OTHER THEMES

Leveling Subjectification Regime in Chilean University Affirmative Action

Rafael Miranda-Molina[I]

[I]Universidad Finis Terrae, Santiago/Región Metropolitana – Chile

ABSTRACT – Leveling Subjectification Regime in Chilean University Affirmative Action. In Chilean higher education, affirmative action has been characterized by combining equity quotas with leveling as a means of favoring access to and retention of deserving students from high social vulnerability contexts. This paper addresses a pedagogical relationship that associates professionals as leveler subjects with students as subjects of leveling, in a regime of subjectification that aspires to produce humble, participative and grateful students and requires supportive, motivating and proud professionals. This is a power/knowledge relationship based on the epistemic authority of the professional subject that contributes to the subordination of working-class students in the selective university.

Keywords: **Affirmative Action. Higher Education. Leveling. Subjectification.**

RESUMEN – Régimen de Subjetivación Nivelatorio en la Acción Afirmativa Universitaria Chilena. En la educación superior chilena, la acción afirmativa se ha caracterizado por ensamblar cupos de equidad con nivelaciones como medios para favorecer el acceso y permanencia de estudiantes meritorios provenientes de contextos de alta vulnerabilidad social. Este trabajo aborda una relación pedagógica que asocia a profesionales como sujetos niveladores con estudiantes como sujetos de nivelación, en un régimen de subjetivación que aspira a producir estudiantes humildes, participativos y agradecidos y requiere profesionales solidarios, motivadores y orgullosos. Esta es una relación de poder/saber basada en la autoridad epistémica del sujeto profesional que contribuye subalternizar al estudiantado de clase trabajadora en la universidad selectiva.

Palabras clave: **Acción Afirmativa. Educación Superior. Nivelación. Subjetivación.**

Introduction

> But the child who is explained to will use his intelligence in the work of grieving: to com–prehend, that is to say, comprehending that he doesn't comprehend unless he is explained to. [...] Thus, the child acquires a new kind of intelligence: that of the teacher's explanations. Later, he will be able to become an explainer in turn. (Rancière, 2002, p. 9).

In the midst of the massification processes that Chilean higher education (HE) has experienced in recent decades, leveling emerges as a new training space to promote the retention of new students. Generally speaking, the need for these initiatives is usually justified as a consequence of the entry of a new type of student, whose underrepresentation would be explained as a result of their lack of prior preparation, something which equity in access initiatives might not be solving, but rather, are postponing beyond admission (Miranda-Molina, 2022). The entry of these 'uneven' subjects, meaning, underprepared, constitutes the core of the general leveling problem.

Despite the multiple forms that leveling usually takes in Latin America, in the Chilean case the policies that prescribe them tend to privilege supplementary remedial support, distinguishing the leveling subject from their peers (Venegas-Ramos; Gairín, 2020). Whether it is a product of their entry route, or their lower initial performance, the leveling subject is assumed to be at a level of insufficient preparation for the regular curriculum, a sort of 'zero level' that implies the outsourcing of their learning challenges to extracurricular instances. This is an educational integration strategy that constructs lack of preparation as a form of special educational need with the potential to segregate multiple historically marginalized groups from HE into supplementary intervention spaces (Miranda-Molina, 2024).

Another distinctive feature of leveling in Chile is its inscription in a problem of socioeconomic inequality addressed through affirmative actions, linking them with propaedeutic strategies and equity quotas, from a dominant discourse that positions the most vulnerable high schools and their students as subjects of intervention. The specific affirmative action I am referring to is the Program for Accompaniment and Effective Access to Higher Education (in Spanish PACE), created in 2014 as the first public policy to promote access and retention for students of low socioeconomic status (Villalobos et al., 2017). School strengthening, contextualized meritocracy and leveling are the central technologies of this policy, in a power relationship that positions the university, through its professional teams, in an intervening role into high schools and students in order to promote greater equity in access and permanence (Miranda-Molina; Leyton, 2025).

While these actions are offered as accompaniments to the working class subject to enter and persist, they are also configured from a regime of meritocratic exceptionality that pushes them to stand out from their peers and take responsibility for their own in/exclusion (Briones-Barahona; Leyton, 2020). Studies that have addressed this dimension of

affirmative action and its leveling technology have also revealed a strategic role of professional subjects within universities to defend the legitimacy of the subject of inclusion and disseminate a meritocratic understanding of inclusion (Miranda-Molina, 2025).

With this work I seek to problematize the professional subjectivity of affirmative action professionals directly involved in leveling, as produced and reinforced in a pedagogical relationship between the leveler subject and the subject of leveling. Thus, the leveler subject works so that the students recognize themselves at fault and learn to ask for help, from there participate in all the actions they organize and value the support that the university offers them. In counterpart, the leveler subject works on themself to deploy and demonstrate the ability to meet the need for leveling in solidarity and motivate the participation of the students, living this experience with great professional satisfaction and pride in being a worker for inclusion and the restitution of the right to HE. Both subjects, then, the participative student who accepts and appreciates help, as well as the capable and motivating professional, constitute defenders of this meritocratic form of affirmative action, although unanchored from the critique from which it emerged more than a decade ago, its language of the right to education and its politics of indignation.

In the following sections, I present background information on PACE and its leveling technology, then develop a theoretical framework based on the studies of governmentality and subjectification processes. In the methodology I describe the project, and in the results section develop a biography of the question and four lines of subjectification that allowed to characterize the pedagogical relationship of leveling. Finally, in the conclusions section, I propose a discussion of the need to challenge the assumed goodness of affirmative action and the symbolic violence in which it is inscribed.

Leveling as a technology of affirmative action

The emergence of affirmative action in Chilean HE can be located in a context of high social conflict, immediately after an explosive privatizing massification. This massification was experienced to a greater extent in non-traditional private universities (i.e., 40 years old or less), which between 1990 and 2015 increased their enrollment almost 10 times more than traditional ones (c.f. Espinoza, 2017). At the same time, traditional universities, grouped in the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (in Spanish, CRUCH), had a centralized admission system based mostly on standardized admission tests that since the 1970s have been exhibiting a significant socioeconomic bias (Ramos, 2023).

