as someone who must feel ashamed of themselves. They must acknowledge their failure to fulfil educational demands and be as disgusted with themselves as the rest of the community are. Shame is a (fragile and unstable) site of recuperation of subjective viability and belonging, as much as a path to an insurmountable position of inferiority within the school order.

As internalised rules of how deviant/unsuccessful students must feel, shame and sadness are powerful corporal disciplinary registers of failure. These emotions

locate all students in a ‘frightened position’ in their relationship to the learning and schooling process. The constitution of all students with the fear of becoming disgusting objects saturated by shame and sadness is a critical engine of the primary education process.

Nevertheless, not all bodily intensities and emotions related to grade retention are necessarily negative. The promoted student - constituted in opposition to those who are retained - is an ‘object of pride’. Within neoliberal logics of competition and individualism, success and recognition are constructed over failure and hierarchical distinctions of worth. Love, joy, satisfaction and gratification are subproducts of the same operations that inscribe retained students’ bodies into the educational environment with forms of pain and discomfort. Furthermore, in a combined form, these affects define the borders of the educational community and bond their members in acts of condemnation towards those who have been left outside. This hostile distinction and violent separation from the ‘disgusting object’ operates in schools and between them; it is a powerful affective device of recognition and circulation of power. What is left are educational fields and educational communities in which joy, success and pride entail fear, disgust, sadness and shame.

These emotions - and other affective encounters beyond those that I have articulated here – are generally overlooked inside the school. Many educators deny or minimise the affective power of grade retention rationales and practices. Contrary to that, I propose here that all students’ – and indeed all school members’ – capacities to act, feel and be are shaped and restricted by these affective dynamics.

The grade retention ensemble as a site of disposession

The examination of grade retention's production and productivity challenges the idea of grade retention as an educational strategy that safeguards students' academic development. Instead, it suggests grade retention as a technology to protect and reinforce educational and school orders and identities by defining those who are not aligned with them as the reasonable and rightful objects of academic, social, affective, symbolic and physical dispossession.

Within the grade retention ensemble…

It is possible to separate a child from their peers and friends

It is possible to create deviant and inferior school identities

It is possible to prioritise disciplinary exchanges over quality pedagogical relationships

It is possible to saturate the educational and learning encounters with fear, sadness, and shame

It is possible to normalise students' homogeneity and academic segregation among schools

It is possible for students and guardians to be threatened and harassed by the school staff

It is possible to endanger positive educational trajectories

It is possible for a student to be physically and psychologically denigrated by their peers

It is possible to coerce parents to medicate their children

It is possible for a student to be spoken to by their teachers in derogatory terms

It is possible to withdraw pedagogical resources and support from a child whose parents the school evaluates negatively

It is possible for a teacher to discipline a student through physical and psychological violence

It is possible to tell students that their school is not for them

It is possible to marginalise inclusive schools

It is possible for a teacher to 'take revenge' on a child

It is possible for a child to be forced to leave their school

It is possible to normalise threats and punishments in educational interactions

It is possible to sustain educational pride, joy, satisfaction and belonging through feelings of disgust and pain

Schools and educators are usually blind to these forms of dispossession and to the convergent subjectivating, disciplinary and affective dynamics that make them possible. Even the literature on the topic hardly acknowledges them. We have normalised these interactions and fields of possibility to the point of making them

acceptable and expected if they occur within the territory demarcated by the grade retention ensemble in primary school.

This state of affairs is only possible because grade retention makes sense in contemporary neoliberal educational values and because it facilitates schools' functioning under those parameters; these are its conditions of existence. Beyond the negative connotation that research usually attributes to grade retention, there is a positive dimension: grade retention makes it possible for primary schools and primary educators to make happen the things they are mandated to make happen.

Grade retention practices and rationales create a fiction that allows us to inhabit a world of inclusive education and opportunities for all while we simultaneously operate with scarce and unevenly distributed resources; with an idea of meritocracy defined by submission to institutional orders and needs; with legitimised distinctions between better and worse students; with homogenising and normalising pedagogies; with the enforcement of fierce discipline relying on coercive tactics; with a testing culture sustained by fear, shame and sadness; with the stability of school orders as the final goal of education; with teachers/adults' hierarchical (and sometimes violent) authority over student/children; with the marginalisation of vulnerable students and communities; with a segregated schooling system; and with the devaluation of creativity, exploration, error and difference. Even if grade retention does not contribute to students' academic progress, it looks pretty effective as a device to navigate neoliberal demands of deviation and failure in a scenario recently 'restricted' by inclusive policies. As long as these logics and goals continue to define primary education, grade retention will continue making sense within it. Even if one

day we get rid of grade retention, other devices will take their place to ensure their fulfilment.

In the meantime, while these educational principles remain unchallenged, some children will be made impossible/abject subjects of education. They will remain legitimately exposed to uncertain conditions of precarity and violation. Institutions and educators will be relieved of their responsibility towards them. At the same time, all children's early educational and social encounters will be defined by the fear of abjection, violence, deprivation, exclusion and the hurtful emotions associated with them. These emotions will also be inseparable from educational experiences of success, satisfaction and joy, and a sense of belonging to the school community. Ultimately, these operations will prevent the school from being a safe and supportive place offering all students opportunities to thrive and flourish.

The grade retention ensemble as a site of becoming

The post-structural positionality we have followed throughout the analysis of the grade retention ensemble shows that the entrenched structures, practices, discourses, meanings, subjectivities, materialities, and feelings constituting this ensemble and striating primary education are neither necessary nor stationary. They are actualised in daily practice and every new educational encounter. This contingency conveys deterritorializing potentiality and possibilities beyond current educational discourse.

We can follow molecular lines to *make grade retention differently*. A first movement to undermining grade retention arrangements as we know them would be

to modify promotion policies. As an example, grade retention could be rearranged so it became an exceptional intervention aiming to enhance students' educational opportunities and well-being with independence of academic progression, or a measure limited to the request of the children and their guardians. New fluxes of affects could be incorporated into the grade retention ensemble in ways that challenge its position as a technology of neoliberal educational governmentality with its associated constraints on bodies' capacities. An alternative or complementary deterritorializing movement would be to ensure educators opportunities to critically reflect on how these practices affect all students' capacities to act, feel and be, as well as the molar forces that they introduce in all educational encounters. Generally, professionals have little information regarding the detrimental effects research has found regarding grade retention practices and are not aware of the affective economies related to it. New sensibilities and political responsibility towards those students who have previously been declared acceptable targets of retention practices (for being developmentally or morally 'defective') might actualise this territory in novel ways allowing alternative educational encounters.

To some extent, these two elements have converged in the most recent cycle of Chilean promotion policies. The new regulations[74] promoted in Chile give schools boards greater autonomy over decisions about progression while conveying the message that retention practices have been found harmful for most children and should be avoided when possible. It follows that, through a critical position and the collective examination of normalised interpretations, educators' discursive agency could engage in a resignification of students learning identities and evaluation

74 Normas Mínimas Nacionales Sobre Evaluación, Calificación Y Promoción (Deroga Los Decretos N° 511 de 1997, N° 112 de 1999 y N° 83 de 2001). Decree 067/2018. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1127255

practices. Dominant meanings and subjectivating categories of success traditionally entrenched in the grade retention ensemble could be problematised and reappropriated inside school communities as less violent and disempowering expressions. Those who were made impossible/abject subjects to schooling might then regain intelligibility as viable students.

These movements, however, are not without risk. Inclusive professionals and communities can be marginalised inside the system (as has happened before). The new policy promoted in Chile does not include further arrangements or resources to facilitate diversified pedagogical encounters or alternative approaches to 'traditional' governmental practices. This might leave critical teachers in positions that are difficult to sustain in their communities. Besides, this could create further rifts between inclusive and non-inclusive schools, strengthening an already fractured and segregated educational system in which inclusiveness frequently conveys marginality.

Furthermore, when consulted regarding the forthcoming changes to promotion regulations, most participants in this research did not foresee any need to significantly vary their schools' promotion practices after the introduction of the new regulation. Most of them claimed that grade retention was already made as an (informal) collective decision in their schools (rather than an automatic definition) and that the criteria by which students were declared subjects to retention (within the established 'norms' of learning gaps, qualifications, attendance, attitude, behaviour, compliancy, development/maturity, family background) would continue under the new legislation. The number and type of students that were retained in their schools, they suggested, would change little. The difficulty of translating a different

policy/knowledge of retention into different practices in schools can be related to the broader context in which education takes place. The current neoliberal educational assemblage might inhibit schools from embracing the new regulation as an opportunity to become otherwise. On the contrary, its introduction might legitimate the educational ensemble already in place, reterritorialize retained students as indisputably deviant, and make local communities responsible for the outcomes.

A further movement scattering the grade retention ensemble molar lines/forces would be the legal subversion of grade retention. If we consider the inconsistency suggested here - between grade retention's 'official' policy objectives and its deployment in schools - expert advice about eliminating grade retention and progressing towards automatic promotion in primary education seems worthy of serious consideration. A legal inability to retain students might disrupt the unitary truths that these practices have forged and create new possibilities for educators, students, parents, policymakers and stakeholders. Both the education system and schools would have to reconsider their approach to discipline and their responsibility for ensuring all students' learning. The whole system by which students are assessed would need to be adjusted. New regulations, practices, training engagements, and material resources, previosulsy diminished, restricted or inhibited might (re)emerge or become necessary and trigger micro-becoming processes.

Although this seems the most direct and powerful move to deterritorialize grade retention dynamics, it might not have the expected results in some educational territories. In Chile, for example, grade retention's abolition might create great resistance from within educational communities. Some inclusive policies and regulations have failed in the past when they have contradicted educational values

and technologies already embedded in Chilean schools' operations. Moreover, the subjectivating dynamics, disciplinary process, and affective economies that grade retention produce are embedded in a broader socio-educational assemblage that makes them intelligible. Molecular endeavours destabilising the grade retention ensemble are likely to be reterritorialized by those persistent (neoliberal) forces that operate independently of specific policies. Abolition or local disruptions of grade retention will not prevent the emergence of other practices that compensate for it and sustain similar exchanges and operations.

An alternative would be to de-normalise and re-politicise grade retention as an expression of a broader symbolic/affective/material order sustaining injustice, exclusion and violence from which we can attempt a line of flight. In relation to neoliberal molar values but also beyond them, we could diverge from an educational regime of truth in which the circulation of power is defined by the constitution of impossible/abject students as reasonable objects of dispossession. Within neoliberalism, these identities seem to have been assigned to those considered immature, rebellious or unproductive – since those are the 'uncooperative' characteristics identified as obstacles to schools' 'acceptable functioning'. However, institutional definitions of recognisable and desirable 'studenthood' might vary under alternative regimes of truth. What we should flee from, beyond neoliberal forms, is any assemblage in which educational orders (whatever they are) are protected by the failure/abjection of some students and their families and the violence and educational precarities that follow.

This would involve two further lines of rupture from existing educational relationships and norms. First, it would mean scattering forms of governmentality in

which students have to adapt to the schooling system through a unilateral exchange. Instead, it expands these encounters towards a reciprocal influence/interdependence between all members of the school that would make imperious hierarchical authority and coercive uniformity absurd. Second, an educational territory in which there is no failure, but different forms of realisation would disturb systems of school segregation. This would be a scenario in which the political, economic and institutional arrangements making schools' social validation conditional on their students' recognition within the rigid limits of acceptable 'studenthood' and normative success would lose legitimacy.

