

# School choice in Indigenous families as a conflicting path between territories and cultures: The case of rural Mapuche families in Chile

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Juan de Dios Oyarzún<sup>1</sup>, Laura Luna<sup>2</sup> and Camila Moyano<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, El Bosque 1290, Viña del Mar, Chile, email: Juan.oyarzun.m@pucv.cl

<sup>2</sup> Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Villarrica Campus; Center for Local Development (CEDEL UC); Center for Intercultural and Indigenous Research (CIIR); Cape Horn International Center (CHIC); Millennium Nucleus for Research on Anti-Racist Chilean Education (MRACE)

<sup>3</sup> Universidad Finis Terrae and Millennium Nucleus on Digital Inequalities and Opportunities (NUDOS)

Chile has a highly segregated education system. Indigenous students tend to be one of the most disadvantaged socio-cultural groups in terms of educational access and academic outcomes, in addition to lacking consistent intercultural educational alternatives. Through in-depth interviews, we explored Mapuche families' experiences from two communities in rural southern Chile regarding their secondary school choice processes. This study analyses ethnic, territorial and future labour-related aspects influencing families' decisions regarding their children's educational transition. Generally, the path from primary to secondary school in rural settings involves a change from a small, local, multi-grade primary school to an urban secondary school. The findings show that this decision involves the crossing of ethnic, territorial and social boundaries that affect the families' educational definitions related to the aspirational expectations for their children. In this, secondary school choice appears as an event in which different aspects and tensions of contemporary Indigenous ethnicity emerge and are confronted.

**Keywords:** Indigenous families, school choice, Mapuche ethnicity, Chilean education, territories

## Introduction

Vast international evidence has shown how Indigenous peoples and their knowledge struggle to be included and recognised in Latin American education systems (López & Küper, 1999; UNESCO, 2019) and how Indigenous students tend to be in a disadvantaged position in the educational field in terms of access, segregation and outcomes (Levitan & Post, 2017; Torrecilla & Garrido, 2017; Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2023). By considering the influence of cultural, ethnic, social and territorial features, this article analyses the secondary school choice processes of Mapuche Chilean rural families, the largest Indigenous population in the country.

In Chile, from the national official figures, almost 80% of the Indigenous population self-identifies as Mapuche (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas [INE], 2018). Their geographical roots come from the

territory's southern region, mainly from La Araucanía Region. The Mapuche people have held a deep political conflict with the Chilean state since the beginnings of the Chilean nation, which continues to the present day. The educational sphere manifests part of the structural injustices lived by many Indigenous young people, where Mapuche students tend to be one of the most disadvantaged socio-cultural groups in Chile in terms of educational access and academic outcomes (Treviño et al., 2023). Also, the Chilean curriculum, which extensively encompasses all the disciplinary areas, and its national census evaluation system, which measures the learnings of the curriculum for each school and operates as part of the high-stakes accountability system within the Chilean educational system, leaves little room for the inclusion of different forms of knowledge, such as Indigenous culture and knowledge (Martínez, 2017).

An important part of the rural faction of the Mapuche people live in La Araucanía, which, similar to other Latin American areas, is affected by demographic, economic and cultural transformational processes that have constituted a "new rurality" where the exchanges between the rural and the urban are a constant and daily matter (Kay, 2008). This phenomenon clearly has an impact on the rural schools attended by children who live in Mapuche communities (Williamson et al., 2023). However, there is still a concentration of Mapuche students in primary rural schools compared to urban schools and, again, as in most Latin American countries, intercultural education policies are mainly applied in small, rural, multi-grade schools (Duque et al., 2024). In these primary schools Mapuche language and culture are taught as part of the official curriculum and it may not be hard to find educational projects permeated by practices, values and social relations that characterise the Mapuche communities where they are situated, particularly through the presence of traditional educators and the involvement of Indigenous families and communities in the educational dynamics lived at these schools (Luna, Bolomey, Caniguan 2018; Luna & Contreras 2019).

However, the deficit of culturally relevant secondary education in rural areas (where there is a general lack of secondary schools) is an issue for some Mapuche communities, since Mapuche children often need to leave their communities and families and move to an urban or semi-urban area to attend secondary school (Torres & Friz, 2020). The secondary school choice process, therefore, has deep implications for rural Mapuche families, as their children may have to move into a more culturally diverse area where social and educational experiences are not eased by community and family, and being Mapuche and coming from a rural community is likely to become an object of discrimination (see Zañartu Canihuante et al., 2017).

This qualitative study carried out by a research team from the UC Educational Justice Center<sup>1</sup> addressed the school choice experiences among socio-cultural minorities in Chile; in particular, this article illustrates in-depth findings with members of two rural Mapuche communities in the south of Chile and aims to explore the role played by cultural, social, ethnic and territorial issues in the secondary school selection process. While processes of school choice in parents have been widely studied mainly from a socioeconomic perspective in Chile and abroad (e.g., Carrasco et al., 2021; Kosunen et al., 2020), other socio-cultural dimensions have been less addressed, particularly in the case of Indigenous families and students. In fact, despite ethnicity and race being a main consideration in some studies of school choice in the US (Anthony-Stevens, 2017; Castagno et al., 2016; Garcia, 2008; Kotok, 2017), school choice in Indigenous populations is an understudied matter in the Latin American educational research field, an exception being the recent study by Hofflinger et al. (2023) in Chile. This research expects to contribute to a broader scope of the Indigenous education research field by addressing the secondary school choice

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://centrojusticiaeducacional.uc.cl/> for more information about the UC Educational Justice Center.

experiences of Mapuche families and considering the socio-cultural dimensions involved in their decision-making processes.