Thus, around 2011 a gross participation rate of more than 50% of the population between 18 and 24 years of age was reached, that is, the phase that Martin Trow (2007) describes as universalization, although with a traditional university system sustaining a high selectivity based on a general meritocracy. In this period, when the first right-wing government since the recovery of democracy took office, a university student movement that challenged the market orientation of the education system

gained great relevance, especially with demands for more equitable access, outlawing profit and debt, strengthening public education and expanding state control (Bellei; Villalobos, 2024). *Ad-hoc* government responses, which dismissed the demands for free tuition to expand scholarship and credit systems, incorporated a new type of scholarship, the so-called Academic Leveling Scholarship (in Spanish BNA) aimed at financing remedial programs of supplementary support for students "of high in-context school performance, although academically disadvantaged" (Mineduc, 2011, p. 3).

The policy instrument that mobilizes the BNA is known as a performance agreement, a state financing instrument that commits higher education institutions to comply with programmatic–carry out the prescribed actions–, financial and accounting commitments. As a financing policy aimed at the development and installation of institutional capacities (Yutronic et al., 2012), it was a voucher which targeted academic and psychosocial support measures for students, now scholarship holders, privileging a form of leveling based on supplementary support outside the regular curriculum (Miranda-Molina, 2026). Between 2011 and 2018, the BNA financed 109 programs in 49 higher education institutions, most of them traditional public and private universities [1].

In 2014, the Program for Accompaniment and Effective Access to Higher Education (PACE) was created as the first public policy of affirmative action that intervenes in university selectivity, explicitly aimed at 'restoring the right to higher education' (Mineduc, 2015, p. 4), in an strategic articulation of the experiences of Propaedeutic programmes[2] and BNA, with the purpose of favoring the access of meritorious students from high social vulnerability sectors (Villalobos et al., 2017). Despite the fact that this policy incorporates a reorientation of previous institutional initiatives, by moving from the early recruitment of in-context meritorious subjects to the strengthening of pedagogical practices and vocational guidance in high social vulnerability public high schools (Miranda-Molina; Leyton, 2025), the incorporation of a leveling strategy constitutes a continuity of the BNA, now aimed at students admitted to PACE immediately after their entry. Academic accompaniment is prescribed, aimed at 'critical' subjects–that is, subjects with a high level of failure–, and psychoeducational accompaniment aimed at the development of socio-emotional skills to promote permanence (Mineduc, 2016a), as areas of intervention focused supplementally to the regular curriculum.

The relevance of the BNA programme in the context of the emergence of affirmative action is key, insofar as it responds to demands for greater equity in retention, as a complement to others for equity in access, which is part of a discursive training that assumes the lack of preparation as the main explanatory factor for the underrepresentation of the most vulnerable sectors (Miranda-Molina; Leyton, 2025). The baseline assumption that associates prior preparation actions with equity quotas and leveling assumes that actions to promote greater equity in access through quotas would not address the assumed cause, and then the lack of preparation would be postponed beyond the access stage, now in a remedial way that must be focused primarily on the subjects of

inclusion (Miranda-Molina, 2024). This statement is the one that is regularly synthesized in the slogan 'access implies retention, discursively configuring the quotas/leveling dyad as a form of 'effective access' for the most vulnerable sectors.

This trajectory of institutionalization of leveling in affirmative action manages to configure it as a technology aimed at remedying insufficient preparation after admission, contributing to lessen the university's accountability for inequity in access to the extent that it constructs the leveling subjects' preparation as a the locus of intervention. However, an analysis of this nature also requires making the other subject of the intervention visible, the intervener/leveler, their relationship with the leveling subject and their participation in the discursive construction of intervention needs. This problem, then, makes it necessary to inquire about the discourses that take shape through the technology of leveling in affirmative action, constructing discursively and subjectively positioning the subjects of leveling.

Discourses, power relations and processes of subjectification

In this paper I am guided by a poststructuralist conception of the processes of subjectification, referring to the production of certain particular types of subjects in the practices of policies (Bacchi; Goodwin, 2016). In this context, the notion of subject simultaneously involves a subjective position to be occupied in different spaces of society (subject to another), as well as the subjectivity that such a positioning requires, produces and reinforces, as attributes, behaviors and dispositions that they are encouraged to assume (Foucault, 1988). As potential citizens, students, clients, patients, etc., the processes of subjectification configure the production of subjectivities associated with these different positions in a continuous process of constitution and reconstitution in response to the conditions in which we find ourselves and multiple relationships that we build from there (Wille et al., 2015).

From this approach, subjectivity is conceived not as something that one has or is, but rather as something that is done, performatively shaping a subject in response to one context and others through actions sustained over time (Butler, 2021). Such a process of formation does not arise precisely from the individual, but rather from conditions that discourses produce and limit, in power relations that legitimize certain ways of thinking, speaking and acting as appropriate and meaningful (Youdell, 2006a).

From here, the subjects of leveling are produced and limited by power/knowledge relations from the subjective positions available in a particular discursive context (Youdell, 2006b). This results from the intersection of multiple available discourses (deficit, socioeconomic status, diversity, rights, social mobility, etc.), which regulate particular ways of learning and behaving (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2012) and consequently construct an idea of *good* students and *good* leveling professionals. The concretion of these subjects can be considered as a discursive effect, shaped in relation to norms, expectations, affects, and experiences, configuring knowledge and interventions on the subjects (Energici, 2016).

This capacity of discourses to materialize in actions and not only in 'sayings' involves technologies, such as expert knowledge, techniques, instruments, procedures and modes of intervention that effectively produce subjective effects (Bacchi; Goodwin, 2016; Dean, 1996).