There is potential for 'anti-abjection' nomadic shifts from injurious governmentality and exclusionary views of subjectivity within the primary school. Circulating discourses mobilising disgust as a prominent force within the primary school – and the policies and practices engendered by it – might be contested and disrupted by subjects' critical approaches towards educational 'truths' and their own discursive constitution within them. We could undermine the pillars of 'abjectivating' education with a political commitment to modifying injurious laws, policies and other expressions of monopolised power, as well as creating alternative routes through which meanings and recognisability might be settled outside those institutional channels.

It is possible for school members to find spaces for disruption in everyday practices. 'Pedagogies of becoming' (Youdell, 2010a, 2011) – as fields of expanded and fluid recognition - can defy hegemonic borders of young people's identity intelligibility by constituting them as students and learners in a contingent space uncaged by prior definitions. Although there is a risk that those involved in these

transgressions jeopardise their viability as acceptable members of their communities, collective spaces of subversive reinscription and the engagement with other assemblages problematising normative subjectivities have the potential to limit that threat.

Within the educational research field, researchers can challenge descriptions of policies as extant phenomena independent of the construction of truths/realities that tend to create or reinforce 'problematic student identities.' Instead, research can move beyond those categories, inquire about their production, and challenge their status as immobile truths. Moreover, scholars can engage in an 'anti-abjection' critical position that - assuming policies/practices transcend those for whom they are primarily formulated - recognises that when children's educational identities are undervalued, and their educational paths are made precarious, the whole educational field is affected and constituted through that violation.

By these movements, the grade retention ensemble as a site of dispossession might metamorphose into a site for re-imagining primary education otherwise. Post-structural engagements can open routes of counter-politics in education by subverting sites of dispossession through their resignification as devices of becoming towards new (and unanticipated) pedagogical territories. Far from pursuing final states or conclusive structural transformations, this would imply contingent, partial, unstable and provisional forms of local resistance against authoritarian 'abjectivating' forces, enabling otherwise 'unauthorised' experiences, encounters, knowledge, meaning.

Within this dynamic critical field, a new sphere of possibility opens, in which educational and learning processes seek justice and human flourishing instead of

distinctions of failure and success. From there, we can envision a primary school in which joy, pride and belonging are based on care and respect, and where all students and all members of the school community have their capacities to do, feel and be enhanced. Ultimately, this is a territory in which the fictions sustaining the grade retention ensemble described here - and the processes of dispossession comprised in it – no longer make any sense.

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APPENDICES

Appendix Nº 1.- Characterisation of Primary Schools in Chile and Santiago[75]

Types of School by Administrative Dependence (2016)	In Santiago, 28.4% of primary schools are public, 56.1% are private subsidised schools, and 15.5% are private. This distribution is reflected in students' enrolment figures: 24.4% of them are enrolled in public schools, 59.6% in subsidised schools, and 16.0% in private schools. When national figures are considered, most Chilean primary schools are public (54.8% versus 39.8% subsidised schools and 5.4% private schools). However, given that many of them are small schools located in rural areas, the enrolment is higher in subsidised schools (53.8%) than in public schools (37.8%). Meanwhile, only 8.4% of primary students are enrolled in private schools. Private subsidised schools (both in Santiago and the country) have historically tended to be for-profit organisations. Still, there is a significant presence of non-profit and free-paying subsidised schools in the country. Most of them are religious institutions. The subsidised sector is currently in the process of reform since the introduction of the Inclusion Law in 2015 (Ley de Inclusión Escolar Nº 20.845), that seeks to ban the pursuit of profit, fee-payment and students' entrance selection in schools receiving State funding.
Area (Urban-Rural) (2016)	While in Chile 42.8% of primary schools are considered rural and 57.2% urban, in Santiago 99.6% of the schools are defined in this last category.
Educational Levels (2016)	The majority of the schools that offer primary education in Santiago also have a pre-school level (45.1%) or provide education from pre-school to secondary (40.9%). Only a few schools offer only primary education (6.9%) or have primary and secondary levels without offering pre-school education (7.1%). In contrast, 29.7% of schools offer only primary education when considering the whole country and just 23.9% offer all levels. Like in Santiago, 42.6% of Chilean primary schools also provide pre-school education while a small percentage have primary and secondary levels without offering pre-school grades (3.8%). Regarding educational level by administrative dependence, subsidised schools in Santiago and within the country tend to offer either all levels

75 The information only refers to schools that offer primary education (although most of them also provide education in pre-school or secondary levels).

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>(44.8% and 38.6% respectively) or primary and pre-school grades (39.9% and 33.6% respectively). In Santiago, most public schools that offer primary grades also provide pre-school education but not secondary levels (76%). In Chile, this percentage is lower (52.7%) since a significant number of schools offer only primary education (38%). Conversely, in Santiago, less than 3% of public schools offering primary education fall into that category. Private schools across the country tend to provide education at all levels (66.3% in Santiago and 72.6% in Chile).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Schools' Students Enrolment (2016)</td><td>In Santiago, the average school enrolment of primary students is 362 in public schools, 448 in subsidised schools and 432 in private schools. In the rest of the country, schools tend to be smaller. When all Chilean primary schools are considered, the average number of students enrolled is 164 in public schools, 321 in subsidised schools and 372 in private schools.</td></tr>
<tr><td>National Quality Measurement System Results (2015)</td><td>Education Quality Measurement System SIMCE 2015, Average Results
<table>
<tr><th>SIMCE 2015</th><th>Chile</th><th>Santiago Metropolitan Region*</th></tr>
<tr><td>Reading 2nd grade</td><td>253</td><td>255</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reading 4th grade</td><td>265</td><td>267</td></tr>
<tr><td>Maths 4th grade</td><td>260</td><td>264</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reading 6th grade</td><td>247</td><td>248</td></tr>
<tr><td>Maths 6th grade</td><td>252</td><td>258</td></tr>
</table>
*National administrative division that contains the nation's capital, Santiago. 69.2% of primary schools and 72% of primary students in the area are located in Santiago city.
Elaborated with information from the Chilean Quality Assurance Agency.

In average, there are no major differences between the results obtained in the national standardised test in Santiago Metropolitan Region than in the rest of the country. On the other hand, across the country, significant differences have been consistently identified between schools providing education to populations socioeconomically diverse. Schools with a higher number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students tend to obtain lower results and vice versa (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2016).

The table below reflects the average differences in schools' outcomes when the socioeconomic background of their students is considered (further details of this variable are given below).</td></tr>
</table>

SIMCE 2015 Results by Schools' Socioeconomic Group

SIMCE 2015	Low	Low-Middle	Middle	Upper-Middle	Upper
Reading 2nd grade	233	240	255	269	286
Reading 4th grade	234	245	261	277	300
Maths 4th grade	245	251	266	281	300
Reading 6th grade	227	231	247	265	284
Maths 6th grade	224	232	251	274	303

Elaborated with information from the Chilean Quality Assurance Agency

Due to Chilean schools' socioeconomical segregation depending on administrative dependence, this distribution is translated into significant results' differences between public, subsidised, and private schools. For example, in the 4th grade reading test (2015), public schools obtained an average score of 243, while subsidised schools and private schools scored 255 and 292 points respectively that year (Holz, 2018).

Considering this, individual schools' results in the different subjects evaluated are compared with the outcomes of schools that have been identified as socioeconomically 'equivalent' by the Chilean Quality Assurance Agency (see School Socioeconomic Group below). This has been taken into account when selecting the participant schools.

School Socioeconomic Groups[76] (2015)

Most schools in Santiago are identified as serving students predominantly coming from low-middle (29.9%) and middle (29.9%) socioeconomic groups. Those considered upper-middle and those considered upper are 16% of the total each. The percentage of schools in the low socioeconomic group is slightly over 8%.

The majority of public schools in the city are identified as socioeconomically low-middle (56.6%), while 20.6% are identified in the middle group and 18.3% in the low socioeconomic group. Subsidised schools are concentrated in the middle socioeconomic group (42.8%). Additionally, 25.5% of them are in the upper-middle group and 24.6% in the low-middle group. Private schools are generally identified as serving the upper socioeconomic strata (96.9%).

Except for the private sector, in which the socioeconomic distribution looks similar to Santiago (92.2% schools are considered in the upper

76 This indicator represents the predominant socioeconomic status of the students enrolled in each school. It is used to compare National Quality Measurement System outcomes between 'equivalent' institutions. The variable is constructed by the Chilean Quality Assurance Agency considering students' mother and father years of schooling, household income, and the Vulnerability Index (IVE-SINAE).

	group), in Chile, the percentage of schools serving students from more disadvantaged groups is higher than in the capital. Public schools tend to be concentrated within the low (44.4%) and low-middle (42.4%) groups, while subsidised schools serve a wide range of socioeconomic groups (35.2% middle group, 24.1% low-middle group, 20.2% low group, and 19.5% upper-middle group).
Vulnerability Index (IVE-SINAE)[77] (2017)	In 2017, the average Vulnerability Index Score of primary schools (excluding private schools) was 0.807 in Chile and 0.690 when considering only schools located in Santiago. Considering that 0 represents a school in which there are no vulnerable students and 100 represents a school in which all students are identified as living under conditions of social vulnerability, Chile and Santiago general scores fall under the category of 'high-middle vulnerability'. While in the country primary (non-private) schools are concentrated in the group of high vulnerability (56.4%), in Santiago more than half of them (51.9%) are in the vulnerability group middle-high. In this city, the highly vulnerable schools are 24.7%, and those defined as middle vulnerable are 20.8%. Within the country, 32.7% of them can be identified as middle-highly vulnerable and 9.9% as middle vulnerable. The percentage of public and subsidised schools considered under the category of middle-low or low vulnerability is very small in Santiago (2.6%) and the country (1%). Across the country, the vulnerability index tends to be higher in public than subsidised schools. 71.6% of public schools can be defined as highly vulnerable and 25.7% as middle-highly vulnerable. Meanwhile, in subsidised schools, 35.5% falls under the category of highly vulnerable, 42.3% middle-highly vulnerable and 20.2% middle vulnerable. In Santiago, public schools are concentrated in the categories middle-high (46.9%) and high vulnerability (45.8%) while subsidised schools

77 The Vulnerability Index (IVE-SINAE) is a Measurement of the Condition of Vulnerability of Students provided by the Chilean Ministry of Education through the National System for an Equitable Founding Assignation - Chilean National Board of Scholarships and Student Help (Sistema Nacional de Asignación con Equidad para Becas JUNAEB, https://www.junaeb.cl/). The measurement is used by the Ministry of Education to determine eligibility for school breakfast and lunch programs. The Index indicates the 'social risk condition' associated to the students enrolled at each school, considering socioeconomic and sociodemographic information on students and their families such as household income, parents' years of schooling, facilities at home, and the receipt of financial or social State assistance. IVE-SINAE has values ranging from 0 to 100%. All private schools are assigned a value of 0 (zero) since it is assumed that there are not students under conditions of vulnerability enrolled on them. On the other hand, the maximum value of vulnerability (100%) would correspond to a school where all the students have been identified as under conditions of social risk/vulnerability.

	are more frequently in the categories middle-high (54.4%) and middle vulnerability (27.8%).
Religious Orientation (2016)	In Santiago, over 60% of schools are self-defined as secular institutions. In public schools, this figure overpasses 80%. Besides, 55.0% of subsidised schools and 49.0% of private schools are also secular. The vast majority of religious schools are catholic. When considering the whole country, the percentage of religious schools in public and subsidised schools is considerably higher (49.8% and 55.8% respectively). Again, they are mostly catholic.
Grade Retention (2015)	In 2015, 45,255 primary students were retained in Chile (27% of them were enrolled in a school located in Santiago). In Chile and Santiago city, both, this means that slightly over 3% of primary students were retained that year. In Santiago, 5% of students attending a public school were retained that year, while 3.8% were retained in subsidised schools. In private schools, only 0.7% of students were not promoted to the following year. When all Chilean schools offering primary education are considered, the percentage of retained students in 2015 is similar in public and subsidised schools (3.8% and 3.6% respectively). The low number of retained students in Santiago's private schools is repeated when considered the whole country (0.7%).