## Indigenous people's situation in Chilean education: Problematising from the literature and the theory

As in other Latin American countries, Chilean Indigenous people experience high levels of educational inequality and segregation (UNESCO, 2019). Ethnicity intersects with other structural factors that explain Indigenous educational segregation and inequality, such as social class and residential segregation (Treviño et al., 2023; Webb et al., 2018). Because of their low socioeconomic position, Indigenous students tend to be among the poorest children and are educated with others of a similar condition in public or subsidised private schools.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, they are overrepresented among the poorest population (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2017). Indigenous people are particularly affected by school segregation (Elacqua, 2012; Elacqua et al., 2006).

Ethnic segregation can further be explained by the concentration of Indigenous people in specific territories, mostly rural, where there is lower population density and fewer schools. This is the case in several areas of La Araucanía, the poorest region in the country with a strong presence of Mapuche people. The La Araucanía Region has a high concentration of Indigenous people (34.3%), which reflects the strong intersection between social class and Indigenous ethnicity in Chile, a situation that replicates in different zones of Chile, both rural and urban. In a broader context, Mapuche people represent 79.8% of the country's Indigenous population and 9.9% of the national population (INE, 2018).

The most recent legal framework regarding Indigenous education comes from the 1993 Indigenous Law (Ministry of Planning and Cooperation of Chile, 2017), which recognised Indigenous people's right to teach their language and culture within the formal educational system. This law established the first actions to support schools situated in Indigenous contexts. By 1996, the Intercultural Bilingual Education Program (Programa de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe, PEIB) was founded to improve education quality for Indigenous people and improve educational achievement among them (Martinez, 2017). Later, this program's emphasis shifted from improving academic results to identity strengthening. Its support was mainly focused on teacher training, educational resources and integration of Indigenous people as educational agents in schools (Martinez, 2017).

However, the major shift in Indigenous education policy started in 2010 with a governmental decree creating an Indigenous language subject in the curriculum for four Indigenous languages, being Mapuche, Aymara, Quechua and Rapa Nui (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2009). Since 2013 the subject has been implemented in schools that have at least 20% Indigenous students and covers all the primary education years<sup>3</sup>. The subject has focused on oral and written communication in the Indigenous language and on major cultural elements, and it is considered that a "traditional educator" is the person in charge of transmitting language and cultural knowledge. However, due to the scarcity of native speakers since 2017, this person may not be an Indigenous or native speaker in so far as the

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<sup>2</sup> The Chilean education system is composed of three types of schools: municipal schools (basically public schools; 34% of student enrolment), subsidised private schools (same public funding as municipal schools but with a private owner; 54% of the enrolment), and private paid, which are funded by fees charged to the families (9% of the enrolment).

<sup>3</sup> The Chilean school system is structured as follows: nursery school (until students are 6 years old), eight years of primary education (until 14 years old), and four years of secondary education (until 18 years old). This structure is projected to change in 2026 with a six years + six years scheme for primary and secondary education. Secondary education is provided by regular scientific-humanistic schools, technical-vocational schools, and polyvalent schools which provide both scientific-humanistic and technical-vocational educational paths.

person has linguistic and cultural competencies to teach the subject and is validated by the local community in that role (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2017). Recent reforms have been made to the programs for teaching Indigenous culture and language, which now address nine of the 11 Indigenous peoples of Chile (Aymara, Quechua, Likanantai, Colla, Chango, Diaguita, Mapuche, Kaweskar, Rapa Nui, Yagán, Selknam).

A substantial amount of literature has analysed the advances and limitations of current policies in Indigenous education in Chile (see de la Maza & Bolomey, 2019; Loncón, 2017; Martínez, 2017). It has been noticed, for example, that, despite being an important advance in the recognition of Indigenous people's educational rights, the Indigenous language subject's implementation has been problematic since the origins of the PEIB. This is mainly due to the scarcity of native speakers able to work as educators, the lack of acknowledgement of their role in schools and the lack of teaching strategies employed for second-language teaching (Ibáñez-Salgado & Druker-Ibáñez, 2018; Quilaqueo & Quintriqueo, 2008). The restrictive character of the initiative has also been criticised. Namely, it applies only to schools with 20% of Indigenous students, under the assumption that intercultural education is only beneficial for Indigenous children (Loncón, 2017).

Additionally, different forms of racialisation that occur in schools towards Mapuche students may contribute to their educational disadvantage and may explain the weakening of the Mapuche language. This is illustrated in studies that have shown the invisibilisation of Mapuche ethnic inequalities and their cultural origins from the perspective of teachers and school principals in territories with the presence of Mapuche students, along with their low academic expectations towards them, particularly students from rural areas (Webb et al., 2018; Webb & Radcliffe, 2016).