The study of subjectification is relevant to shed light on learning spaces that exceed the scope of what is prescribed in the curriculum, in places where educational subjects can learn more about who they should be than about what is offered to learn. These studies–of governmentality– are especially concerned with the practices that constitute political subjects as governable, promoting identities that *perform* behaviors considered desirable (Wille et al., 2015). To the extent that these fields of forces aspire to produce and maintain a certain social order, regimes of subjectification are configured that transmit to people truths about themselves, and their way of behaving and relating to others (Bröckling, 2015).

Problematizing these regimes offers relevant opportunities to understand educational micropolitics and the subjectivizing effects of the discourses with which these spaces are governed. For example, Brunila and Siivonen (2016) have shown how neoliberal rationality has been incorporating in educational spaces an alliance between therapeutic and entrepreneurial discourses to produce a subject who works on themself to overcome their own vulnerability, opening themself to various modes of intervention. Skytterstad et al. (2024) have also shown how deficit thinking serves to construct teachers in training as lacking, pushing them to assume characteristics, behaviors and dispositions associated with their assumed deficits and dismissing the knowledge and skills they effectively have.

The study of subjectification focuses on the processes through which individuals learn how to read social expectations and how to submit to them, training themselves in the management of the discourse itself that submits them. However, the subject as a speaker generally believes that they are the authors of said discourse, an effect of identification with the position they assume when they become literate (Wool; Kelchtermans, 2015). The subjects of these discourses thus also become their defenders and spokesmen, and by being subjectivized they can potentially subjectivize others, a discursive agency that, as Butler (2021) proposes, positions them simultaneously as speakers and spoken by the discourses that name them.

Conceptions about the subjects of policies are relevant because they are usually based on assumptions that reflect the problematizations on which they have been constructed, as well as the dominant political rationalities and the technologies that effectively allow them to be focused on individuals (Bacchi; Goodwin, 2016). In an interplay between technologies of control and technologies of the self (Castro, 2004), the subjects of policies are in a permanent process of fabrication working on others and on themselves, a characteristic especially relevant in the case of leveling, insofar as it opens the consideration of norms, expectations, affects, and experiences that are associated with both leveling others and leveling themselves.

Methodology

This work is part of a larger research[3], focused on the study of PACE's enactment (Villagran, 2020) in different institutional contexts. This is a sociological approach that pays special attention to the processes of recontextualization of the policy in different universities, where actors play a key role in interpreting it and translating it into practice in a situated manner (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2012). This approach, then, seeks to problematize the meanings and positions from which professional subjects contextually participate in the discursive construction of the programs, through situated narratives about the type of student that PACE recruits, as well as the one it seeks to train.

Although PACE involves three central technologies, these being school strengthening, situated meritocracy and leveling, this work focuses only on the latter, and with it on the professionals who interact directly with newly admitted students from a particular way of translating into practice the prescriptions on academic and psychoeducational accompaniment. The specific research question is then: How do PACE professionals interpret and translate into practice interventions associated to the students' challenges to access and persist?

In terms of data production, I strategically selected two programs located in universities that configure contrasting contexts in terms of their legal status (private/public), educational project (Catholic/secular), selectivity level and prestige (medium/high). From there I developed a critical ethnography (Dubois, 2015) of a year that, inspired by the framework of institutional ethnographies (Luken, 2021), privileges the point of view of PACE professionals. With this, I sought to interrogate common senses about the work to which PACE professionals are summoned and the discursive spaces in which they are inscribed. The produced data corresponded to interviews with professionals from both cases, professionals from universities linked to PACE and with the Ministry of Education (Mineduc) who participated in the construction of the policy texts in its early years.

For this work, I consider the subset of interviews with professionals who work in direct contact with students admitted to PACE, as well as professionals who participated in the writing of the prescriptions of the intervention strategies aimed at them. In total, I considered the interviews with 37 professionals, who, although they were located in 2022 in direct connection with the two case studies, have worked in 8 different universities and in the Ministry of Education in the last decade. In the following table I illustrate the different roles they have fulfilled in relation to PACE.

Table 1 – Professionals interviewed according to positions associated with PACE

	Current role							
Previous role	Dir.PACE	Coord.PACE	Coord.Min.	Prof.Min	Ac.Acad.	Ac.Psi.	Prof.Seg.	Inv.
Dir.PACE	3							
Coord.PACE		7	2	2				1
Ac.Acad.					5	2	1	
Ac.Psi.		1	1			4	2	
Prof.Seg.				1			1	
Inv.		1		1				2
Total	3	9	3	4	5	6	4	3

Keys: Dir.PACE: Program Director; Coord.PACE: Coordinator in the PACE program; Coord.Min: Coordinator of the Ministry of Education; Prof. Min: Professional Ministry of Education; Ac. Acad: academic accompaniment professional; Ac. Psi: psychoeducational accompaniment professional; Prof.Seg: student monitoring professional: Inv: Researcher. Source: Prepared by the author.

For the production of data, I also considered 61 documents developed in different spaces: at the governmental, institutional or academic level. A large number of the interviewees have fulfilled a role of authorship in these documents. I also observed 29 intra- and inter-institutional events during 2022 that link both case studies, such as coordination meetings, training instances, or admission activities, among others. The ethnographic impression that I was building allowed me to identify which documents have been relevant, resonant, and prescriptive for PACE practitioners, and informed the main themes that were addressed in the interviews.

As a data analysis strategy, parallel to the development of observations and documentary selection, I developed an inductive coding process from the reading of the interview transcripts and the associated observation records in an exercise of constant comparison (Charmaz; Henwood, 2017). Then I built a series of axial codes, these being: leveling need, participating and motivating, asking for help and helping, gratitude, professional development and professional pride. These categories are directly linked to lines of subjectification that, from professional narratives, are associated with a relationship between the leveler subject (who speaks in the interview) and the subject of leveling (who is named). The results that I develop below describe a process of subjectification that relates the positioning of the leveler subject and their professional subjectivity with the needs and expected characteristics of the subject of leveling.

Results

I locate the origin of this analysis in two events post-implementation of the fieldwork, which were especially influential to the extent that they coincided with the period during which I analyzed the interviews with PACE professionals. These had an important impact on my ethnographic impression, adding to the multiple observations, interviews and readings of documents, and to a certain extent, opening a par-

ticular reading of the narratives of professionals in relation to the challenges that PACE students face in their insertion stage.