Appendix Nº 2.-The Chilean Education System – Extended Version

In Chile, the neoliberal marketisation of public life has led to the establishment of one of the most radical examples of market policies in education (Bellei et al., 2018). For-profit entrepreneurship, privatisation, school competition, and family school choice have become the organisational engines of the educational space. This included the transfer of all public schools' administration from the Ministry of Education to roughly 300 local governments or 'municipalities' with the aim of developing a highly decentralised and self-regulated school market (Bellei et al., 2018; OECD, 2010; Villalobos, 2016). Along with this, a nationwide flat per-student subsidy enacted through a voucher-like mechanism linked to students' enrolment/attendance and providing equal payments to public schools and subsidised private schools. Families were allowed to select the school (private or public) of their choice irrespective of their residence zone (Hsieh & Urquiola, 2006; Mizala & Torche, 2012).

This has led to a schooling system composed of three types of institutions. First, public schools (also called State schools or municipal schools) are funded and administrated by the State through the local/regional authorities. Traditionally, they are free[78] and the least selective[79] schools (OECD, 2010). They primarily serve students from disadvantaged groups (Elacqua, 2012; Mizala & Torche, 2012). Consistent with national (Ikeda & García, 2014) and international (OECD, 2020) evidence linking individual and institutional socioeconomic constraints with grade retention, primary students in Chile attending this type of school are the most likely to be retained (3.8%); this is particularly true in Santiago (5.0%)[80]. These schools have gradually become stigmatised as low-quality institutions that accept students with social and behavioural problems (Bellei et al., 2018). In 2016, less than 25% of primary students in Santiago (and less than 40% nationally) were enrolled in public schools[81].

Subsidised private schools (also called voucher private schools) are privately owned and administered and receive State funding through a voucher system. From their inception, these institutions were allowed to operate as for-profit organisations and to select students under their own admission and expulsion policies. Attempts to limit selection practices during the following 15 years generally failed (Bellei et al., 2018). From 1993, private subsidised schools were also authorised to charge families add-on fees to complement the government voucher[82]. By 2010 the majority of these schools were for-profit and charged tuition (Mizala & Torche, 2012). This triggered a tendency for price differentiation among institutions and the subsequent socioeconomic homogenisation of these schools' communities (Bellei et al., 2018; Bellei et al., 2010). Free private subsidised schools tended to serve more

78 From 1993 a reform was introduced that allowed secondary public schools to charge parental fees. Very few incorporated payments and, when they did, the amounts charged tended to be very small (Mizala & Torche, 2012; Valenzuela, 2008).
79 Although public schools were mandated by law to accept all students who apply unless they were oversubscribed (Mizala & Torche, 2012), entrance selective practices have been reported (especially in highly prestigious secondary public schools) (Bellei, 2013a).
80 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
81 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
82 Ley de Financiamiento Compartido. Law N°1924/1993. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=30614

disadvantaged communities while those charging fees specialise in distinct 'niches of the market' (Mizala & Torche, 2012; Valenzuela, 2008). Those who remained as non-profit organisations tended to be religious, mostly Catholic, institutions (Corvalán et al., 2009). As detailed below, recent regulations have introduced some changes to the subsidised private sector landscape. In terms of promotion, 3.6% of primary students attending these schools in Chile and 3.8% in Santiago are retained every year[83].

Finally, private schools (also called fee-paying private schools, private-paid schools, and private fee-based schools) are owned, administrated and funded privately. These schools charge high tuition fees and serve a small group of high-income families; they are beyond the reach of the majority of the population[84]. Over 90% of students enrolled in these institutions come from the two wealthiest deciles (Mizala & Torche, 2012). These schools are usually also highly selective (Elacqua, 2012). Grade retention in the primary age groups is rare in these institutions. Less than 1% of their students – both in Chile and Santiago – are retained at the end of any school year[85].

The 'terrors of performativity'[86] (Ball, 2003) are also evident in the Chilean schooling system (Falabella, 2021). Schools are measured by inspection and performance management technologies that define their value through processes of comparison (Rose, 1999). Students' accomplishments in the schools' curriculum competencies and contents are measured every year – in defined primary and secondary grades – through a National Quality Measurement System (SIMCE). School rankings have been published since the mid 1990s, and parents are informed of school-level outcomes by letter (Bellei et al., 2018). Despite compelling evidence that test outcomes are associated with socioeconomic factors, both financial incentives and institutional sanctions, are deployed according to SIMCE school results (Bellei et al., 2010; Valenzuela, 2008). Thus, within the performative school market model in which Chilean education is enmeshed, educational actors have been *seduced* by a formula that pairs a "hyper-surveillant state" with the promise of free choice (Falabella, 2021). In this context, national assessments have become a site of idealisation and a framework of intelligibility for the practices of parents, teachers and students, with profound homogenising and normalising effects (Santori, 2018).

This scenario has led to the widespread privatisation of the schooling system with the consequent decline of public education in terms of enrolment and its symbolic and cultural significance (OECD, 2010; Villalobos, 2016). While in 1980 only 15% of all students attended privately administrated schools, by 2006, more than 40% were enrolled in them (Elacqua, 2012). Data from the Ministry of Education[87] shows that, by 2016, over 50% of primary

83 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
84 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
85 See Appendix Nº1 for details.
86 Following Lyotard (1984), Ball (2003) uses the phrase 'terrors of performativity' to denote a neoliberal mode of state regulation embedded in the culture of measurement and accountability as a regime of truth. In it, inspection and performance management technologies inserted in everyday practices and social relationships are used to measure individual and institutional value. In this way, performativity profoundly affects educational practices and subjectivation processes within the school by generating a 'moral system' that redefine its meaning (Ball, 2013).
87 See Appendix Nº1 for details.

students in the country and about 60% of those living in Santiago attended private subsidised schools.

Privatisation and persistent market-oriented strategies combined with acute residential segregation have caused high levels of educational segregation (Bellei et al., 2018; Bellei et al., 2010; OECD, 2010; Valenzuela, 2008). Globally, Chile is considered as having among the least socio-economically diverse schools (Bellei et al., 2018; Bellei et al., 2010). Within Latin America and the Caribbean, Chile is one of the countries with lower levels of educational social integration in primary education (Treviño et al., 2016). This has provoked the charge that, despite significant progress made regarding educational attainment and coverage in the last decades, participation rates and achievements for disadvantaged students are still inadequate (OECD, 2010).

After the reestablishment of democracy (in 1990), and especially over the last fifteen years, the educational landscape has been severely questioned by different groups in civil society, especially educational academics and national social movements (Moyano, 2020; Valenzuela, 2008; Villalobos, 2016). They have highlighted the importance of progress in educational equity, promotion of social and academic diversity in schools, and the integral development of all students. In response, new policies and regulations have been implemented to target these goals (Mozala & Torche, 2010; Valenzuela, 2008).

In 2008, the voucher system was adjusted to provide an extra per-student subsidy for economically disadvantaged students and schools with a high concentration of these 'priority students'[88]. Schools participating in this new system were asked to improve management and educational standards and to subscribe to monitoring and accountability processes. Additionally, they were prohibited from charging tuition to families and applying selective admission practices to students up to 6th grade. The following year a new law was passed to promote universal free access to pre-school education and restrict families' co-payment in primary and secondary schools[89]. The regulation also increased accountability in schools receiving State subsidies and created new institutions focused on promoting and monitoring schools' quality. Along with this, primary schooling was modified from an eight to a six-grade structure.

In 2009, a 'School Integration Programme' (PIE)[90] was introduced to allocate additional resources for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This was mandatory in public schools and voluntary in private subsidised schools. Schools participating in the programme received a special allowance for every child diagnosed as having a Special Educational Needs. This allowance is usually invested in hiring new professionals and specialists. Officially, every class is allowed to have a maximum of five students with temporal SEN (such as specific learning disorders, specific language disorders, attention deficit and

88 Ley de Subvención Preferencial or 'SEP'. Law N°20248/2008. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=269001
89 Ley General de Educación or 'LEGE'. Law N°20370/2009. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1006043
90 Programa de Integración Escolar or 'PIE'. Decree N°170/2009. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1012570

hyperactivity disorders) and two students with permanent SEN (such as autism, severe intellectual deficits, and audio and visual impairments). These limits are often surpassed.

Six years later, a new decree changed the focus from students with diagnoses of SEN towards the promotion of teaching diversification practices for all preschool and primary students[91] (although PIE continues operating in parallel). This new ordinance mandates that schools implement a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to adapt teaching practices and curricular objectives to each student's learning pace, interests, characteristics, styles, and educational needs. This regulation targeted all the schools in the country: public, subsidised and private. The Decree came into force in 2017 in preschool, 1st and 2nd grades (the first year of fieldwork), in 2018 to 3rd and 4th grades (the second year of fieldwork) and reached 5th and 6th grades by 2019.

In 2015, the most relevant reform limiting the relevance of market-oriented dynamics in Chilean education was carried out (Bellei et al., 2018). The so-called 'School Inclusion Law'[92] established the end of for-profit schooling, co-payment, and student selection during the admission processes in subsidised schools[93] and forbade excluding students on the basis of their low achievement or SEN diagnoses. This new law reinforced and expanded State education. The project fieldwork reported in this thesis was undertaken after the enactment of this law but before its full enforcement (which is still ongoing in 2021).

The diverse initiatives designed to improve the education system's quality and equity have begun to compensate for some of the effects of market policies. Nevertheless, still firmly embedded in institutional and social practices, neoliberal forces (subsidiary state, segregation, competition, privatisation, performativity, hyper-surveillance) have continued operating (Bellei et al., 2018; Carrasco et al., 2021; Falabella, 2021; Villalobos, 2016). The incompatibility and incongruence of long-established educational neoliberal pressures and the new demands for inclusion and equity have faced schools with a 'schizoid contradiction' (Harvey and Ringrose, 2016): they have to 'perform' equity and inclusion without addressing their complexities and implications. The participants of the research reported here repeatedly mentioned these tensions.

91 Diversificación de la Enseñanza o Diseño Universal de Aprendizaje ('DUA'). Decree N°83/2015. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1074511

92 Ley de Inclusión Escolar. Law N°20.845/2015. Detailed in https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1078172

93 A new centralised school admission system (Sistema de Admisión Escolar, or NSAS) - with a fairer allocation process - was nationally installed from 2020 to replace the previous unregulated and decentralised admission system based on the intensive use of selective practices (Carrasco et al., 2021).