However, the articulation of discussions on Indigenous or intercultural education with the debates on public educational policies in Chile is still a pending topic in academic research. It seems particularly relevant in the context of the implementation of the School Inclusion Law, in force since 2015 (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2015), aimed at combating school segregation by forbidding schools to select students<sup>4</sup>. This disposition of the School Inclusion Law expects to provide a more equal school admission policy to Chilean students, particularly to those from less advantaged social segments. The previous decentralised and arbitrary admission processes, among other educational features and policies of the Chilean educational system, were indicated as one of the main factors explaining the country's strong educational segregation (Valenzuela et al., 2014), being that Indigenous, and especially Mapuche, students form part of the most deprived population in this schooling system. This latest reform on the school admission policy in Chile was materialised through the new school admission system (SAE, from its initials in Spanish), which, in correspondence to the dispositions of the School Inclusion Law, seeks to erase all previous selective practices in schools' admission processes. It allocates students through an online, centralised and transparent mechanism with impartial criteria. The SAE expects to offer equal educational opportunities to all students, being neutral to families' features, records and capital. In this context, it seems relevant to ask to what extent this new education policy scenario may have expanded possibilities for Indigenous peoples, that is, for Indigenous students to be educated according to their views, needs and interests.

These institutional factors also carry the question of the considerations implied in the contemporary secondary school choice processes of Indigenous rural families and, particularly, whether ethnic or cultural aspects play a significant role throughout this process. In addition, the scarcity of secondary

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<sup>4</sup> The law also forbids schools to charge tuition fees in state-subsidised establishments or to profit in educational entrepreneurship.

schools with an intercultural approach and also the lack of policies in intercultural education for secondary schools in Chile add other relevant contextual factors for the exploration on how Indigenous people position themselves in their school choice processes within this education policy scenario (for a similar reference from the Australian viewpoint, see Mander et al., 2015). Hence, Indigenous families face a widely monocultural educational system in Chile, which brings other theoretical insights and tensions to this research (Quintriqueo & McGinty, 2009).

Authors such as Quijano (2000, 2007) and Mignolo (2007) connect the racialised post-colonial process of Western modernisation in Latin America to a monocultural development model, which oppresses and neglects native local cultures as the Indigenous ones. The cultural facet of modernisation involves, on the one hand, racial issues, imposing white privilege and classifying and neglecting native peoples' racial roots and ethnic cultures (Quijano, 2000). On the other hand, it involves the imposition of monocultural Western forms of knowledge, neglecting and discontinuing other forms of Indigenous or local knowledge and epistemology (Quijano, 2007). This is why Mignolo (2007) states that "coloniality of power (economic and political)" has been extensively understood as "coloniality of knowledge and of being (gender, sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge)" (p. 4). Indeed, authors such as Lander (2000) have focused on the notion and scope of the coloniality of knowledge as a particular form in which the coloniality of power is deployed through institutions from the scientific and educational fields. This modern rationality as coloniality of power/knowledge/being has a strong and all-encompassing influence on the educational sphere of some formerly colonised countries, such as Chile, where knowledge and education are strongly rooted in Western-European epistemologies.

This means that the Chilean education curriculum works with a different cosmovision of how education is understood, which relates to the epistemological distance between the Western and "Chilean" ways of producing and approaching knowledge and the Mapuche epistemology. This can be identified in two dimensions. First, the scientific approach dominant in the curriculum has marginalised other ways of approaching nature and the world. This is particularly relevant if we compare how the Mapuche cosmovision and person-nature relationship work. As Villarroel et al. (2022) point out, Mapuche knowledge is principally rooted in family and territory, emphasising a holistic understanding of the environment and the interconnectedness of all living beings. This also includes experiences involving the community, observation and experimentation in their learning processes. The Western-dominant perspective approaches knowledge from a very different position, namely a binary one: objective/subjective, person/nature, and school/family, among others. Second, there is a predominant use of the Spanish language over other Indigenous languages. Today, the Mapuche language is being taught, focusing principally on literacy. However, the language relates more to the Mapuche cultural and knowledge system. The main problem of this distance between the Western and Mapuche knowledge systems is that the former has left aside the culture and values of Mapuche students (Villarroel et al., 2022), decontextualising their relationship with the school and their learning processes. Most importantly, it generates a socio-cognitive conflict for Mapuche students in terms of their personal and socio-cultural identity (Quintriqueo & McGinty, 2009) to the detriment of their potential academic achievements.

## Study design

This study's fieldwork took place in La Araucanía Region in southern Chile. Our research question addresses the role played by cultural and ethnic issues in the process of choosing a secondary school for Mapuche families in two rural communities. The simplistic definition of rurality in Chile, based on

density thresholds and distance to urban centres (INE, 2018), has been questioned (e.g., Oyarzún, 2020) and, considering that these communities are in geographical areas that correspond to that official definition, a relevant indicator that allows the research team to identify these communities as rural is their attendance and proximity to a rural multi-grade school.

One group of families is from a community with a strong cultural and political identity, with an active involvement in political activities in defence of Mapuche territories, and with an alive presence of cultural traditions and rituals of Mapuche people; the other group has less cultural-communitarian attachment and weaker organisation. Our intention was not to compare the two communities but to have a broader range of experiences and perspectives among Mapuche families. The research team comprised five researchers; four were identified as non-Indigenous and one was Mapuche. Access to these communities required previous social links that allowed the research team to be welcomed, links that mainly came from the member of the research team identified as Mapuche; this researcher comes from and, at the time of the fieldwork of this study, still has related family within the community with strong cultural and political identity. Also, the goals of the study considered as meaningful by the communities were a requirement. Hence, families were selected using a snowball technique (Naderifar et al., 2017), through contacts and conversations established by the research team, particularly through the contacts established by the local researcher referred to above. Detailed information of the purposes and processes involved in the research was shared with all the families who participated, including the insights expected to be collected through this study. After this fieldwork, and in agreement with the community members, parts of the research insights were systematised to provide a document written in Mapudungun (the original Mapuche language) with practical orientations regarding the new school admission policy reform.