The first event was a lecture on leveling that I held with a PACE team, where I presented the results of different analyses that I have carried out parallel to this research. As I develop in the aforementioned analyses (Miranda-Molina, 2022), leveling constitutes a remedial education technology with a strong load of deficit discourses with which students of lower socioeconomic status are symbolically positioned at the lower level of gaps and unevennesses in regard to a certain level required or deemed 'normal'. Despite the fact that this technology is deployed in PACE with a rhetoric of care, in this lecture I made an argument about the leveling nature of actions focused on newly admitted students, showing that these interventions have been strategically renamed as 'accompaniments'.

At the end of this lecture I received multiple comments from professionals who actually work in the field of leveling, one of which seemed to respond to the criticism of the deficit discourses by referring to the fact that PACE students "come back all the time to ask for help and tell us that they need even more leveling". This comment seemed to refer to a belief from the students themselves about their need for leveling, locating the *locus* of the deficit production on the subject of intervention.

A few weeks later I attended a workshop on inclusion facilitated by this same professional, where he mentioned this concern from the field of inclusive education with greater authority. In an explanation of attitudinal barriers to learning, this professional proposed a conceptualization that I reconstruct below:

> And another type of (attitudinal) barrier, which we see a lot in the program, is the student's self-prejudice, because the kids (sic) often believe that they are less capable than they really are and that limits them (Teacher inclusion course, field notes).

This explanation, sustained from a now teaching position, seemed to me to be evidence of his own conceptualization of what he previously told me as a personal concern that was not necessarily consistent with inclusive education[4]. He presents this conceptualization with a double authority: from the current position of inclusion 'teacher' and also from his own experience working with students with 'inclusive approaches'. Participation in these events suggested to me a new reading of my materials, denaturalizing a relationship that sometimes describes the professional subject from a position of ghost author of institutional documents and that speaks about the needs and characteristics of the students. These events opened up a working hypothesis for me about the subjective potential of the pedagogical relationship that the leveler subject maintains with the subject of leveling.

These experiences are a key milestone in the biography of the question with which I inquired about the problem of professional interpretation and subjectivity, in a relationship of power that seems to have a certain parallelism with the relationship that we have previously reported between university and high schools, the former—symbolically at

the higher level—as an intervening subject, and high schools and their students as subjects of intervention at the lower level of a gap to be closed (Miranda-Molina; Leyton, 2025). The topics that I describe below are associated with lines of subjectification that link both subjects of the leveling and not only refer to the relative positions they assume, but also to the subjectivities that these require, produce and reinforce, despite the fact that the nature of my research privileges the point of view of the leveler subject.

Leveling need: lacking students and capable professionals

Offered as a 'solution', leveling generally points to a multiplicity of training deficits that are assumed as elements that would limit the possibilities of PACE students to participate fully in the university space and persist in the trajectory that has just begun. From this problematization, the professional subjects narrate their involvement in making up for various deficits associated with the knowledge necessary to successfully start the programme, such as prerequisites for the subjects with the highest level of failure and demand, but also a series of skills to favor their retention. All these training deficits make up a complex network of elements that make up the need for leveling.

> When we talked about leveling, we were talking about handling this gap, for us, accompanying them during the first year meant getting them to understand what university life was like, learning to manage their time, relating to others, organizing themselves and participating in all the activities in order to open up a whole world for them that they hadn't had access to (PACE Program Coordinator, interview).

These multiple elements that the aforementioned coordinator describes as the needs of the subject of leveling in order to integrate into the university context, build the university space as a new and symbolically distant place to the extent that there is a certain 'gap' between the resources with which they enter and those they need to effectively participate in this space. However, described from a first-person plural, it denotes an institutional commitment embodied in the leveler subjects, who 'take the responsability' of opening up a 'world' to which they now have access. Thus, the leveler subject turns to meet this need from their professional training, even more so, in multidisciplinary teams with a collective capacity to attend to multiple lines of intervention. The professional subject is also positioned as a connoisseur of and belonging to the university space, symbolically, within this world that is opening up to the subject of leveling, although it requires a certain mediation.

> There is a specific development of any other–additional–tutoring that the PACE student needs. And we continue to have an open channel to identify potential new demands that PACE students could have and must be accompanied. Today, when we have already received six PACE generations, we already know, down to the millimeter, what courses and in what semester and in which academic units a student who enters through PACE will need help (Higher education coordinator, interview).

The multidisciplinary work of the teams that are dedicated to 'helping' PACE students in the multiple needs they present is constructed discursively as a set of institutional capacities and learning of the dif-

ferent leveling subjects. At the institutional level, this practical knowledge of the professional teams about the needs of PACE students constitutes a symbolic capital that they use strategically to defend their legitimacy as 'university' students capable of persisting thanks to this support. Knowing 'down to the millimeter' the potential needs of PACE students denotes a professional capacity to construct specific support actions, although assuming the need as an essential characteristic of the subject of intervention, devoid of a relational character with institutional conditions and practices. In this way, the constructed nature of the need for leveling and its relationship with the conditions and practices of other actors who are not focused on as subjects of intervention in PACE, such as university teachers, is made invisible.

Learning to ask for help: humble students and caring professionals

Among the many skills to promote retention that are prescribed in PACE, in the field of psychoeducational accompaniment, one that especially affects professionals in this component is the so-called ability to 'ask for help' (Mineduc, 2020, 2022, p. 10), a trait that is promoted in different ways in the programs. During the fieldwork, I identified multiple interactions in formal and informal spaces where this element is translated into practice with a rhetoric of solidarity.

> Our model seeks to make the student feel confident enough to stop hiding or denying what the system forces them to hide or deny, which are all the 'I don't know'. 'Any questions?', I tell them, and the students stay quiet, because they compare themselves with others, with the one who is further ahead, who is always identified and they're ashamed to say 'I don't know'. But in the tutoring, we try to show them that the most important thing is for them to tell me 'I don't know', because then I can help you, but the most important thing is that you can identify what you need support in (Math mentor, interview).