Appendix Nº 3.- Construction of Database on Primary Schools in Chile and Santiago

Steps that were taken to construct the Database of Primary Schools in Chile and Santiago:

1. Databases Examination and Selection

I examined the databases available in 2017 on the website of the Education Studies Centre of the Chilean Ministry of Education (https://centroestudios.mieduc.cl/; http://datosabiertos.mineduc.cl/). I selected four databases that contained relevant information to the purpose of characterising primary schools in Santiago and Chile.

a) Schools' General Information 2016 (location, administration, educational levels, and others): file's name 20160923_Directorio_Oficial_EE_2016_20160430_PUBL

b) Students' Enrolment by School 2016: file's name 20161011_Resumen_Matricula_EE_Oficial_2016_20160430

c) Students' Attendance and Promotion 2002-2015: file's name 20160222_Resumen_Rendimiento 2015_20160131

d) Measurement of Students and Schools Condition of Vulnerability 2017: file's name 'PRIORIDADES-POR-RBD-CON-IVE-SINAE-2017-BASICA-MEDIA-COMUNA'.

Additionally, I requested the Agencia de Calidad de la Educación ('Chilean Quality Assurance Agency' https://www.agenciaeducacion.cl/) information regarding schools' outcomes in the Education Quality Measurement System SIMCE[94]. I was given access to the 2016 databases with the evaluation results in primary education. The databases included school's scores in the different test taken on 2015, along with information regarding if those results were similar, or significantly better or worse than outcomes from schools defined as 'socioeconomically equivalent' by the Quality Assurance Agency.

2. Variables Selection and Merging Process

I used the Database with general information of schools (20160923_Directorio_Oficial_EE_2016_20160430_PUBL) as the ground to merge all the databases/selected variables. I kept the database original variables described on the next page.

94 This research used databases obtained from the 'Agencia de Calidad de la Educación' (Chile). The author appreciates the access to information provided by the 'Agencia de Calidad de la Educación'. The study results do not compromise this organisation since they are under the full responsibility of the researcher/author of the research project [note requested by the Agencia de Calidad de la Educación].

Variable	Code(s)	
Year	AGNO_M	
School Identification	RBD	NUM_RBD
	DGV_RBD_M	MRUN
	NOM_RBD_M	RUT_SOSTENEDOR
	LET_RBD	P_JURIDICA
School Location	COD_REG_RBD	NOM_DEPROV_RBD
	COD_PRO_RBD	RURAL_RBD
	COD_COM_RBD	DIR_RBD
	NOM_COM_RBD	LATITUD
	COD_DEPROV_RBD	LONGITUD
Administrative Dependence	COD_DEPE	COD_DEPE2
Contact Details	FONO_RBD	CELULAR_RBD
Integration Programme (PIE)	CONVENIO_PIE	
Education Provided	ENS_01	ENS_07
	ENS_02	ENS_08
	ENS_03	ENS_09
	ENS_04	ENS_10
	ENS_05	ENS_11
	ENS_06	ENS_12
Operational State	MATRICULA	ESTADO_ESTAB
Religious Orientation	ORI_RELIGIOSA	ORI_OTRO_GLOSA
School Fee	PAGO_MATRICULA	PAGO_MENSUAL

On the Enrolment Database (20161011_Resumen_Matricula_EE_Oficial_2016_20160430) I selected variables of interest before merging:

Variable	Code(s)	
Year	AGNO_M	
School Identification	RBD	
	DGV_RBD_M	
	NOM_RBD_M	
Enrolment Figures	MAT_ENS_1	MAT_ENS_6
	MAT_ENS_2	MAT_ENS_7
	MAT_ENS_3	MAT_ENS_8
	MAT_ENS_4	MAT_TOTAL
	MAT_ENS_5	MAT_INT_TOTAL

In the case of the Students' Attendance and Outcomes Database (20160222_Resumen_Rendimiento 2015_20160131) I selected schools providing primary education and then I chose variables of interest before the merge (I shortened the names of variables with long names, keeping the root):

Variable	**Code(s)**	
Year	AGNO_M	
School Identification	RBD DGV_RBD_M NOM_RBD_M	
Grade Promotion	APR_MUJ_01 APR_MUJ_02 APR_MUJ_04 APR_MUJ_05 APR_MUJ_06 APR_MUJ_07 APR_MUJ_08 APR_MUJ_TO	APR_HOM_01 APR_HOM_02 APR_HOM_04 APR_HOM_05 APR_HOM_06 APR_HOM_07 APR_HOM_08 APR_HOM_TO
Grade Retention	REP_MUJ_01 REP_MUJ_02 REP_MUJ_04 REP_MUJ_05 REP_MUJ_06 REP_MUJ_07 REP_MUJ_08 REP_MUJ_TO	REP_HOM_01 REP_HOM_02 REP_HOM_04 REP_HOM_05 REP_HOM_06 REP_HOM_07 REP_HOM_08 REP_HOM_TO
School Attendance (Promoted/Reproved)	PROM_ASIS_APR PROM_ASIS_REP_HOM PROM_ASIS_REP_MUJ	PROM_ASIS_REP PROM_ASIS

Regarding the Database containing Vulnerability Measures (PRIORIDADES-POR-RBD-CON-IVE-SINAE-2017-BASICA-MEDIA-COMUNA), I selected the following variables regarding primary schools (I shortened the names of variables with long names, keeping the root):

Variable	Code(s)	
School Identification	RBD DGV_RBD_IVE NOMBRE_ESTABLECIMIENTO_IVE	
Administrative Dependence	DEPENDENCIA_IVE	
Students Priority by Vulnerability	NO_VULNERAB PRI_PRIOR SEC_PRIOR	TER_PRIOR SIN_INFO
Total Enrolment	TOTMATR2016	
School Vulnerability Index	IVE_SINAE_BASICA_2017	

Finally, regarding the SIMCE Databases, I combined the databases with test results in different grades (2nd, 4th and 6th grade) and then merged the general database created with the other data bases and variables.

Tests Considered	Code(s)
Reading 2nd grade	lect2b
Reading 4th grade	lect4b
Maths 4th grade	mate4b
Reading 6th grade	lect6b
Maths 6th grade	mate6b
Information Considered by Test	
School general score in the test	prom_rbd
General score compared with previous year results	dif_rbd
General score compared with other schools with similar socioeconomic characteristics	difgru_rbd
Significance of difference regarding previous year score	sigdif_rbd
Significance of difference regarding 'similar' schools	siggru_rbd
Percentage of students with an 'insufficient' result	palu_eda_ins_rbd
Percentage of students with an 'elementary' result	palu_eda_ele_rbd
Percentage of students with an 'appropriate' result	palu_eda_ade_rbd

Once I had a Final Database - including all the variables of interest extracted from the original Data Bases previously described - I removed all schools that were "in recess", "closed" or "authorised without enrolment" in 2016.

To examine, merge and manage the databases I used the statistical software Stata.

3. Construction of New Variables

I created new variables from the information provided by the Final Data Base that I considered valuable to the analysis of primary schools' characteristics in the context of this research. Again, I used the statistical software Stata in this process.

a) School Percentage of Retained Students. I generated this variable by contrasting the total number of students from 1st to 6th grade that were retained in 2016 in every school with its general enrolment figures within those grades (code PORC_RE6).

b) School Educational Levels. I created categorical variables to condensate information regarding the educational levels each school offers: a) only primary education; b) pre-school and primary education; c) primary and secondary education; d) pre-school, primary and secondary education (code LEVELS)

c) Vulnerability Categories. I transformed vulnerability values adjudicated to each school (numerical scores from 0 to 100%) into categories. In doing this, I followed the distinctions the Chilean Ministry of Education has made regarding socioeconomic groups (Ministerio de Educación, Gobierno de Chile, 2009): "Low vulnerability" (between 0.0% and 5% in vulnerability index); b) "Middle-Low vulnerability" (between 5.01% and 27.50% in vulnerability index); c) "Middle vulnerability" (between 27.51% and 57.50% in vulnerability index); d) "Middle-High vulnerability" (between 57.51% and 82.50% in vulnerability index); e) "High vulnerability" (over 82.50% in vulnerability index) (code IVE_CAT).

Appendix Nº 4.- Semi-structured Interview Schedules[95]

Appendix 4.a - Interview Guide and Indicative Questions
Headteacher

Date:.....

School's Name:…….....

Interviewee's Name: .....

Length of time in the position: ..... Time working in the school:.....:.....

Introduction

I would like to start this interview by thanking you for being involved in this study. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the manner in which primary school promotion and retention regulations are expressed in the daily school processes. The idea of this interview is to know about your experience and opinion regarding this topic in order to help me to understand more about it. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded to do not lose relevant information. Nothing we discussed in this interview will be shared with other people in the school and your identity will not be disclosure to anybody. You will find more details on this in this participation information sheet. I urge you to read it carefully and sign the informed consent if you agree to participate.

I. Presentation

1. To begin with, I would like to know how long you have been principal in this school and how has your experience been so far.
2. I would also like you to tell me a little more about this educational institution and the profile of the students who attend it.

II. Important Instances of Promotion and Retention

3. Now I would like to ask you some questions related to the topic of promotion and retention of primary students. Could you tell me how the end of the school year is in terms of the promotion and retention of students?
4. Could you help me to identify which events or instances throughout the school year are related to the promotion and retention of students? (For example Teachers' Councils, School Closing Ceremony)

95 These guides show indicative questions that presented variations in the actual application of the interviews. Not all the questions were asked in all cases and the wording of questions variated. Since the research was carried out in Chile, the interview guides were translated into Spanish and all the interviews were conducted in that language.

5. How is the process through which the decision to retain a student is made? Which actors are involved in the process? As the school principal, what is your role in the process?

III. Description of Assessment and School Promotion Regulations

6. How frequent is grade retention in this school (in primary)? What is the main reason why they repeat? Low attendance? Low grades? Other reasons?
7. Should students who repeat a grade leave the school or they can stay in it? What about those who repeat a second time?
8. Can you describe how is the ‘School Policy’ about grade retention in this educational institution?
9. I understand that each school has the power to develop internal evaluation regulations (based on the general regulations) that are established in the 'Assessment and School Promotion Regulations'. How does this work? How much freedom does the school have to decide on the evaluation processes of the students? How much freedom does the school have to decide on the promotion processes of the students?
10. What do you think about the current legal dispositions on primary school promotion and retention of students? Would you make any change?

IV. Automatic Passing between 1997 and 2003

11. Between 1997 and 2003 there was a change in the primary school promotion policy in Chile. Automatic passing was implemented in first and third grade. How was your experience regarding this modification?
12. In 2003 this new regulation changed to allow the principal to authorise grade retention in this grades in the case of students with significant laggings that could seriously affect the continuity of their learning in the subsequent grade. What do you think about this second modification? How this works in practice?
13. Does this special regulation for the promotion of first and third grade students has any advantage or disadvantages in comparison with to the norm applied in the rest of the primary school grades?

V. Teachers and Grade Retention

14. Do you consider grade retention as a relevant pedagogical tool for teachers?
15. How would you describe the relationship between grade retention and day-to-day assessment processes in the school (partial, semester, yearly)?
16. Do you believe grade retention has any implication to the relationship between students and teachers?

VI. Students and Grade Retention

17. What is the importance that students give to grade retention?
18. What role do you think grade retention plays in the life of an average primary student?

VII. Parents/Guardians and Grade Retention

19. What is the parent's attitude toward grade retention?

VIII. Usefulness

20. Do you think grade retention has a relevant role in primary school? (Which? / Why not?)
21. How effective do you think is the practice of grade retention to help students with a severe school backwardness? Do you think it has an impact on the educational or professional opportunities in students' future lives?