As pointed out earlier, one community is commonly acknowledged as being quite “traditional”, meaning that they follow Mapuche rituals systematically and have an elaborated discourse about their cultural differences and critiques towards *huinca*<sup>5</sup>—Chilean non-Mapuche people—life, as well as about the official state politics regarding their people and territory. The Toki Cura community is located close to Budi Lake in the Lafkenche Mapuche sector. In 2000 this community was involved in a strong movement called Budi’s Werkenes Council, whose purpose was to make specific demands to the Origins Program of the Inter-American Development Bank and other programs affecting the area (Luna & Contreras, 2019).

The other community, situated in the Cautín Sur province, is more permeated by beliefs and practices considered “exogenous” by many Mapuche, despite the fact that its inhabitants mostly identify themselves as Mapuche. Indeed, they express different levels of attachment to Mapuche culture, following their cultural traditions with less constancy. They do not have an elaborated discourse against *huinca* life nor towards the political conflict between their people and the Chilean state.

We conducted 10 in-depth interviews with families—five from each group—with a child who had applied to secondary school during the last school application period before this fieldwork. We conducted these interviews in their own homes in the presence of at least one of the parents. The interviews were conducted in the Spanish language; all the members of the families interviewed spoke this language fluently. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and codified with an open code technique, then analysed using a narrative approach (Andrews et al., 2013). The interviews covered their family history in the community and territory, their attachment to Mapuche traditions, their educational and

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<sup>5</sup> “Huinca” is a Mapuche word used to refer in a quite pejorative way to Chilean or non-Mapuche people. Originally used to refer to Spanish people, it is associated with invaders or enemies.

labour paths, their children's previous educational paths, their secondary school choice criteria and process, and their future expectations and apprehensions at the time of choosing a secondary school for their children. We defined that, to understand the families' school choice experiences and perspectives, it was necessary to contextualise and explore part of their family biographies, along with their beliefs and practices regarding their Mapuche identity, territorial attachment, and previous educational experiences and perspectives. By doing this, we could attempt to understand and analyse more broadly their characterisations of the secondary school chosen for their children.

Finally, this study design was approved by an independent ethics committee approved by the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile's ethics committee and all the interviewees provided appropriate informed consent in person, prior the beginning of each interview. This article uses codes to anonymise the surnames of the families studied; initial letter "B" corresponds to families from the Budi Lake community, while initial letter "C" corresponds to families from the community situated in the Cautín Sur zone.

Recapping, in this study and in the subsequent findings section, then, we examine the secondary school choice rationalities and the cultural, ethnic, social and territorial influences of rural Mapuche families regarding their children's future educational fate. In doing so, we analyse to what extent and in which forms Mapuche families' perceptions and experiences regarding their children's transition from primary rural schools to urban secondary schools are challenged and/or determined by such a monocultural (still colonised) educational system.

## Findings

Despite their geographical closeness and common ethnic roots, there was cultural heterogeneity among the interviewed families. Even within the same community, the interviewed families manifested different modes of linkages to Mapuche traditions and different senses of belonging. In fact, regarding Mapuche culture, families showed different manifestations of Indigenous identity and diverse perspectives.

One of the ethnic expressions among the families is manifested in those who daily nurture their ethnic identity, value the teaching of Mapuche language and culture at primary school, and, in some cases, believe that it would be good if it continued during secondary education. Families where we find this expression are competent in Mapuche language and knowledge and are convinced that their full realisation as individuals is highly related to their cultural and political achievement as Mapuche people.

Other expressions of Mapuche ethnicity found in this study were characterised by families that live a process of recovering a stronger cultural attachment. Manifested in testimonies that acknowledge having been subjects of cultural assimilation, they nurture a strong respect for Mapuche culture and interest in boosting their ethnic identity. These parents value educational opportunities to rescue the knowledge and sense of Indigenous belonging, particularly in their children.

While the first expression of ethnicity is more present in the Budi Lake community, the latter prevails in the Cautín Sur community. But also, as a different expression of Indigenous ethnicity, other families express a distance towards the Mapuche language and the main Indigenous traditions that constitute an important part of Mapuche culture and identity. Particularly, those who declare themselves as evangelical Christians do not show a deep attachment to Mapuche traditions and distance themselves from Mapuche political demands and social protests. These families are also more clearly present within the Cautín Sur community.

In this context and from these diverse ethnicity expressions, our findings show how, within the institutional and cultural context that shapes the Chilean educational system, the current forms of identity and culture expressed in the Mapuche families interviewed ambivalently influence their secondary school choice criteria. Secondary education is more than an academic stage, as it represents a meaningful step towards future educational and labour paths. School choice is deeply connected with future aspirations for their children in which community and territory play a key role, as the offer of secondary schools in rural areas in Chile drastically decreases compared with primary multi-grade schools.

## 1. School choice criteria: Between educational hopes and socio-cultural fears

To start with, all the families, no matter how their ethnicity manifests, share that the scarcity of secondary schools with an intercultural education in their rural contexts was not a relevant issue. While the monocultural curriculum and language emerge as an issue in primary school, such a problem loses relevance in secondary education. In a similar vein, the study by Herbert et al. (2014) in Australia shows that the main value given by secondary students to education is English language learning, without alluding to their native languages as something they value in their educational experiences. On the other hand, these findings differ from those of Beaulieu et al. (2005), Garcia (2014) and Anthony-Stevens (2017) in the US, where native families seek a more balanced curriculum that shares dominant and Indigenous forms of knowledge and culture.