This professional accounts for their own model ('our model') with a sense of authorship and belonging to a team that has been building and validating it, where recognizing what is not known constitutes a possibility condition to identify specific elements of the need to be addressed. Help requires docility from the subject of leveling, it requires openness to the intervention and recognizing gaps or deficits in a simile to the patient's therapeutic gesture indicating where it hurts. In this case, beyond the assumptions and lessons learned about the deficits of the PACE student that the professional subject uses strategically to build individual supports, this mode of subjectification requires that students overcome the embarrassment of making their 'need' visible, in order to also generate an openness to intervention. There is here a line of dialogue in which the leveler subject seeks to convince the subject of leveling of their need, in order to attract their participation.

> There's that myth that if you did well in school, you're going to do well here too. Eh... no. Most likely, your first grade will be a one, but don't worry, it's all good, let's go for that one. In fact, we have a meme: 'How did your first one go?', because in the first years it was terrible, that is, they got grades like one or two, boys who had gotten 6.8 all their lives (PACE Coordinator, interview).

From a positioning of a certain camaraderie, this coordinator associates the challenge of the subject of leveling as a shared one ('let's go for that one'), in the form of an accompaniment of their trajectory, assumed as potentially failed. Anticipating, therefore, an expected initial academic failure constitutes a coping strategy for the shock that would mean finishing secondary education with almost maximum grades[5] and then starting higher education with minimal grades.

This contrast is recurrently described in a narrative that symbolically places secondary education at a lower level of difficulty, and HE at a higher one, so that the same subject, previously showing a relatively high performance, is now expected to have an insufficient level of performance as a result of their social origin. This derives from the formation of the subject of the PACE policy, simultaneously talented, as they have superior relative performance at the secondary level, and vulnerable because they come from sectors of high social vulnerability. Learning to ask for help constitutes in this problematization a condition of possibility for the subject of leveling to participate in the accompaniments that the professional subjects build.

Participating in everything: Engaged students and motivating professionals

Generally, participation in these supplementary leveling instances does not imply a formal obligation for the subject of leveling, but rather, a benefit derived from their entry through the program, which activates a tactic of convincing them of their need for participation.

> Basically, by entering through this track you are obligated to go through these supports, and that's why, as we already know in advance, you have needs. So you have to go through these leveling courses, and along with your academic load you have to add a little more, and you're also going to be over-distinguished compared to your peers, but that's for your sake, because if you don't, you probably won't continue in college (Inclusion Researcher, interview).

This is a line of dialogue between the subjects of leveling, in a relationship of power based on the knowledge ('we know in advance') of the leveler subject about the needs of the subject of leveling and the negative consequences that would 'probably' come with not participating in these instances. The leveler subject also announces necessary costs to be assumed, such as a greater academic load and an 'over-distinction' that would make them visible as a student with greater 'needs'. This is a tactic of convincing them about their deficits and a certain declared symbolic obligation for having entered through equity quotas, as a precedent to the offer of accompaniment that promises to overcome them.

Recognizing one's own needs and learning to ask for help are, therefore, learning outcomes from the leveling technology, to the extent that they configure conditions of possibility for their participation. Participation is also an area of accountability in the PACE program, prescribed as an expected outcome of good management at the institutional level.

> It is important for universities to consider measures that promote the participation of beneficiaries in mass activities that in-

> volve the disbursement of significant sums of money for food. If it were to become evident that a HEI [Higher Education Institution] had been negligent, resulting in significant losses, it will be cause for the analysis and possible request for reimbursement of the amounts wrongly invested (Mineduc, 2017, p. 10).

Participation is an element directly linked to the good use of the public resources that finance the program, as prescribed in this excerpt from the 2017 accountability manual. From this rationality of the Neoliberal State, which demands accountability for the use of the resources it provides, a low participation of students in activities that involve food expenses can be judged as a 'loss' derived from 'negligent' management of the program. Participation indicators are also accounted for, such as percentages of attendance at the different academic and psychoeducational support actions, which are directly developed by the leveling subjects, who experience it with significant pressure.

> It is frustrating when we organize an activity for forty people and only two arrive, because we know they need it, and also the ministry asks us to report biannually how many are participating. So we have a weekly contact protocol by email, if they don't answer we continue through Whatsapp and if that doesn't work we send tutors to look for them in the classroom. Finally, for them to sign the resignation letter. But we are always reinforcing the importance of their participation, motivating them to come to all the activities, because we know that it helps them and we don't want them to let two or three months go by, and then come to ask for help when they've already almost failed the courses (Student Follow-up Professional, interview).

A tactic with which the programs face the accountability for participation and its link with the academic performance of the subject of leveling is the preparation of resignation letters, so that PACE students who do not participate can formally express their willingness to 'do without' the accompaniment offered. These instruments are means of verification delivered to the Ministry of Education to account for students who do not participate of their own volition and not due to a lack of effort from the program. The participation of the subject of leveling and the motivation that the leveling subject incites are associated here as a central element of the leveling relationship.

Moreover, the ultimate responsibility for achieving the participation of PACE students falls simultaneously on both subjects, the subject of leveling assuming the responsibility of participating from the awareness of their 'needs' and the leveler subject assuming the responsibility of motivating them. A dominant interpretation of the participation of the subject of leveling here is to understand it as an effect of a 'job well done', expressive of a motivation that the leveler subject managed to effectively incite, that is, expressive of the work of a motivating professional. Thus, I was able to observe different instances in which the high participation is celebrated by the teams and professionals in charge of the organization of these activities, living it with pride, because it is a sign that the PACE students value the support offered to them. I also observed instances in which the low participation put certain professionals in question, having to account for the efforts made to motivate the student body.

Grateful students and proud professionals

Despite the fact that since 2018 the general purpose of PACE was rewritten to "allow entry" and "favor progress" of "outstanding students from vulnerable contexts" (c.f. Mineduc, 2018, p. 3), as opposed to the original purpose of "restoring the right to higher education" (c.f. Mineduc, 2015, p. 4), this discourse on the right to higher education is still resonant in the context of practice for the professionals in the program.