IX. Current Scenario and Future Perspectives

22. The tendency in the last years in Chile has been a decrease in grade retention. Have you witnessed that process? To what could be attributed this change?
23. Some people think that grade retention is a good strategy in some cases. Others disagree and think that it should be abolished, what do you think about it?
24. What do you think would happen in this school without grade retention? Would there be any change?
25. Do you think the Chilean educational system would be prepared to abolish grade retention in primary school?

X. Demands towards Chilean Schools

26. Currently, Chilean schools must meet two requirements. On the one hand, they must promote integration and diversity in their classrooms. On the other hand, they must respond to the pressure for obtain good results. How can both demands be responded simultaneously?

XI. Closing the interview

27. I have no further questions. Do you have any other comments or insights that might help this research?
28. Do you have any further question or comment?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix 4.b - Interview Guide and Indicative Questions
Senior School Leader (Head of the Technical Unit, General Coordinator, or other)

Date:.....

School's Name:.....

Interviewee's Name: .....

Interviewee's Position: .....

Length of time in the position:..... Time working in the school: .....

Introduction

I would like to start this interview by thanking you for being involved in this study. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the manner in which primary school promotion and retention regulations are expressed in the daily school processes. The idea of this interview is to know about your experience and opinion regarding this topic in order to help me to understand more about it. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded to do not lose relevant information. Nothing we discussed in this interview will be shared with other people in the school and your identity will not be disclosure to anybody. You will find more details on this in this participation information sheet. I urge you to read it carefully and sign the informed consent if you agree to participate.

I. Presentation

1. To begin with, I would like you to introduce yourself saying your name, your position in this school, and how long you have worked here.

II. School Regulations and Procedures regarding Grade Retention

2. Can you describe how is the 'School Policy' about grade retention in this educational institution?
3. Should students who repeat a grade leave the school or they can stay in it? What about those who repeat a second time?
4. I understand that each school has the power to develop internal evaluation regulations (based on the general regulations) that are established in the 'Assessment and School Promotion Regulations'. How does this work? How much freedom does the school have to decide on the evaluation processes of students? How much freedom does the school have to decide on the promotion processes of students?
5. Could you help me to identify which events or instances throughout the school year are related to the promotion and retention of students? (For example Teachers' Councils, School Closing Ceremony)

6. How is the process through which the decision to retain a student is made? Which actors are involved in the process? What is your role as (head of the technical unit/coordinator/other senior school leader) in this process?

III. Underachievement and Learning Difficulties

7. How are underachievement and learning difficulties managed in this school?
8. What is the process that precedes grade retention? Could you explain me what happens from the moment that a student at risk of being held is detected to the point when she/he is actually retained at the end of the school year? Are parents involved?
9. Is there any association between special educational needs and grade retention? Do students with special educational needs (or enrolled in the School Integration Programme (PIE)) repeat with the same frequency that students without special educational needs?
10. Are there any difference between students with and without special educational needs in the way that grade retention is managed?

IV. Grade Retention and Daily School Process

11. What do you consider is the function of grade retention in the daily process of teaching and learning?
12. What do you consider is the relation between grade retention and day-to-day assessment processes in the school (partial, semester, yearly)?
13. Do you think that the existence of grade retention has any implication for the relationship between students and teachers?
14. In general, how is the attitude of teachers towards grade retention?

V. Usefulness

15. How effective do you think is the practice of grade retention to help students with a severe school backwardness? Do you think it has an impact on the educational or professional opportunities in students' future lives?
16. Do you think that grade retention has any other function in the school? (For example, to stimulate children to study and get good marks, to have more homogeneous classrooms)

VI. Current Scenario and Future Perspectives

17. What do you think about the current legal dispositions on primary school promotion and retention of students? Would you make any change?
18. Some people think that grade retention is a good strategy in some cases. Others disagree and think that it should be abolished, what do you think about it?
19. What do you think would happen in this school without grade retention? Would there be any change?
20. Do you think the Chilean educational system would be prepared to abolish grade retention in primary school?

VII. Demands towards the Chilean Schools

21. Currently, Chilean schools must meet two requirements. On the one hand, they must promote integration and diversity in their classrooms. On the other hand, they must respond to the pressure to achieve good results. How can both demands be responded simultaneously?

VIII. Closing the Interview

22. I have no further questions. Do you have any other comments or insights that might help this research?
23. Do you have any further question or comment?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix 4.c - Interview Guide and Indicative Questions
Teachers (End of the School Year)

Date:.....

School's Name:.....

Interviewee's Name: .....

Interviewee's Position: .....

Length of time in the position:..... Time working in the school: .....

Introduction

I would like to start this interview by thanking you for being involved in this study. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the manner in which primary school promotion and retention regulations are expressed in the daily school processes. The idea of this interview is to know about your experience and opinion regarding this topic in order to help me to understand more about it. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded to do not lose relevant information. Nothing we discussed in this interview will be shared with other people in the school and your identity will not be disclosure. You will find more details on this in this participation information sheet. I urge you to read it carefully and sign the informed consent if you agree to participate.

I. Presentation

1. To begin with, I would like you to introduce yourself saying your name, your position in this school, and how long have you worked here.

II. Overview

2. Do you believe that grade retention plays an important role in the school? (what role and why its high/low relevance)
3. Is grade retention present all year round in the school or only at the end of the year? (for teachers/for students)
4. What are the challenges related to grade retention faced by teachers at this specific time of the school year?

III. Before and After being Held Back

5. What is the process that precedes grade retention? Could you explain me what happens from the moment that a student at risk of being held is detected to the point when she/he is actually retained at the end of the school year?
6. What is your experience with children who repeat? What happens to them afterwards?
7. Do you think the school have enough resources to deal with students that have been held back?

IV. Students' Attitudes toward Grade Retention

8. (ONLY 1st GRADE TEACHERS) Do students from this grade know what grade retention means and what are the reasons why students repeat?
9. How is the students' attitude toward grade retention?
10. What role do you think grade retention plays in the life of an average primary student?
11. How do students react when they are told that they are at risk of not being promoted? How do they react when they are actually retained?
12. How do classmates react when they know that a student in their class will repeat?

V. Parents' Attitudes toward Grade Retention

13. In general, what is the parent's attitude toward grade retention?
14. What happens when parents are notified that their child is at risk of repeating? And then when they are notified that the student will actually repeat?

VI. Characteristics of Students who have been Retained

15. Are there any common characteristics among children who repeat?
16. Is there any association between special educational needs and grade retention? Do students with special educational needs (or enrolled in the School Integration Programme (PIE)) repeat with the same frequency that students without special educational needs?

VII. Special Promotion Regulation

(THIS SECTION IS ONLY FOR 1st GRADE CLASSROOM TEACHERS)

17. Regarding grade promotion, the transition between 1st and 2nd (and 3rd to 4th) grade is a special case since promotion is automatic, unless the school principal and the classroom teacher consider that there is a significant lag in reading, writing and/or mathematics that can seriously affect the continuity of their learning in the higher course. What do you think about this special regulation for the promotion of first and third grade students?
18. Does it have any advantage or disadvantages with respect to the norm applied in the rest of the primary school grades?

VIII. Daily Processes

19. Does grade retention have any implication in the daily process of teaching and learning?
20. How is grade retention related to day-to-day assessment processes in the school (partial, semester, yearly)? Do you think grade retention influences the way in which students face school assessment?
21. Does the existence of grade retention have any implication for the relationship between students and teachers?

IX. Current Scenario and Future Perspectives

22. Have you noticed any change in the “issue” of grade retention since you started your professional career until now?
23. The tendency in the last years in Chile has been a decrease in grade retention. Have you witnessed that process? To what could be attributed this change?
24. There are people who think that grade retention is a good strategy in some cases. Others disagree and think that it should be abolished, what do you think about it?
25. What do you think would happen in this school without grade retention? Would there be any change?
26. Do you think the Chilean educational system would be prepared to abolish grade retention in primary school?

X. Demands towards the Chilean Schools

27. Currently, Chilean schools must meet two requirements. On the one hand, they must promote integration and diversity in their classrooms. On the other hand, they must respond to the pressure for obtain good results. How can both demands be responded simultaneously?

XI. Closing the interview

28. I have no further questions. Do you have any other comments or insights that might help this research?
29. Do you have any further question or comment?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix 4.d - Interview Guide and Indicative Questions
Teachers (Beginning of the School Year)

Date:.....

School's Name:.....

Interviewee's Name:. .....

Interviewee's Position: .....

Length of time in the position:..... Time working in the school.....

Introduction

I would like to start this interview by thanking you for being involved in this study. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the manner in which primary school promotion and retention regulations are expressed in the daily school processes. The idea of this interview is to know about your experience and opinion regarding this topic in order to help me to understand more about it. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded to do not lose relevant information. Nothing we discussed in this interview will be shared with other people in the school and your identity will not be disclosure to anybody. You will find more details on this in this participation information sheet. I urge you to read it carefully and sign the informed consent if you agree to participate.

I. Presentation

1. To begin with, I would like you to introduce yourself saying your name, your position in this school, and how long you have worked here.

II. Grade Retention at the Beginning of the School Year

2. Is there any challenge related to grade retention faced by teachers at this specific time of the school year?
3. Could you tell me a little bit about what the process of going back to school is like for the students who were retained last year?
4. In your experience, how students receive new classmates who were held back? How is the integration process?
5. What measures are taken with students who were held back last year? Are they followed up or given special support the following year? Are the parents involved?
6. Is there any special challenges of teaching children who have been held back? (If there is, does the school have the appropriate resources to meet this challenge?)

III. Characteristics of Repeaters

7. Are there any common characteristics among children who repeat?
8. Is there any association between special educational needs and grade retention? Do students with special educational needs (or enrolled in the School Integration Programme (PIE)) repeat with the same frequency that students without special educational needs?

IV. Students' and Parents' Attitudes

9. Do students from this grade know what grade retention means and what are the reasons why students repeat?
10. What role do you think plays grade retention in the life of an average primary student?
11. What is the parent's attitude toward grade retention?

V. Grade Retention and Daily School Process

12. Do you believe that grade retention have an important role in daily school processes? (If not, why? / If yes, which?)
13. Do you think grade retention has any implication on the daily process of teaching and learning?
14. How is grade retention related to day-to-day assessment processes in the school (partial, semester, yearly)? Do you think grade retention influences the way in which students face school assessment?
15. Does the existence of grade retention have any implication for the relationship between students and teachers?

VI. Function of Grade Retention in Primary School

16. What is your opinion about the usefulness of grade retention as a strategy to address underachievement?
17. What is your opinion about the usefulness of grade retention as a strategy to avoid school non-attendance?
18. Do you think grade retention have any other function in the school? (stimulates children to study, more homogeneous classrooms)

VII. Special Promotion Regulation

(THIS SECTION IS ONLY FOR 2nd GRADE CLASSROOM TEACHERS)

19. Regarding grade promotion, the transition between 1st and 2nd (and 3rd to 4th) grade is a special case since promotion is automatic, unless the school principal and the classroom teacher consider that there is a significant lag in reading, writing and/or mathematics that can seriously affect the continuity of learning in the higher course. What do you think about this special regulation for the promotion of first and third grade students?
20. Does it have any advantage or disadvantages in comparison with to the norm applied in the rest of the primary school grades?

VIII. Current Scenario and Future Perspectives

21. Have you noticed any change in the “issue” of grade retention since you started your professional career until now?
22. The tendency in the last years in Chile has been a decrease in grade retention. Have you witnessed that process? To what could be attributed this change?
23. There are people who think that grade retention is a good strategy in some cases. Others disagree and think that it should be abolished, what do you think about it?
24. What do you think would happen in this school without grade retention? Would there be any change?
25. Do you think the Chilean educational system would be prepared to abolish grade retention in primary school?