Across the families interviewed, while ethnicity and religious and political beliefs have a role in the configuration of their identities and educational aspirations, social class and territorial issues intersect with these configurations. Rather than seeing secondary education as a space for ethnic acculturation, the families see it as a necessary step to enter the labour market and achieve social mobility. Expectations of better labour prospects and social distinction are projected onto secondary education, both the scientific-humanistic path and the technical-professional path<sup>6</sup>, as discussed in the following section. No matter whether or not it is understood as the bridge for higher education and becoming professional—something to which most of these families aspire—secondary education is considered the key stage for the acquisition of basic competencies for independent adult life. In some cases, there is strategic rationality regarding educational plans and expectations, which also involves decisions based on technical and professional prospects, as this student explains:

I wanted to study something technical. And after they told me that I wasn't admitted in [school name] that was scientific-humanistic, I turned to the technical. Because in the technical school they give me a [formal certification], and I can work, and if I want, I also can go to college or an institute, it gets easier in that way. (C3 family son)

One of the crucial factors at play in the school choice process is the influence of other relatives or friends from their communities, territories or rural primary schools. They expected to continue studying in the same secondary school, keeping their social bonds and forming small communities where they could have a more supported and safer transit from rural primary schools to urban secondary establishments. However, this emerges more as a social bond than a cultural one:

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<sup>6</sup> The General Law of Education (Law N° 20370, enacted in 2009) indicates that the final two years of Chilean secondary education are divided between a scientific-humanistic path (closer to an academic vein) and a vocational-technical (TVET) path. Nowadays, a third of the secondary schools in Chile offer TVET paths.

I have a good impression of the school and good expectations of what I can be there. This is because I take with me four schoolmates so we will stay together and there won't ... be any kind of bullying, nothing. (B3 family daughter)

Three families also mention social and ethnic discrimination as an issue they consider when choosing a school. Three families referred to the fear they feel that their child may enter a school with children from a different social class. In some cases, they refer to being Mapuche or being committed to the Mapuche political cause as a factor for possible discrimination that intersects social class and ethnicity:

If you choose this double life, of movement, of political movement, for demands, [through] protests, occupations, barricades, do not go to [name of school], because they are all "high" there ... you will find there that the parents are military authorities and they will put you in gaol. (B1 family father)

I didn't want to go to a school so good, maybe because I was frightened ... I feared how I was going to be treated by my mates because some people look bad at you because you are Mapuche. I was scared of that. So I wanted to go to a quieter school ... which wouldn't ... [be] with different people, different class. (C3 family son)

Generally, most families search for safe, careful attention in their children's future school. Mainly, they seem worried that their children would move into an unfamiliar, unsupervised environment where nobody worries if they miss school or are sick. Also, drugs, rudeness and abuse are part of what they fear children may have to cope with during their secondary education. These are seen as a corruption risk to their moral integrity, as the following quote illustrates:

A bad school for me is a school where there's drug[s] or where they allow kids to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol ... I hope, I ask God, that my son is not going to be assigned to a high school like this, because that is one of my fears: that if I get to realise that it is a kind of superficial high school ... But I am not going to let him get contaminated, because he is calm; he is – it is not because he is my son – but he is intelligent. So guys like this, you have to take care of them and demand them too, but for good. (C1 family mother)

Some of these families indicated academic aspects (such as quality of teaching or academic rigorousness and results), features of the schools' projects (such as Educational Integration Programs<sup>7</sup>, community handbooks or their guiding values), or school distance and accessibility as relatively important features. But, overall, and similar to other socio-cultural minorities in the country (Moyano, Joiko & Oyarzún, 2020), or eventually similar to other rural families beyond Indigenous communities, they mainly seemed concerned that their future school will look after their children both in physical and moral dimensions. One family explains its concerns about secondary schools, alluding to the difference between urban and rural children and the impact on class environment:

It is because children from the countryside are different from children from the city. You put 20–30 children in a classroom and, if the teacher is not there, it's a mess. On the contrary, in the countryside, children are more passive, less rebellious ... This is why it is complicated that children move to Pucón [Chilean city] and meet people from towns, suburbs and all that. (C4 family father)

<sup>7</sup> Educational Integration Programs (PIE) are the integration programs optionally set in state-funded schools in Chile. Different pedagogical specialists work at schools in the educational processes of children with different special educational needs.

This parent not only thinks that school life may be more difficult in town but also perceives the urban environment as a socially risky place and, therefore, as a menace to children's moral integrity. In this sense, they seem more confident in the rural environment's conditions to raise children according to family values and habits.

Therefore, along with class intersected with ethnicity, rural/urban distinction acts as another factor at play in families' decisions about secondary school. All these dimensions seem relevant when parents' main preoccupations with their children's education are their social and emotional wellbeing, as well as developing (or maintaining) moral qualities. This focus on values and habits, which seems to leave academic and labour aspects as secondary concerns, may be associated with the centrality of the person referred to as *che* in Mapuche culture. A particular kind of social behaviour and attitude is needed in order for somebody to be *che*, an autonomous person capable of productive social interactions, which is not a given in Mapuche culture, but something developed in life (Course, 2011). Particularly important for Mapuche education is being *norche*, that is, an upright person who knows what to do and acts accordingly (Alarcón et al., 2018). However, a comparative study (Luna, 2014) on educational expectations carried out among families of the same Budi Lake community and among parents of an urban school showed that, for both groups, educating the whole person, focusing on values, responsibility and identity, is a priority in their view of education. Therefore, concern for their children's moral development conditions is not an exclusive cultural argument for Mapuche families. But what seems clear is that the school choice process triggers several fears associated with their children moving to a less familiar and less homogenous environment where they become vulnerable, not only because of their social and ethnic origins, but also because they will be exposed to values and habits that diverge from those they have been taught in their home and community environment.

