Institutional and Teaching Practices for Student Retention: Accounts from Four High Schools of Valparaíso, Chile

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Abstract: Although central governments, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, have defined reducing school dropout rates as a priority, and drawn policies accordingly, there are still young people who do not finish secondary education, and numbers are still alarming. Therefore, it is necessary to observe educational communities and analyze how they interpret and implement guidelines issued by the central government. The following study sought to describe the institutional and teaching practices deployed by four high schools in Valparaíso (Chile) in order to achieve student retention. A qualitative approach was employed. The management team, support professionals, teachers, students, and their families were interviewed. The information gathered was analyzed using the Grounded Theory. As a main finding, establishments use practices such as monitoring attendance, providing support to students facing problematic situations, and encouraging them during class, through a series of strategies. It is recommended that researchers implement this type of methodology for other study objectives, and that the central government consider these results to provide feedback on its policies.

Keywords: *School dropout, institutional practices, teaching practices, student retention.*

Introduction

The promotion and generation of strategies for children and adolescents to complete primary and secondary education have been central topics in the agendas of different countries and educational institutions (Romero Sánchez & Hernández Pedreño, 2019; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016) due to the wide range of negative consequences of early school dropout both for students and society (Bentaouet Kattan & Székely, 2015; Koc et al., 2020; Ministry of Education of Chile, 2017; Stuit & Springer, 2010). Currently, only 49% of the world population is estimated to have completed secondary education (UNESCO, 2019), with this situation being even more concerning in developing countries (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019). Such is the case of Latin American and Caribbean countries, where a series of initiatives has been launched to reduce the levels of school dropout (Araya & Palma, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). However, these countries are also still facing the challenges inherent to the region, which are mainly associated with belonging to Indigenous populations, as well as poverty and rurality, factors that also affect students (Adelman & Székely, 2017).

Among these countries is Chile, where this commitment has translated into measures such as the enactment of Law No.19786 in 2003, which defined the obligation of secondary education (Library of the National Congress of Chile, 2003), and the generation of guidelines, orientation, subsidies, and/or scholarship programs for protecting the educational trajectories of the most vulnerable populations (Budget Office of Chile, 2018; Ministry of Education of Chile, 2015a). Furthermore, according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019), Chile is the country with the second highest percentage of public expenditure on education among members of this group. In summary, the central government has denominated all these efforts "student retention," which refers to the capacity of the education system to achieve the permanence of students in school and guarantee that they complete their studies (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2020a).

Despite the above, the latest data published by the Center of Studies of the Ministry of Education of Chile (2020b) indicate that 37,149 primary and secondary education students were forced to abandon their studies. Although these data are

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influenced by the consequences of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2022), it could be argued that this situation carried over from before, considering that information from the 2017 census showed that 10.3% and 12.3% of the population had not completed primary and secondary education, respectively (Ministry of Social Development and Family of Chile, 2017).

Therefore, it may be inferred that the policies, programs and guidelines designed by the central government for promoting student retention are not adequately crystallized in diverse educational contexts. On this point, authors like Wilson and Tanner-Smith (2013) have revealed the importance of reviewing the proposals and strategies implemented in educational institutions. Finally, the dynamics generated in schools are relevant to explain the educational trajectories that students will follow (Bernárdez Gómez & Portela Pruano, 2023).

Thus, the general aim of this study was to analyze and describe the institutional and pedagogical practices of educational communities for dealing with student retention, which respond to their specific needs and contextual characteristics. The research question was stated as follows: "What institutional and pedagogical actions for school retention are mobilized in funded or state-subsidized secondary education establishments?". During each practice, the research team inquired strengths, opportunities for improvement, and challenges in promoting successful graduation.

Literature Review

The Problem of School Dropout

School dropout is a problem that does not have a single way of defining (González-Rodríguez et al., 2019) because each country has its regulations to define what school education consists of, and under what conditions it can be established that a student has officially dropped out (Marlow & Rehman, 2021; Momo et al., 2019; Mughal, 2020). However, in general terms, it could be defined as a gradual process where the student gradually withdraws from the educational establishment and culminates with the cessation of compulsory studies (Makarova & Herzog, 2013; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2017). Understanding it as a process involves, among other relevant aspects, that measures can be taken before this scourge occurs.