IX. Closing the interview

26. I have no further questions. Do you have any other comments or insights that might help this research?
27. Do you have any further question or comment?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix 4.e – Focus Group (or Interview) Guide and Indicative Questions
Parents/Guardians

Date:.....

School's Name:.....

Introduction

I would like to start this focus group by thanking you all for being involved in this study. The aim of it is to develop an understanding of the manner in which primary school promotion and retention regulations are expressed in the daily school processes. The idea of this meeting is having a conversation of your experiences and opinions on this subject, without the need to reach consensus. Each opinion is relevant, no matter how different is from the rest of the participants.

The conversation will be audio-recorded to do not lose relevant information. Nothing we discussed in this meeting will be shared with other people in the school and your identity will not be disclosure. I ask you do not share what we talk here outside this group.

You will find more details on this in this participation information sheet. I urge you to read it carefully and sign the informed consent if you agree to participate in this focus group.

I. Presentation

1. To begin, I would like everyone to introduce themselves. Please say your name, the grade of your child/children and how long have she or he been in this school.

II. Experience

2. What was your experience as a child with grade retention? Do you think things have changed since then or not?
3. What is your experience as a parent/guardian regarding grade retention?

III. Perceptions about Students

4. What is your child's attitude toward grade retention?
5. Do students think about grade retention during the school year or it is something that just appeared at the end of the year? (Differentiate answers of students with low and high achievements)

IV. The School

6. How is the 'School Policy' about grade retention?
7. How are underachievement and learning difficulties managed in this school?
8. What do you think is the main role of grade retention in this school?

V. Usefulness

9. What is your opinion about the usefulness of grade retention?
10. Do you think grade retention is a relevant pedagogical tool for teachers?
11. How effective do you think is grade retention to stimulate primary students to study and get good marks?

VI. Hypothetical Scenarios

12. In a Hypothetical Scenario. What would happen if you found out tomorrow that your child will be held back? What would your reaction be? How do you think the reaction of the other members of your family would be?
13. In a Hypothetical Scenario. If this year your child had low grades and you had the power to decide if she/he is retained or promoted to the next grade, what decision do you think you would make?

VII. Cessation of Grade Retention

14. Some people think that grade retention is a good strategy in some cases. Others disagree and think that it should be abolished, what do you think about it?
15. What do you think would happen in this school without grade retention? Would there be any significant change?

VIII. Closing

16. I have no further questions, is there anything somebody would like to add to the discussion or have any questions or comments?

(THANK PARTICIPANTS, COLLECT THE INFORMED CONSENTS, AND FINISH THE MEETING)

Appendix 4.f – Interview Guide and Indicative Questions
SEN/Integration Staff

Date:.....

School's Name:.....

Interviewee's Name: .....

Interviewee's Position:. .....

Length of time in the position:..... Time working in the school:. .....

Introduction

I would like to start this interview by thanking you for being involved in this study. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the manner in which primary school promotion and retention regulations are expressed in the daily school processes. The idea of this interview is to know about your experience and opinion regarding this topic in order to help me to understand more about it. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded to do not lose relevant information. Nothing we discussed in this interview will be shared with other people in the school and your identity will not be disclosure to anybody. You will find more details on this in this participation information sheet. I urge you to read it carefully and sign the informed consent if you agree to participate.

I. Presentation

1. To begin with, I would like you to introduce yourself saying your name, your position in this school, how long have you worked here and which are the functions associated with your position.

II. Definition of Success and Failure

2. How would you define school achievement and school failure in primary education?

III. Relevance of Grade Retention in the Daily Process of the School

3. Do you believe grade retention plays an important role in daily school processes? (If not, why? / If yes, which?)
4. Do you think grade retention has implications in the way the teaching-learning process is handled? (students, teachers)
5. How is the relation between grade retention and day-to-day assessment processes in the school (partial, semester, yearly)? Do you think grade retention influences the way in which students face school assessment?
6. Do you think grade retention has any influence on the relationship between students and teachers?

IV. General Procedures related with Grade Retention

7. In general, what is the process that precedes grade retention? Could you explain me what happens from the moment that a student at risk of being held is detected to the point when she/he is actually retained at the end of the school year?
8. How is the process through which the decision to retain a student is made? Which actors are involved in the process? What is your role as a (*special education teacher)* in the process?
9. Are there enough resources (material, staff) in the school to manage students at risk of being retained?
10. Once a student has been held back, what measures are taken with them? Are they followed up or given any special support the following year? Are the parents involved? Are there resources and staff available to support students who has been retained?

V. Usefulness

11. In your experience, how effective is the practice of grade retention to help students with an important schooling delayed? How are the school trajectories of the children who repeat in comparison to those who have been at risk of repeating but who were finally promoted?
12. Is the effect of school retention on children without special educational needs the same as for those who have special educational needs?

VI. Grade Retention and SEN Students

13. Is there any association between special educational needs and grade retention? Do students with special educational needs (or enrolled in the School Integration Programme (PIE)) repeat with the same frequency that students without special educational needs?

14. Are there any difference between students with and without special educational needs in the way that grade retention is managed?
    - Management of students at risk of being retained
    - Management of students retained
15. How is the school policy regarding the retention of students with special educational needs (Assessment and School Promotion Regulations)? Is it the same as the other students or are there differences? Do you agree with this policy? Would you make any changes?

VII. Personal Experience

16. Have you had the experience of working through a school year with a student and seeing her/him repeats at the end of the year? If yes, how was this experience for the child? How was this process for you?

VIII. Relevance of Grade Retention for Students

17. What role do you think grade retention plays in the life of an average primary student?
18. What role do you think grade retention plays in the life of a student with special educational needs? Is it something that is constantly present or not?
19. How do students react when they are told that they are at risk of not being promoted? How do they react when they are actually retained?

IX. School Promotion National Regulations

20. What do you think about the current legal dispositions on primary students' promotion and retention in Chile? Would you make any change?
21. In 1997 there was a change in the school promotion policy in Chile. Automatic passing was implemented in first and third grade. Six year later, in 2003, this new regulation changed to allow the school principal to authorise grade retention in this grades in cases of students with significant laggings that can seriously affect the continuity of their learnings in the next grade. How was your experience regarding these modifications? What do you think about them?
22. I understand that to authorize the retention of first and third grade students with special educational needs, the principal must present (among other evidences) a report from the special education teacher. How does this work in practice?

X. Current Scenario and Future Perspectives

23. Some people think that grade retention is a good strategy in some cases. Others disagree and think that it should be abolished, what do you think about this debate? What do you think would happen in this school without grade retention? Would there be any change? Would there be any change related with the management or understanding of the special educational needs?
24. Do you think the Chilean educational system would be prepared to abolish grade retention in primary school?

XI. Demands towards the Chilean Schools

25. Currently, Chilean schools must meet two requirements. On the one hand, they must promote integration and diversity in their classrooms. On the other hand, they must respond to the pressure to obtain good results. How can both demands be responded simultaneously?

XII. Closing the interview

26. I have no further questions. Do you have any other comments or insights that might help this research?
27. Do you have any further question or comment?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix 4.g – Interview Guide and Indicative Questions
Psychologist/Counsellor

Date:.....

School's Name:.....

Interviewee's Name: .....

Interviewee's Position:. .....

Length of time in the position:..... Time working in the school:. .....

Introduction

I would like to start this interview by thanking you for being involved in this study. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the manner in which primary school promotion and retention regulations are expressed in the daily school processes. The idea of this interview is to know about your experience and opinion regarding this topic in order to help me to understand more about it. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded to do not lose relevant information. Nothing we discussed in this interview will be shared with other people in the school and your identity will not be disclosure to anybody. You will find more details on this in this participation information sheet. I urge you to read it carefully and sign the informed consent if you agree to participate.

I. Presentation

1. To begin with, I would like you to introduce yourself saying your name, your position in this school, how long have you worked here and which are the functions associated with your position.

II. Functions related to Grade Retention

2. Do you have to assume functions related to students learning difficulties or/and special educational needs? If yes, how your experience has been?
3. Do you have to assume functions directly related to the issue of grade retention? If yes, how your experience has been?
4. Do students who are at risk of being held back have any psychological support or counselling?
5. Do students who have been retained have any psychological support or counselling?

III. The School

6. Could you describe how is the 'School Policy' about grade retention in this educational institution?
7. How do you think this educational community defines success and failure in primary school? Is there a shared vision or are there important differences in how the different members of the school define these concepts?

8. Which place is given to failure and error in this primary school?

IV. Role of Grade Retention

9. What do you think is the main role of grade retention in primary education?
10. Do you think grade retention is important to the functioning of this school? Do you think this may be different in others schools (with other characteristics)?

V. Grade Retention and Daily School Process

11. Do you think grade retention has any implication on the daily process of teaching and learning?
12. Do you think grade retention is a relevant pedagogical tool for teachers?
13. How would you describe the relationship between grade retention and day-to-day assessment processes in the school (partial, semester, yearly)?
14. Do you think grade retention has any influence on the relationship between students and teachers?
15. How would you describe the attitude of teachers in this school towards grade retention?

VI. Outcomes of Grade Retention

16. In your experience, what is the academic and psychological effect of grade retention to primary students? If there are negative effect, how teachers handle it?
17. Do you know how students who have repeated are received by their classmates in their new class? How is the integration process?
18. Do you think the school have enough resources to deal with students who have been retained?
19. Who do you think is the main beneficiary and the main loser when a student is held back?

VII. Students and Grade Retention

20. What role do you think grade retention has in the life of an average primary student?
21. What are the feelings of primary students toward grade retention?
22. How do students react when they are told that they are at risk of not being promoted? How do they react when they are actually retained?
23. Are there any common characteristics among children who repeat?

VIII. Parents/Guardians and Grade Retention

24. In general, what is the parent's attitude toward grade retention?

IX. Current Scenario and Future Perspectives

17. There are different opinions about grade retention. Some people think that grade retention is a good strategy in some cases. Others disagree and think that it should be abolished, what do you think about it?

25. What do you think would happen in this school without grade retention? Would there be any change?
26. Do you think the Chilean educational system would be prepared to abolish grade retention in primary school?

X. Demands towards the Chilean Schools

27. Currently, Chilean schools must meet two requirements. On the one hand, they must promote integration and diversity in their classrooms. On the other hand, they must respond to the pressure to obtain good results. How can both demands be responded simultaneously?

XI. Closing the interview

28. I have no further questions. Do you have any other comments or insights that might help this research?
29. Do you have any further question or comment?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix 4.h – Indicative Topics to Address
Follow-up Interview with School Leaders

Date:.....

School's Name:.....

Interviewee's Name: .....