Lastly, parents are concerned about the schools available for their children in their school choice processes. The father of B1 family, who stands out for his criticism of Chilean education and institutions, points to the fact that despite the impartiality of the new school admission system (SAE), it cannot overcome the structural educational inequalities that prevail in the country. In this sense, he seems to be aware that Mapuche families belong to the disadvantaged sector of society and the schools available for them lack academic quality and social heterogeneity:

But, how does it [the SAE] equalise? About what? That is the question that I made to myself. I said, ok, it is fine. The [name of school], two years ago you had to stand in a long queue, to wake up at dawn with a tent outside the school. Ok. But now [with the SAE], what does it mean to have those schools available if quality isn't good? ... When you ask me about that system, I said to you that it is easy to apply, it is clear. But doesn't guarantee any quality. (B1 family father)

Unlike Chilean upper-class families, they cannot access quality education, and they suffer segregation as rural Mapuche communities, explained by the intersection of class and ethnicity inequalities experienced by Indigenous peoples in Chile (see Treviño et al., 2023). In this, they have a social class awareness that also nurtures their ethnic identities, which is shared with other disadvantaged social groups in the country. These particular positionings, despite the School Inclusion Law and the SAE having left behind all kinds of selective and discriminatory entry processes to the school offer, have not, yet, implied a change in the school choice criteria or preferences of these Mapuche families. Structural barriers in the Chilean educational system still need to be overcome.

## 2. Future aspirations for their children and the place of the community and the land

In this section we analyse the place of social aspirations as a key component for interviewed families' school choice processes. As mentioned in the previous section, social upgrading plays an important role, even in the aspirations of those most committed to the Mapuche political cause for self-determination. However, it intersects with other factors associated with ethnicity, which makes life projections for children a more complex issue. Territory is a crucial factor here. Bear in mind that the cultural tensions associated with the continuity of studies and work projections in an urban setting mainly concern those families who manifest some kind of bond with or appreciation of Mapuche traditions and culture. Testimonies from those families who do not nurture a particular interest in Mapuche traditional culture evidence that becoming a professional is highly valued as the main chance for full realisation and for "being someone in life", and it is not tensioned by other motivations related to culture or territory. This is the case of the C3 family, for whom the value of obtaining a university degree is not linked to economic reasons as much as to the acquisition of social status. It is a matter of pride and being able to say, "I made it". Indeed, the C2 family, also from a family less attached to Mapuche traditional culture, seek a different social status for their son. They expect social mobility through his future secondary technical studies:

If you study business administration, it is because you want to be an administrator, you want to be something high status. And they are teaching you to achieve that, not to send you for cleaning work when you are doing your training, or for loading up boxes. (C2 family father)

These aspirations influence their evaluation of what children should learn at school. According to the C3 family, Mapudungun lessons should be replaced by more English classes, since that is the knowledge with exchange value in the work market. This family explicitly hopes that their children's futures will develop in the city. In the other families that also express a lesser attachment to Mapuche culture, becoming a professional seems to be the most important goal, no matter its implications. Therefore, in these cases, no discourse is articulated around the territory and the detachment from the rural community is not problematised.

But this is much nuanced in other families that, despite not having a deep association with such cause and the traditional forms of Mapuche culture, value their Indigenous roots and express incipient efforts to recover Mapuche language—valuing the role of educational institutions in this—and resume their participation in the Mapuche traditions and rites.

A clearer difference is expressed in families with a stronger political activism and attachment to their Mapuche roots. Among the latter, the B4 family more clearly illustrates the tensions between class and culture in their school choice process. While the mother explicitly forbids her child to enter a military career in the near future, as she does not want him to "listen to the huincas", she also comments how she instilled in him the importance of formal education for protecting his future: "If you want to be someone in life, you'll need to look for your education, I told him." She hopes her son will study away in the future, but, at the same time, her desire is that he returns to work in the area, not far from the community and that he becomes a professional not working for huincas, but for his people, like a Mapudungun professional. This mix of aspirations shows the complexity of conjugating ethnic motives with class issues, along with ambivalent connotations regarding the forms of knowledge offered by formal education.

