

Between engagement and renouncement: Academic excellence in high performance state schools [Entre a entrega e a renúncia: Excelência acadêmica em escolas públicas chilenas de alta performance]

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Excellence is a key-concept of the new educational rhetoric. This paper aims at reflecting on social representations of excellence shared by principals and students attending the last two years of secondary education in two high performance state schools located in Santiago (Chile), the capital of one of the most permeable countries to the commodification of education. It also aims at reflecting on the costs of pursuing excellence, concerning emotional dimension and free time to leisure and sociability. Firstly, we will characterize the Chilean educational system and we will discuss the polysemic concept of excellence, from the most performative definitions to those focused on a holistic perspective of education. Due to the openness of the Chilean educational system to privatization, evaluation and accountability, we would predict that these schools' educational agents would share a strong attachment to the academic dimension of excellence. However, based on data collected through intensive and extensive techniques (individual interviews with school management teams and students and focus groups and surveys with students), we find evidence that students share nuanced perceptions and that they markedly do not include performative and utilitarian dimensions in their social representations of excellence. Concerning the way how students experience the pursuit of excellence, their speeches have revealed anxiety and stress disorders, often very severe, and also a busy daily workload, due to heavy academic tasks that do not allow them the essential free time to establish the networks of sociability and leisure that are part of youth identity.

Excellence

State schools

Student's job