PRE-2020 (Before Decree 067 Effective Date)

- School Preparation to Address the Modifications on Promotion Regulations
- Predictions
- School Community Interpretation of the Decree

2020 CURRENT CONTEXT (Decree Effective Date)

- Decree Implementation
- Impact of COVID-19 on Decree Implementation
- Comments on the Public Debate about Grade Retention vs Automatic Promotion within the COVID-19 Current Educational Context

POST-2020 (Future Expectations)

- School Board Criteria to Base Retention/Promotion Decisions
- Future Repercussions of the Decree on the way in which Different Members of the School Community (teachers, students, carers) will face Evaluation/Promotion Processes
- Future Repercussions of the Decree on the Number of Retained Students
- Future Repercussions of the Decree on the Characteristics of Retained Students
- Personal Opinion on Advantages/Disadvantages of the New Promotion Regulation

Appendix Nº 5 – Participation Information Sheets and Consent Forms[96]

Appendix 5.a – Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form Interviews



Interview Participant Information Sheet

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

The purpose of this document is give you information about the research that is currently undertaken at the school and help you to decide if participate or not on it. If you have any questions or concerns about this information, do not hesitate to ask the researcher. If you decide to take part on the research, you will be asked to sign the consent form accompanying this sheet as a record of your agreement to participate.

Description of the research: The aim of this project is to develop an understanding of the manner in which school promotion and retention regulations in Chile are expressed in the daily school processes. To achieve this objective, this study places the school community and its members at the centre of the research. In this context - due to your position and the relevance of it in the school promotion and retention process - you along with other members of the school community have been selected to participate in this studio.

Activities involved: You are invited to participate in an **interview** about your experience and appreciations regarding how school promotion and retention policies are expressed in the daily school processes. This activity will last approximately 45 minutes. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded in order to do not lose relevant information.

Participants' rights: Participation in this research is entirely **voluntary**. You have the right to refuse to participate, to choose not to answer the questions or to withdraw from this investigation at the time you deem it appropriate, without explanation and without consequences to you. In addition, if you would like to withdraw from the research after conducting the interview, you can do it during the four weeks following the activity sending an

[96] Since the fieldwork was carried out in Chile, all Information Sheets and Consent Forms that were given to participants were translated to Spanish.

email to the researcher with this request. In that case, your interview (recording) will be deleted and the information obtained will not be used.

Confidentiality and disclosure of information: All data that is obtain in this study will remain confidential. No one, apart from the researcher and the project supervisors, will have access to the data. In addition, confidentiality will be maintained in the release of the findings for the participants. All information will be used in a way that neither you nor the school can be identified.

Risks: There are no reasonable foreseeable risks to you of participating in this research.

Benefits: You will not get any direct benefit from participating in this research. However, the information that will be obtained will be useful to know more about the problem under study.

Data storage: The electronic data will be stored using the "Research Data Store (RDS)" and "Research Data Archive (RDA)" services of the University of Birmingham. These technological resources will provide support and protection to the research data. After ten years, all the data collected in this project will be deleted.

The Researcher: The research is conducted by Alejandra Meyer, as part of the doctoral thesis she is undertaken at the School of Education of the University of Birmingham. The project is supervised by Professor Deborah Youdell (email: [redacted] and Professor Ian McGimpsey (email: [redacted]), faculty members at the School of Education.

Questions: Should you be interested in receiving the results of the study or you have any questions do not hesitate to contact the investigator in charge Alejandra Meyer at the email [redacted]

If you agree to participate, please fill-in the consent form accompanying this sheet. Thank you for your consideration.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Participant Consent Form

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

I have been explained the purpose of this research, the activities involved in it and the rights of those who accept participating in the study.

I confirm that:

- I have read the information in the participant information sheet, or it has been read to me.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am under no obligation to consent.
- I know that I have a right to withdraw at any stage of the interview.
- I also understand that my identity will be protected and there will be no breach of confidentiality.

Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant .....

Date (day/month/year) .....

Signature .....

Thank you for your participation.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

The purpose of this document is give you information about the research that is currently undertaken at the school and help you to decide if participate or not on it. If you have any questions or concerns about this information, do not hesitate to ask the researcher. If you decide to take part on the research, you will be asked to sign the consent form accompanying this sheet as a record of your agreement to participate.

Description of the research: The aim of this project is to develop an understanding of the manner in which school promotion and retention regulations in Chile are expressed in the daily school processes. To achieve this objective, this study places the school community and its members at the centre of the research. In this context, you along with other members of the school community have been selected to participate in this project.

Activities involved: You are invited to participate in a **focus group** to share your experience and appreciations about school promotion and retention in primary school. This activity will last approximately 60 minutes. This focus group will be audio-recorded in order to do not lose relevant information.

Participants' rights: Participation in this research is entirely **voluntary**. You have the right to refuse to participate, to choose not to answer the questions or to withdraw from this activity at the time you deem it appropriate, without explanation and without consequences to you. In addition, if you would like to withdraw from the research after conducting the focus group, you can do it during the four weeks following the activity sending an email to the researcher with this request. In that case, your participation will be deleted from the record and the information provided by you will not be used.

Confidentiality and disclosure of information: All data that is obtain in this study will remain confidential. No one, apart from the researcher and the project supervisors, will have access to it. In addition, confidentiality will be maintained in the release of the findings for the participants. All information will be used in a way that neither you nor the school can be identified.

Risks: There are no reasonable foreseeable risks to you of participating in this research.

Benefits: You will not get any direct benefit from participating in this research. However, the information that will be obtained will be useful to know more about the problem under study.

Data storage: The electronic data will be stored using the "Research Data Store (RDS)" and "Research Data Archive (RDA)" services of the University of Birmingham. These technological resources will provide support and protection to the research data. After ten years, all the data collected in this project will be deleted.

The Researcher: The research is conducted by Alejandra Meyer, as part of the doctoral thesis she is undertaken at the School of Education of the University of Birmingham. The project is supervised by Professor Deborah Youdell (email: and Professor Ian McGimpsey (email: faculty members at the School of Education.

Questions: Should you be interested in receiving the results of the study or you have any questions do not hesitate to contact the investigator in charge Alejandra Meyer at the email

If you agree to participate, please fill-in the consent form accompanying this sheet. Thank you for your consideration.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Participant Consent Form

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

I have been explained the purpose of this research, the activities involved in it and the rights of those who accept participating in the study.

I confirm that:

- I have read the information in the participant information sheet, or it has been read to me.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am under no obligation to consent.
- I know that I have a right to withdraw at any stage of this focus group.
- I also understand that my identity will be protected and there will be no breach of confidentiality.

Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant…..

Date (day/month/year)…..

Signature .....

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 5.c – Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form
Classroom Observations (Teachers)



Participant Information Sheet
Observations

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

The purpose of this document is give you information about the research that is currently undertaken at the school and help you to decide if participate or not on it. If you have any questions or concerns about this information, do not hesitate to ask the researcher. If you decide to take part on the research, you will be asked to sign the consent form accompanying this sheet as a record of your agreement to participate in the activities explained here.

Description of the research: The aim of this project is to develop an understanding of the manner in which school promotion and retention regulations in Chile are expressed in the daily school processes. To achieve this objective, this study places the school community and its members at the centre of the research. In this context, you along with other members of the school community have been selected to participate in this project.

Activities involved: In order to explore the everyday school process, it is consider important to observe what happens during lessons. These **observations** will not be directed at anybody in particular, but rather will be oriented at gaining a broad vision of how regulations pertaining to the promotion of primary students are incorporated into the classroom dynamics. In this context, you are asked to allow the researcher to be present in some of your classes. Her presence in the classroom would should not alter in any way the normal course of the teaching and learning processes.

Participants' rights: Participation in this research is entirely **voluntary**. You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from this investigation at the time you deem it appropriate, without explanation and without consequences for you. In addition, if you would like to withdraw from the research after the observation(s), you can do it during the four weeks following it sending an email to the researcher with this request. In that case, the information obtained during the class(es) will not be used.

Confidentiality and disclosure of information: All data that is obtain in this study will remain confidential. No one, apart from the researcher and the project supervisors, will have access to the data. In addition, confidentiality will be maintained in the release of the findings for the participants. All information will be used in a way that neither the participants nor the school can be identified.

Risks: There are no reasonable foreseeable risks to you of participating in this research.

Benefits: You will not get any direct benefit from participating in this research. However, the information that will be obtained will be useful to know more about the problem under study.

Data storage: The electronic data will be stored using the "Research Data Store (RDS)" and "Research Data Archive (RDA)" services of the University of Birmingham. These technological resources will provide support and protection to the research data. After ten years, all the data collected in this project will be deleted.

The Researcher: The research is conducted by Alejandra Meyer, as part of the doctoral thesis she is undertaken at the School of Education of the University of Birmingham. The project is supervised by Professor Deborah Youdell (email: [redacted] and Professor Ian McGimpsey (email: [redacted], faculty members at the School of Education.

Questions: Should you be interested in receiving the results of the study or you have any questions do not hesitate to contact the investigator in charge Alejandra Meyer at the email [redacted]

If you agree to participate, please fill-in the consent form accompanying this sheet. Thank you for your consideration.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Participant Consent Form

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

I have been explained the purpose of this research, the activities involved in it and the rights of those who accept participating in the study.

I confirm that:

- I have read the information in the participant information sheet, or it has been read to me.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am under no obligation to consent.
- I know that I have a right to withdraw at any stage of the process.
- I also understand that my identity will be protected and there will be no breach of confidentiality.

Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant…..

Date (day/month/year) .....

Signature .....

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 5.d – Parent/Guardian Consent for a Minor to Participate in a Research Project



Participant Information Sheet
Parent/Guardian Consent for a Minor
to Participate in a Research Project

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

Dear Parents/Legal Guardians,

The purpose of this document is to help you to make the decision to allow - or not - your child to participate in the study "Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices". The school has agreed to participate in this study. However, your permission is require for your child to participate on it. If you allow your daughter/son participation you will be asked to sign the consent form accompanying this sheet and to send it back to the school to the classroom teacher.

The Research: This project aim is to develop an understanding of the manner in which school promotion and retention regulations in Chile are expressed in the daily school processes. To achieve this objective, primary students and other important members of the school community have been invited to participate.

Activities Involved: Your children participation involve two activities. You can allow her/him to participate in both, just one or none.

Drawing Activity: In the first activity the participation of your child will consist on **painting a drawing** related to the practices of promotion and repetition in the school. In addition, the researcher will ask some questions about the drawing. The answers will be audio-recorded in order to do not lose relevant information.

Observation Activity: The second activity consist in allowing the researcher to **observe** and take notes during the classes and other normal activities that happen in the school in which your child participate. The researcher will not intervene or alter in any way the normal functioning of the school.

Confidentiality and Disclosure of Information: All data obtain in this study will remain confidential. Only the researcher and the project supervisors will have access to the data. It is possible that some drawings obtained in the first activity accompany the publication of the results of the study. In this case, neither the name of the child who did it nor the name of her/his school will be revealed. As with the drawings, all the information collected during the research will be used in a way that neither the children nor the schools can be identified.

Data Storage: The electronic data will be stored using the "Research Data Store (RDS)" and "Research Data Archive (RDA)" services of the University of Birmingham. These technological resources will provide support and protection to the research data. After ten years, all the data collected in this project will be deleted.

Participants' Rights: Participation of your daughter/son in this research is entirely **voluntary**. You have the right not to accept that your child participate or to withdraw him/her from this investigation at any time without explanation and without consequences for you or your child. In addition, if you decide to withdraw your child from the research after the activity, you can do it during the four weeks following it sending an email to the researcher with this request. In that case, the drawing and the audio-record and/or the observe register of your child will be deleted and the information obtained will not be used. Your consent does not force your child to join the activities. She/he will decide freely whether to participate or not in it.

Benefits and Risks: There are no reasonable foreseeable risks associated with your child's collaboration in this study nor any direct benefits of participating in it. However, the information that will be obtained will be useful to know more about the problem under study.