> And I said, but I'm here in the best job of my life. On top of that, I work in a program to assert rights, that is, students will be able to enter, you give them an opportunity, that is, this is extremely important and deeply committed with PACE, and I honored it a lot, I worked every day I could, and more, I was there, committed (Professional academic accompaniment).

As the story of this professional illustrates, the discourse of restitution of rights that mobilized the program since its inception has important subjective effects, as they live their participation in the program with pride, in a political positioning that associates this right in a normative terrain that places them at the pole of social justice and inclusion. This symbolic dimension of the right to education constitutes an important political commitment from the professionals, as agents of inclusion who, in the field of practice and in direct contact with the subjects of leveling, aspire to make effective the promise of restitution of the right. The work of building specific initiatives within this policy is also lived with significant professional pride.

> So, we generated a tutoring system and we asked ourselves, how do we do this? I don't know, we tried, questioning all the time how to do it and we continue until now, because I have the conviction that what we do helps the students, from their own stories about us, they're openly grateful for the work we do here (Academic mentor, interview).

This is another dimension of professional pride, an experience that they live by building specific strategies with their professionalism at the service of the purposes of the program. In opposition to an orientation best described as 'executors'[6], professional pride here is configured rather as that of policy builders who, from their professional knowledge and expertise, develop intervention strategies so that they effectively work and are valued by the subjects of leveling.

During the fieldwork I was able to observe multiple relatively informal instances of interaction between PACE professionals and students based precisely on this pride/gratitude relationship. The presentation of testimonies of students in different activities as already leveled subjects is also a recurrence.

> It was them [the PACE professionals] who gave me the necessary tools, such as study tips, how to organize your time, and all these little things that are needed to survive and then, as time went on, I began to be part of the team, attending lectures where I gave my testimony and experience to finally end up being a PACE tutor. Accompanying my classmates from the first year and I'm very grateful to all of it because they gave me that plus and confidence to be able to continue and finish this whole process and I am very grateful to all of you and to the entire program in general (PACE tutor testimony, field diary).

This testimony shows a clear ascription to the lines of subjectification of leveling, both in the openness to intervention with the purpose of 'surviving' the process of transition to HE, as well as making one's own experience available to the leveling processes. It is a narrative of success, of having been leveled out, given that the assumed deficit was made up for with the 'plus' that the leveler subject gave them, so that they are now able to contribute to the leveling of new subjects. The trajectory of PACE students to become peer tutors in professional accompaniment tasks is a phenomenon that is frequently celebrated by the professionals of the program. These testimonies also serve as an invitation to the subject of leveling to—paraphrasing Rancière—later also become leveler subjects.

Conclusions

With this work I have addressed professional subjectification in the context of affirmative action, starting from a specific professional subject, such as the leveler subject and their relationship with the subject of leveling to which it turns. This technology of affirmative action, central to favoring retention, is constructed by the professional subject, discursively and materially oriented towards designing actions that are useful, valuable and effective for the subject of leveling, the performative environment in which they work on themself. Thus, the pedagogical relationship in which they are inscribed aspires to form docile, humble, participative and grateful students and for this it requires a capable, supportive, motivating and proud leveling subject, in a relationship of power/knowledge based on the epistemic authority of the leveler subject.

However, this work privileged the perspective of the professional subject, that is, this approach to the processes of student subjectification derives from multiple instances in which the subject of leveling is spoken of in the third person, the different intervention actions are named and associated with specific needs and characteristics, with a marked authority based on one's own professionalism and experience. This work, then, fails to shed light on other forms of student subjectivity, their possibilities of resistance to these modes of subjectification. The non-participative, meanwhile, absent from the leveling space, are named as abject subjects headed for failure and abandonment in a warning to others about the consequences of non-participation.

In the field of student subjectivity, in a similar manner as to how the work of Díaz et al. (2021) illustrates, after admission, the subject of leveling is inscribed within a certain symbolic violence as a recipient of authority and domination by other educational agents, in this case, the professional subject, although deployed with a rhetoric of care and solidarity. While in the field of access, the regime of student subjectification in PACE is of meritocratic exceptionality (Briones-Barahona; Leyton, 2020), aspiring to produce subjects deserving of access to HE based on a performance superior to that of their peers, learning to ask for help after access means overcoming a certain humiliation, by renouncing to being recognized as a good student to the extent that they would need support

to 'survive' (Wolves; Gallardo; Valenuzela, 2021). This would be, then, a shock particular to the working-class subject, unlike regular entry students.

In the field of professional subjectivity, working at PACE involves significant political and professional pride, symbolically positioning the leveling subject as an agent of inclusion and restitution of the right to HE. They also live this experience with a sense of belonging, from a we, the leveling subjects as collective subjects who assume the responsibility of making effective the inclusion that PACE promises. In their capacity as builders, they participate in the discursive construction of the program and its subjects, as meritorious/vulnerable students, and in the objects that configure the need for leveling. However, the gesture of solidarity of accompanying, though it avoids a rhetoric of the deficit of 'leveling', reinforces a discourse that constructs the PACE student body as headed for failure in the absence of necessary additional support.

These results allow us to show how, in the specific field of leveling, PACE programs are governed by fundamentally positive affects, between pride, solidarity and gratitude, unanchoring affirmative action from the policies of indignation typical of the criticisms that triggered their emergence. Echoing Restrepo's (2013) suggestion, the assumed kindness in affirmative actions constitutes a threat of closure of thought, and from there, critically addressing support, aid, and accompaniment also requires inquiring about how they do not necessarily help, as well as about the effects of constructing historically marginalized sectors as subjects of help. However, the possibilities of resistance or flight of the leveler subject regarding this matrix of exclusion in which they are inscribed, would merit a certain mourning regarding how satisfactory and enriching their participation in this leveling endevour can be, to reorient them towards strengthening the self-efficacy of the working class student body and effectively recognizing their legitimacy as a subject of the right to higher education.