A common feature among those who do show a more explicit attachment to Mapuche culture is the expectation from both parents and children that the latter, after becoming professionals or having gone through secondary education, come back to live in their community of origin or to their territory, which they generally refer to as "the countryside", to serve Mapuche people's needs and cause:

I think that contemporary children, who were raised in a social and cultural world, feel attached to their culture. They aren't detached from their culture, they give you surprises in that sense, many surprises because they were raised within their culture, reactivating their cultural processes ... In this community there is much social life, a lot of cultural life. So, our children seek an academic-Western education but with the idea of getting back to support those processes. (B1 family father)

Yes, I'd like that she could take a professional path or not necessarily she must be a professional but that she works right here ... That is my wish as a mum: that she doesn't go far. I wish she never forgets her roots; she may become a "professional of Mapudungun", a person consistent with her *rakizuum* [Mapuche reasoning], a person of this place. (B4 family mother)

The preference for rural life among Mapuche people or the desire to go back to the countryside after a time of urbanisation was seen in a survey carried out in 2016 on contemporary rural and urban Mapuche (Centro de Estudios Públicos, 2016). Its results are largely analysed by Valenzuela and Aranís (2018), who read both rural Mapuche desire to stay in the countryside and urban Mapuche aspiration to go back to the countryside or declarations of attachment to their original community in the countryside as the interest to keep a bond with Wallmapu (the original Mapuche territory in the south of Chile). The same authors point to the sense of place which characterises Mapuche versus non-Mapuche people.

Interviewees' expectations of their children coming back to their land after being educated or having started their working life might be read in the light of the above considerations. In other words, while going to secondary school involves moving and traveling, this should not be seen as an unavoidable detachment from cultural and ethnic roots, but rather as a temporary and "necessary" process of relocation infused with the prospect of a future re-enactment of those roots by returning to the land.

## Discussion: Secondary school choice and the emerging tensions embedded in contemporary rural Mapuche identities

Within the significant vacuum in school choice studies in relation to Indigenous people in Latin America, this research sought to explore and analyse the influences of cultural, ethnic, social and territorial aspects in the secondary school choice processes of families from two rural Mapuche communities in the south of Chile. In this section, we examine the findings in dialogue with related literature and some theoretical premises.

The first point is that in the inter-relation between class, work, land, community life, different religious expressions and cultural features, a fluid, broad Mapuche identity is constituted. As Weaber (2001) states, Indigenous "identities are always fragmented, multiply constructed, and intersected in a constantly changing, sometimes conflicting, array" (p. 240). Therefore, the secondary education school choice can be seen as a moment and experience in which part of these aspects and tensions emerge and are confronted by these families. From their perspectives, secondary school choice is not only based on academic and educational considerations, but it is also deeply connected with their children's safety and the parents' future aspirations and expectations for them.

Although the teaching of the Mapuche language and culture in primary school is highly valued, and some families consider that, generally, it should continue in secondary education, none of the families adopt a similar cultural criterion in their choice of a secondary school or complain about the scarcity of secondary schools with an intercultural approach. Primary education is the time when Indigenous culture and language can be promoted, but secondary and further education is the necessary bridge

towards professionalism and wider opportunities. This is slightly different from what Baeza et al. (2023) found about the importance that Indigenous people living in the north of Chile give, for example, to the traditional educator, as this person connects the local schools with their community traditions. Their results show that the community would like to intervene in the designation of this educator and claim more participation at school. Academic and technical knowledge are the most valued forms of knowledge regarding their children's future educational and professional prospects. Here we observe the prominent monoculturalism in the Chilean educational system, which has colonised almost every space of its predominant forms of knowledge (Lander, 2000; Quijano, 2007). Doing so leaves no margin for developing other sources of knowledge, such as Indigenous. This has been well studied by Mellado and Huaiquimil (2015) regarding how teachers teach language in Mapuche communities without embracing the cultural and social contexts of their students. Secondary and further education are more associated with acquiring a skill set that will allow the young adult to navigate the capitalist economy and labour market. This economy is also a form of the coloniality of power in Latin American countries today (Mignolo, 2007), an imported development model that influences and severely restrains the courses of life and work in the young Indigenous students of the families studied. For Nahuelpan & Antimil (2019) this is an aspect of colonial violence against the Mapuche people, where the colonial project dispossessed and annihilated the culture, epistemologies and ontology of Indigenous people. As coloniality of power and knowledge approaches also argue, these educational-labour paths are also racialised (Quijano, 2000). In this social, cultural, economic and educational context, these Mapuche families coexist and belong, and they navigate activating different resources that express the fluid forms of contemporary Indigeneity in Chile. Other components of these Mapuche families' culture have deeper implications when choosing secondary schools, mainly regarding territory and community belonging, along with security, care and aspirational issues that express concern and social class awareness.

The realisation of social aspiration for their children implies migration to urban areas. Tensions between being in a culturally safe and protected space (rural territory and community) and families' expectations to upgrade their children's future opportunities are at play when attending secondary school, which involves relocating them from their rural territory to the city. In this, not all the interviewed families refer to large metropolitan areas or the region's capital but to cities of different scales. Despite these different considerations, urban places are considered risky in terms of detachment from family and cultural ties. Still, they also are the spaces for achieving better life prospects. These hopes and fears, of course, are not exclusive to these Mapuche families, given that they may be familiar to other social groups from similar social and geographical backgrounds, but, we argue, these tensions acquire other nuances in the families interviewed, where distinct Mapuche ethnicity representations are manifested and imbued. Territorial borders, here, in part denote how spaces and places define a sense of belonging, in terms of affects and family ties, but also understanding territories – their social configurations and institutional forms – as racialised spaces (Grimson & Segura, 2016).