The Researcher: The research is conducted by Alejandra Meyer, as part of the doctoral thesis she is undertaken at the School of Education of the University of Birmingham. The project is supervised by Professor Deborah Youdell (email: [redacted] and Professor Ian McGimpsey (email: [redacted] faculty members at the School of Education.

Questions: If you have any questions, comments or complaints do not hesitate to contact the investigator in charge Alejandra Meyer at the email [redacted]

If you agree with your child participation in this research, please fill-in the consent form accompanying this sheet and address it to the classroom teacher within 3 days after the date of receipt. Thank you for your consideration.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Parent/Guardian Consent for a Minor to Participate in a Research Project

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

I have been explained the purpose of this research, the activities involved in it and the rights of the participants.

I confirm that:

- I have read and understand the foregoing information about the research "Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices".
- I understand that the participation of my child is completely voluntary and that nor I neither she/he are under any obligation to consent.
- I also understand that the identity of my daughter/son and the school she/he attends will be protected.

Based upon the above, cross the option or options with which you agree ☒ and complete the details below.

☐ **I agree my child to participate in the activity of making a drawing and answer some questions about it**

☐ **I agree with the researcher observing and taking notes in the classroom and other daily school routines in which my child participate**

Name of the Student…….....

Name of Parent/Guardian .....

Parent/Guardian Signature.....

Date (day/month/year) .....

Please fill-in this document and send it back to the school to the classroom teacher within 3 days after the date of receipt. Thank you.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Student Assent Form / Drawing Activity

Researcher's Name: Alejandra Meyer

Researcher's Status: PhD Student / School of Education

HREC Approval Number: ERN_17-0595

E-mail: [redacted]

Who I am and what I am doing in the school?
My name is Alejandra Meyer and I am a student in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham. I am currently doing a research study named "Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices". To carry out this study I need the collaboration of some schools and some primary students. That's why I want to invite you to be part of it!

Before you to decide whether or not to be part of this research I would like to tell you a little more about what it is about, what you would have to do if you decide to participate in it and what would happen if you prefer not to.

What is this research study about?
Research studies help us learn new things. When we are not sure of something, we can make a question and try to find an answer by observing, measuring and asking to other people.

I am doing this research to learn more about school promotion and school retention. That is, the process in which students progress to the next grade or are not promoted and must do the same grade again.

Important things to know….

- You get to decide if you want to take part.
- You can say 'No' or you can say 'Yes'.
- No one will be upset if you say 'No'.

What would happen if you do not join this research or you decide to leave it?
You don't have to be in the study. It's OK if you don't want to do it.
If you decide to be in the in the study, you can change your mind and stop being in the activity at any time. Besides, you do not have to answer any question if you don't want.

What would happen if you join this research?
First, I will ask you to draw a picture related to the subject I am researching. Then, I will ask you some questions about your drawing. I will record your answers so as not to forget them.

Everything you say today is private. That means that I will not repeat it to anyone unless you say something which make me think you or someone else may be at risk. Then I will tell a responsible adult who can help you deal with the situation.

Some of the drawings will be published with the results of the research. If your drawing is chosen to be published other people will be able to see it but nobody will know that you did it because I will not say your name or the name of your school.

Is there any benefit or risk of taking part in this research?
It is important let you know that there is no reward for participating in this project but there are no associated risks either. No bad things will happen to you if you join this research.

Is there any question?
If you have any questions before or during the activity just ask me. I will be happy to answer you!

If you have questions after the activity, you or your parents can contact me at the email

Once you have fully understood what this research is about and what activities will do the students who join it, you can decide whether or not you want to participate.

Ask me any questions you want.

Once you are ready, cross the option you prefer ☒ and then write your name below.



I want to be in this research study ☐



I do not want to be in this research study ☐

Name of Participant .....

Name of Researcher .....

Signature of Researcher .....

Date ……..

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Student Assent Form / Observation Activity

Researcher's Name: Alejandra Meyer

Researcher's Status: PhD Student / School of Education

HREC Approval Number: ERN_17-0595

E-mail: [redacted]

My name is Alejandra Meyer and I am currently doing a research study in your school. The aim of the study is to learn more about the process in which students progress to the next grade or are not promoted and must do the same grade again. The research is named "Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices".

Since I am interested in something that happens in the schools, I need to observe and make questions to the people within the school. That's why I have asked the collaboration of teachers, principals and other members of the school. Today I would like to invite you to be part of this research!

But before you decide if you want to be in it or not, I would like to tell you a little bit more about the study.

Important things to know….

- You get to decide if you want to take part.
- You can say 'No' or you can say 'Yes'.
- No one will be upset if you say 'No'.

What would happen if you join this research?
I will be sitting in some of your classes and other activities around the school and observing what happens. You don't have to do nothing special because I am interested in observing the normal routine of schools and classrooms. If you want to be in this study I will include you in my observations.

What would happen if you do not want to be in this research?
If you decide that you don't want to be in this study, you won't be included in my observations. If you have agreed to be in the study but then you change your mind, just let me know during the observations or until four weeks after them and I won't include you in the research study.

Is there any benefit or risk of taking part in this research?
It is important let you know that there is no reward for participating in this project but there are no associated risks either. No bad things will happen to you if you join this research.

Is there any question?
If you have any questions before or during the activity just ask me. I will be happy to answer you!

If you have comment or questions after the activity, you or your parents can contact me at the email

Once you have fully understood what this research is about and what will happen if you join it, you can decide whether or not you want to participate.

Ask me any questions you want. Once you are ready, cross the option you prefer ☒ and then write your name below.

 **I want to be in this research study** ☐

 **I do not want to be in this research study** ☐

Name of Participant .....

Name of Researcher .....

Signature of Researcher .....

Date ……..

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Generic Participant Information Sheet

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

The purpose of this document is give you information about the research that is currently undertaken at the school and help you to decide if participate or not on it. If you have any questions or concerns about this information, do not hesitate to ask the researcher.

Description of the research: The aim of this project is to develop an understanding of the manner in which school promotion and retention regulations in Chile are expressed in the daily school processes. To achieve this objective, this study places the school community and its members at the centre of the research. In this context you, along with other members of the school community, are invited to participate in this studio.

Activities involved: In order to explore the school processes and dynamics related with grade promotion and retention, the researcher will talk with different members of the school and will observe the daily school dynamics in different educational settings. In the consent form accompanying this sheet you will be able to point at the specific activity or activities in which you are willing to participate in the context of this research.

Participants' rights: Participation in this research is entirely **voluntary**. You have the right to refuse to participate, to stop your participation at any time you deem it appropriate and to withdraw from the research until four weeks after your participation. In the last case, you just need to send an email to the researcher with this request and all the information provided by you will be deleted.

Confidentiality and disclosure of information: All data that is obtain in this study will remain confidential. No one, apart from the researcher and the project supervisors, will have access to the data. In addition, confidentiality will be maintained in the release of the findings for the participants. All information will be used in a way that neither you nor the school can be identified.

Risks: There are no reasonable foreseeable risks to you of participating in this research.

Benefits: You will not get any direct benefit from participating in this research. However, the information that will be obtained will be useful to know more about the problem under study.

Data storage: The electronic data will be stored using the "Research Data Store (RDS)" and "Research Data Archive (RDA)" services of the University of Birmingham. These technological resources will provide support and protection to the research data. After ten years, all the data collected in this project will be deleted.

The Researcher: The research is conducted by Alejandra Meyer, as part of the doctoral thesis she is undertaken at the School of Education of the University of Birmingham. The project is supervised by Professor Deborah Youdell (email:) and Professor Ian McGimpsey (email: , faculty members at the School of Education.

Questions: Should you be interested in receiving the results of the study or you have any questions do not hesitate to contact the investigator in charge Alejandra Meyer at the email

If you agree to participate, please fill-in the consent form accompanying this sheet.

Thank you for your consideration.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Participant Consent Form

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

I have been explained the purpose of this research, the activities involved in it and the rights of those who accept participating in the study.

I confirm that:

- I have read the information in the participant information sheet, or it has been read to me.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am under no obligation to consent.
- I know that I have a right to withdraw from the research.
- I also understand that my identity will be protected and there will be no breach of confidentiality.

Based upon the above, cross the activities in which you agree to take part ☒ and complete the details below.

☐ **Interview or/and Conversation**

☐ **Observation**

☐ **Other** ……

Name of Participant .....

Date (day/month/year)…..

Signature .....

Thank you for your participation.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Follow-Up Interview Participant Information Sheet

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

The purpose of this document is give you information about the research that frame this interview and help you to decide if participate or not on it. If you have any questions or concerns about this information, do not hesitate to ask the researcher. If you decide to take part on the research, you will be asked to sign the consent form accompanying this sheet as a record of your agreement to participate.

Description of the research: The aim of this project is to develop an understanding of the manner in which school promotion and retention regulations in Chile are expressed in the daily school processes. To achieve this objective, this study places the school community and its members at the centre of the research. In this context - due to your position and the relevance of it in the school promotion and retention process - you have been selected to participate in this studio.

Activities involved: You are invited to participate in an **interview** about your experience and appreciations regarding the present and future implications of the modifications to the evaluation and promotion regulations defined by the Decree 067/2018l in the daily school processes and the dynamics inside the educational community.
This activity will last approximately 25 minutes. If it is fine for you, the interview will be audio-recorded in order to do not lose relevant information.

Participants' rights: Participation in this research is entirely **voluntary**. You have the right to refuse to participate, to choose not to answer the questions or to withdraw from this investigation at the time you deem it appropriate, without explanation and without consequences to you. In addition, if you would like to withdraw from the research after conducting the interview, you can do it during the four weeks following the activity sending an email to the researcher with this request. In that case, your interview (recording) will be deleted and the information obtained will not be used.

Confidentiality and disclosure of information: All data that is obtain in this study will remain confidential. No one, apart from the researcher and the project supervisors, will have access to the data. In addition, confidentiality will be maintained in the release of the findings for the participants. All information will be used in a way that neither you nor the school can be identified.

Risks: There are no reasonable foreseeable risks to you of participating in this research.

Benefits: You will not get any direct benefit from participating in this research. However, the information that will be obtained will be useful to know more about the problem under study.

Data storage: The electronic data will be stored using the "Research Data Store (RDS)" and "Research Data Archive (RDA)" services of the University of Birmingham. These technological resources will provide support and protection to the research data. After ten years, all the data collected in this project will be deleted.

The Researcher: The research is conducted by Alejandra Meyer, as part of the doctoral thesis she is undertaken at the School of Education of the University of Birmingham. The project is supervised by Professor Deborah Youdell (email: and Professor Ian McGimpsey (email: , faculty members at the School of Education.

Questions: Should you be interested in receiving the results of the study or you have any questions do not hesitate to contact the investigator in charge Alejandra Meyer at the email

If you agree to participate, please fill-in the consent form accompanying this sheet. Thank you for your consideration.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Participant Consent Form

Research Title:	Promotion and Retention in Chilean Primary Schools: Policies and Practices
Researcher's Name:	Alejandra Meyer
Researcher's Status:	PhD Student / School of Education
HREC Approval Number:	ERN_17-0595
E-mail:	

I have been explained the purpose of this research, the activities involved in it and the rights of those who accept participating in the study.

I confirm that:

- I have read the information in the participant information sheet, or it has been read to me.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am under no obligation to consent.
- I know that I have a right to withdraw at any stage of the interview.
- I also understand that my identity will be protected and there will be no breach of confidentiality.

Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant .....

Date (day/month/year) .....

Signature .....

Thank you for your participation