Received December 1, 2024
Approved July 2, 2026

Notes

[1] 83% (90 out of 109) of these programs were funded in 58% of existing universities (34 out of 58). The source of this data comes from a systematization of the agreements awarded, available on the website of the Undersecretary of Higher Education: https://dfi.mineduc.cl/.

[2] The so-called Propaedeutic Programs are initiatives for the recruitment of students with high relative performance from high social vulnerability high schools, to lead them to extracurricular reinforcement processes and special admission quotas. Created since 2007, they currently exist in 19 universities.

[3] This project is a doctoral thesis, approved in 2021 by the ethics commission of the Alberto Hurtado University, and was funded by the National Research and Development Agency (Chile) / Subdirectorate of Human Capital / National Doctoral Scholarship, Folio 21211032. I am especially grateful for the valuable reviews and comments of Daniel Leyton, Marion Lloyd, Pablo Astudillo and Nicolás Fleet, as well as the collaboration of the professionals of the PACE program.

[4] The notion of barriers to participation and learning is central to inclusive education, locating the focus of inclusion in a relationship between the context and the subject (Echeita; Ainscow, 2011). Proposing a barrier as something that the subject 'has' or 'carries', then, subverts the critique of the inclusive education movement regarding educational integration policies that hold historically marginalized groups responsible for their necessary adaptation (Graham; Slee, 2008).

[5] In the Chilean case, a grading scale between 1 and 7 is usually used.

[6] It should be noted that in the first years of the program, the MINEDUC defined job profiles for coordinators, managers, and executors (Mineduc, 2016b).

References

BACCHI, Carol; GOODWIN, Susan. **Poststructural Policy Analysis**. A guide to practice. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

BALL, Stephen J.; MAGUIRE, Meg; BRAUN, Annette. **How Schools Do Policy**: Policy enactment in secondary schools. London: Routledge, 2012.

BELLEI, Cristián; VILLALOBOS, Cristóbal. The Construction of a Political Actor in a Post-Dictatorship and Neoliberal Context: Persistence, Success, and Challenges of the Chilean Student Movement (1990–2020). In: KLEMENČIČ, Manja (Org.). **The Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Politics and Representation in Higher Education**. 1. ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. p. 328-345.

BRIONES-BARAHONA, Jocelyn; LEYTON, Daniel. Excepcionalidad Meritocrática y Política de Acción Afirmativa en la Educación Superior en Chile. **Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas**, v. 28, p. 1–31, 2020.

BRÖCKLING, Ulrich. **El Self emprendedor**. Sociología de una forma de subjetivación. Santiago: Editorial Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2015.

BRUNILA, Kristiina; SIIVONEN, Päivi. Preoccupied with the self: towards self-responsible, enterprising, flexible and self-centred subjectivity in education. **Discourse**, v. 37, n. 1, p. 56-69, 2016.

BUTLER, Judith. **Excitable Speech**: A Politics of the Performative. 1. ed. London: Routledge, 2021.

CASTRO, Edgardo. **El vocabulario de Michel Foucault**. Un recorrido alfabético por sus temas, conceptos y autores. Argentina: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2004.

CHARMAZ, Kathy; HENWOOD, Karen. Grounded theory. In: WILLIG, Carla; STAINTON-ROGERS, Wendy (Org.). **The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology**. London: Sage Publications, 2017. p. 240-259.

DEAN, Mitchell. Putting the technological into government. **History of the Human Sciences**, v. 9, n. 3, p. 47-68, ago. 1996.

DÍAZ, Mauricio et al. "Vas a tener que nivelarte. Vas a tener que estudiar más que los otros". Voces de estudiantes que cursaron un programa propedéutico en la Universidad Católica del Norte, Coquimbo, Chile. **Estudios Pedagogicos**, v. 47, n. 3, p. 207-227, 2021.

DUBOIS, Vincent. Critical policy ethnography. In: FISCHER, Frank et al. (Org.). **Handbook of Critical Policy Studies**. UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015.

ECHEITA, Gerardo; AINSCOW, Mel. La educación inclusiva como derecho. Marco de referencia y pautas de acción para el desarrollo de una revolución pendiente. TEJUELO. Didáctica De La Lengua Y La Literatura. **Educación**, n. 12, p. 26-46, 2011.

ENERGICI, María Alejandra. Propuesta metodológica para un estudio de gubernamentalidad: Los procesos de subjetivación y los mecanismos de regulación poblacional como ejes de análisis para su abordaje empírico. **Psicoperspectiva**s, v. 15, n. 2, p. 29-39, 2016.

ESPINOZA, Oscar. Acceso al sistema de educación superior en Chile. El tránsito desde un régimen de elite a uno altamente masificado y desregulado. **Universidade**s, v. 68, n. 74, p. 7-30, 2017.

FOUCAULT, Michel. El sujeto y el poder. **Revista Mexicana de Sociología**, v. 50, n. 3, p. 3-20, 1988.

GRAHAM, Linda J.; SLEE, Roger. An illusory interiority: Interrogating the discourse/s of inclusion. **Educational Philosophy and Theory**, v. 40, n. 2, p. 277-293, 2008.

LANAS, Maija; KELCHTERMANS, Geert. "This has more to do with who I am than with my skills" – Student teacher subjectification in Finnish teacher education. **Teaching and Teacher Education**, v. 47, p. 22-29, abr. 2015.

LOBOS, Constanza; GALLARDO, Gonzalo; VALENUZELA, Jorge. ¿Por qué no pedir ayuda cuando la necesito? Obstáculos a la búsqueda de apoyos académicos institucionales (AAI) en universitarios chilenos. **Education Policy Analysis Archives**, v. 29, p. 157, nov. 2021.