Hence, future aspirations are interlaced with territorial factors. Most families' expectations for their children's long-term future are that they do not leave their homelands permanently, but that they come back after having studied and hopefully passed through higher education. Social and professional aspirations mix with the sense of belonging to the rural Mapuche land where they come from. This territorial aspect has been examined in depth by Di Giminiani (2018), who argued how Mapuche identity is linked to their belonging to their land. This is the acknowledgement of the place of origin in rural Mapuche territory. Di Giminiani analysed the meaning and enactment of the Mapuche concept of *tuwun*, intended as the original place of residence affected by both natural and physical surroundings and the historical presence of dwellers. *Tuwun* is crucial in defining a Mapuche person, since it acts as a marker of distinction from Mapuche of other territories and from huinca (not Mapuche). In this sense, connection

with *tuwun* acts as a marker of ethnic identity even in a context of dislocation from the place of origin (Di Gimini, 2018). Merino et al. (2020), in the same vein, argue that urban Mapuche youth do not lose territorial and cultural attachment to their roots, in many cases linked to rural environments and communities, as their identities cross the urban-rural binaries, establishing different forms of maintaining and updating their ethnicities beyond and within locations.

Hence, in some families interviewed, a fluid form of cultural discontinuity is taken as a given without affecting their more profound identifications with their lands and communities (Spindler, 1967/1997; Tyler et al., 2008). In other words, families seem to “assume” with neither resistance nor complaint, the social and cultural tensions represented by the displacement to a secondary school and the urban context. This is not because they passively accept cultural assimilation processes embedded in society and education but, rather, because they envisage this social and territorial transition as a necessary step for their children to become sufficiently empowered in society to find their way in their place of origin. They can keep their family, community and territorial bonds, and nurture the transmission of their culture in different times and places through fluid interchanges of experiences, relations and knowledge. Even in the case of families committed to the Mapuche political movement, there is hope that their children’s professional (Westernised) knowledge may serve Mapuche political demands or the community’s needs. The transition from primary to secondary school is considered necessary and not a menace to ethnic identity. This emerges as a strategic response and negotiation between the commitment to their cultural roots, territories and communities, and a capacity to navigate Chilean education and its subsequent neoliberal labour markets and professional paths (Luna, Bolomey & Caniguan, 2018). Secondary school choice constitutes a stance in which the Indigenous identity of these Mapuche rural families is expressed in crisscrossed forms of culture, between the isolation and the connection of territories, and in a temporal distance that does not weaken the persistent sense of belonging to the communities of origin.

## Final remarks

This research contributes to understanding the diverse dimensions involved in rural Mapuche families’ secondary school choice processes in the south of Chile. This issue is relevant in the context of historical and current neglect of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous forms of education—despite advances in intercultural education policy—along with a recent educational reform on school admission policy, which seeks to offer fairer educational opportunities to all students. Besides, this study cannot be understood apart from the historical political conflict lived for centuries until the present day by the Mapuche people and the Chilean state. The educational field is not exempt from this conflict; on the contrary, it manifests part of its problems and challenges in terms of equity and cultural recognition.

As we reviewed, despite the structural obstacles and disadvantages that they have historically faced in the Chilean social and educational arena, these Mapuche families embody life courses within fluid expressions of culture and ethnicity that allow them to transit between territories, and express an aspiration to apply their children’s education and knowledge to their own local realities. These findings expect to contribute to the still incipient understanding developed in educational and sociological research regarding the school choice criteria present in Indigenous peoples in Chile and Latin America, particularly in Mapuche communities from rural contexts, as a manifestation of the complex scenario that Indigenous peoples live in the standardised Chilean education system and beyond. While doing so, this study expects to offer relevant primary data linked to educational policies related to this process in the country, particularly within a free school choice system. The SAE could incorporate culturally relevant information to Indigenous families and students so they can make an informed decision

regarding their children's education. But beyond that, this study expects to challenge the standardised and monocultural conditions in which Chilean education has historically developed, with a marked neoliberal influence during the last four decades. In this, curriculum policy and accountability systems should moderate their strong (Westernised) academic focus, incorporating intercultural insights into Chilean schools (primary, and, mainly from this study, secondary schools) for a broader and more inclusive educational frame.

Finally, this study acknowledges that it offers a still limited reading on secondary school choice for rural Indigenous peoples, mainly because of the reduced sample of families studied in this research. Further studies can contribute to a broader understanding of school choice processes for Indigenous peoples involving different communities in Chile, even in Latin America, along with Mapuche people, and also providing insights into education policy from rural and urban settings.

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## About the authors

Juan de Dios Oyarzún holds a PhD in education policy studies from University College London, and is currently an Associate Professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso. Juan de Dios studies the field of sociology of education and the sociological study of education policy from critical theoretical perspectives. In particular, he is interested in the analysis of the relationship between educational policy, its implementation at the institutional level and the processes of subjectivation of the actors involved. Recently, Juan de Dios has also participated in research on education, territory and socio-environmental crises.

Laura Luna Figueroa is an Anthropologist, Associate Professor at the Villarrica Campus of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and Director of the UC Center for Local Development. She is a graduate of Sapienza University in Rome, Italy, and holds a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Manchester. Her research and teaching work has focused on topics related to intercultural education, interethnic relations and development. Laura Luna is also dedicated to topics linked to the anthropology of education and educational inclusion.

Camila Moyano Dávila obtained her PhD in social science from the University of Lausanne at the LIVES Research Centre, Switzerland. She is currently an Associate Professor of the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Family, School of Family Sciences, at the Universidad Finis Terrae. In her previous work, she has followed a biographical approach with a focus on subjectivity. She has developed research on vulnerable children and minorities in the Chilean education system. Camila Moyano edited a book about educational justice in Chile. Currently, she is working on educational technologies and the production of stereotypes at school.

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