LUKEN, Paul C. Institutional Ethnography: Sociology for Today. In: LUKEN, Paul C.; VAUGHAN, Suzanne (Ed.). **The Palgrave Handbook of Institutional Ethnography**. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54222-1_1, p. 1–8, 2021.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Beca Nivelación Académica**: Programa de Nivelación de Competencias para Estudiantes de Primer Año de Educación Superior del 2012. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2011.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Términos De Referencia**. Programa PACE 2015. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2015. Disponible en: https://dfi.mineduc.cl/instrumentos-de-financiamiento/asignacion-directa/programa-pace/. Accedido el: 20 abr. 2025.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Guía orientadora**. Estrategia de nivelación y acompañamiento en la educación superior. Programa PACE 2016. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2016a. Disponible en: https://educacionsuperior.mineduc.cl/wp-content/uploads/sites/49/2022/10/REX-2949-2016_aprueba-manuales-y-guias-PACE.pdf. Accedido el: 20 abr. 2025.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Términos de referencia**. Programa PACE 2016. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2016b. Disponible en: https://dfi.mineduc.cl/instrumentos-de-financiamiento/asignacion-directa/programa-pace/. Accedido el: 20 abr. 2025.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Manual de rendición de cuentas PACE 2017**. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2017.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Términos de referencia**. Programa PACE. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2018. Disponible en: https://dfi.mineduc.cl/wp-content/uploads/sites/114/2019/02/TdR-PACE.pdf. Accedido el: 20 abr. 2025.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Términos de referencia**. Programa PACE 2020. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2020.

MINEDUC. Ministerio de Educación. **Términos de referencia**. Programa PACE 2022. Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 2022. Disponible en: https://dfi.mineduc.cl/instrumentos-de-financiamiento/asignacion-directa/programa-pace/. Accedido el: 20 abr. 2025.

MIRANDA-MOLINA, Rafael. Brechas y desniveles: el problema representado en las iniciativas de "nivelación" en la Educación Superior Latinoamericana. **Revista de Estudios y Experiencias en Educación**, v. 21, n. 46, 2022.

MIRANDA-MOLINA, Rafael. Discursos de inclusión universitaria en Chile: meritocracia e integración educacional. **Pedagogía y Saberes**, n. 61, p. 70-82, 2024.

MIRANDA-MOLINA, Rafael. Entre la mejora educativa y la integración educacional: intepretaciones de los equipos PACE sobre la inclusión del sujeto talentoso/vulnerable en la educación superior chilena. **Calidad en la educación**, n. 62, 2025.

MIRANDA-MOLINA, Rafael. Programas de nivelación en las universidades chilenas: gestión centralista del abandono desde discursos del déficit y de integración educacional. **Revista de Estudios y Experiencias en Educación**, n. 25, 2026.

MIRANDA-MOLINA, Rafael; LEYTON, Daniel. The discursive formation of the affirmative action policy in Chile: Right to higher education, public education, and deficit. **Policy Futures in Education**, v. 23, n. 2, p. 355-372, 2025.

RAMOS, Claudio. **El dispositivo de selección universitaria**: mérito, ciencia y justicia social (Chile, 1850-2022). Santiago, Chile: Ediciones UAH, 2023.

RANCIÈRE, Jacques. **El maestro ignorante**: cinco lecciones sobre emancipación intelectual. Tradução: Núria Estrach. 2a ed ed. Barcelona: Laertes, 2002.

RESTREPO, Eduardo. Acción afirmativa y afrodescendientes en Colombia. In: RESTREPO, Eduardo (Ed.). **Estudios afrocolombianos hoy**: aportes a un campo transdisciplinario. Colombia: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2013. p. 249-264.

SKYTTERSTAD, Remi; ANTONSEN, Yngve; STENSETH, Anna-Maria. Remediating deficits? Problem representations in Norwegian policies for newly qualified teachers. **Journal of Education Policy**, p. 1-21, 18 jul. 2024.

TROW, Martin. Reflections on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access: Forms and Phases of Higher Education in Modern Societies since WWII. In: FOREST, James J. F.; ALTBACH, Philip G. (Org.). **International Handbook of Higher Education**. Springer International Handbooks of Education. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2007. v. 18. p. 243-280.

VENEGAS-RAMOS, Luis; GAIRÍN, Joaquín. Aproximación al estado de la acción tutorial en universidades chilenas. **Perfiles Educativos**, v. 42, n. 167, p. 103-118, 2020.

VILLAGRAN, Carla Andrea. El estudio de la puesta en acto de las políticas educativas en clave microfísica. **Revista Latinoamericana de Metodología de las Ciencias Sociales (Relmecs)**, v. 10, n. 2, p. e079, 2020.

VILLALOBOS, Cristóbal et al. Social justice debate and college access in Latin America: merit or need? The role of educational institutions and states in broadening access to higher education in the region. **Education Policy Analysis Archives**, v. 25, p. 73, 2017.

WILLE, Christian et al. (Org.). 5.1 Subjectifications and Subjectifications. In: WILLE, Christian; RECKINGER, Rachel; KMEC, Sonja; HESSE, Markus (Ed.) **Spaces and Identities in Border Regions**. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015. p. 241-252.

YOUDELL, Deborah. Subjectification and performative politics - Butler thinking Althusser and Foucault: Intelligibility, agency and the raced-nationed-religioned subjects of education. **British Journal of Sociology of Education**, v. 27, n. 4, p. 511–528, 2006a.

YOUDELL, Deborah. Diversity, inequality, and a post-structural politics for education. **Discourse**, v. 27, n. 1, p. 33-42, 2006b.

YUTRONIC, Jorge et al. Convenios de desempeño y su aporte en el financiamiento de la educación superior en chile. **Educación superior y sociedad**, v. 16, n. 1, p. 53–77, 2012.

Rafael Miranda-Molina holds a PhD in Education from the Alberto Hurtado and Diego Portales universities in Chile. His research focuses on affirmative action policies in Chilean higher education. He has also researched leveling policies and their problematizations in Latin American higher education. He is currently an academic at the Faculty of Education at the Finis Terrae University.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3084-5704
E-mail: rmiranda@uft.cl

Availability of research data: the dataset supporting the results of this study is published in the article itself.

Editor in charge: Iris Verena Oliveira