A series of institutional, family, social, and student-specific factors produce school dropout (Gil et al., 2019; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2021). Because the student-specific factors are only one dimension in this multifactorial process, some authors have been critical of the concept of school dropout since it holds the student more accountable than necessary. In response, they have preferred to refer to the problem as "unschooling" or "school exclusion" (Cortés-Rojas et al., 2019). Independent of the above, several authors agree that due to the multifaceted nature of the process, identifying it and establishing measures to prevent it from happening is challenging (Gil et al., 2019; Mughal, 2020).

When the most recent studies on school dropouts are analyzed, the research seeks to understand how COVID-19 impacted students' educational trajectories. These investigations emphasize the risk that inequalities in access to education that already existed prior to the pandemic have increased (Bayley et al., 2023). On the other hand, there remains a high interest in continuing to delve into the causes that cause it, either in a general way (Kumar et al., 2023) or by analyzing specific factors such as parental alcohol consumption (Pisinger et al., 2023). Some studies analyze this topic using more sophisticated techniques, such as machine learning (Colak Oz et al., 2023; Selim & Rezk, 2023). Within these cases is a Chilean study, which, based on this methodology, achieved a model with a predictive capacity 20% higher than previous studies (Rodríguez et al., 2023). In the authors' words, this type of study allows us to reinforce the relevance of having "qualitative studies of pedagogic practices" (p. 10128) such as the present research.

In conclusion, school dropout continues to be a highly discussed topic in national and international literature, focusing on identifying why it happens and where individual variables (such as motivation and personality characteristics of the student) occupy a less significant place within the social variables. The following section describes the efforts to understand what measures can be taken to address this problem.

Institutional and Pedagogical Student Retention Practices in Literature

In general, there are studies that have addressed the specific topic of retention practices, although these are fewer, and studies that have not dealt with it from a practice perspective, but rather have focused on initiatives from other institutions that are interesting to analyze. Regarding the former group of studies, one worth mentioning is that of Valenzuela et al. (2019), who studied ten educational centers from different areas of Chile to search for strategies (practices or activities) employed by these educational communities to improve student retention. Among the strategies found, the studied educational communities provided comprehensive support to their students, identified students who could be at risk of dropout, adapted the curriculum, if necessary, constantly monitored student attendance, promoted continuity of studies, and conducted constant work with the family and/or guardians, among others. Other international studies have similar results when teachers and parents are asked about the strategies, they consider relevant to promote student retention. For example, in a study conducted by Majzub and Muhammad Rais (2010), in addition to the strategies above, participants added the importance of developing a safe classroom environment, providing schedule flexibility for students who (due to economic problems) have to work, and promoting active and engaging learning.

In this line, some other studies have focused on finding specific strategies for the promotion of retention, such as the definition of certain roles or the people responsible for it (Carr & Galassi, 2012; Mendoza Lira et al., 2022), or the analysis of specific programs such as summer schools (Vinas-Forcade et al., 2019), school support systems (Lee-St. John et al., 2018), or tutorship programs (Avilés Gavilán & Bascuñán Cancino, 2015), among others. In addition, some studies have addressed the need for working more specifically with certain protected groups such as migrant students (Faas et al., 2015; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022) or students in situations of poverty and vulnerability (Quiroga Lobos, 2022).

Finally, it should be noted that the literature produced has focused on the teacher's role, either in the creation of a positive environment for learning, or specifically in student retention. Some behaviors described as key elements for the promotion of permanence in the education system are emotional support (Tvedt et al., 2021), constant feedback from students (Carvalho et al., 2021), and the construction of an environment where there are high expectations for the student (Van Houtte & Demanet, 2016).

These elements, altogether, allow for the collection of relevant ideas during field work, and enable dialogue with the different educational communities. However, it should be noted that leaving aside Valenzuela et al. (2019) study (which does talk about practices), most of the research previously reviewed did not aim to analyze practices but rather pursued other research questions (which can then be conceptualized as "practices"). This study, then, allows us to specifically raise these strategies so that they can be helpful for other establishments or the scientific community in general.

Theoretical Framework

First, this study takes as a crucial concept the term of "enactment" proposed by Ball et al. (2012), which refers to the implementation process of an education policy in a specific community in order to meet its needs. The education policy, after all, should not only be studied in its design but also in its execution, and it is education stakeholders who interpret, adapt, or even create their own programs to make central government guidelines fit their reality (Meo, 2014). This perspective is then the backbone to approach different educational communities.

Second, the work by Valenzuela et al. (2019), together with the work conducted by the Agency for Education Quality of Chile (2016), provided a reference framework for what will be understood as "practice" throughout this study. To describe this framework, it is worth mentioning the distinction between a practice and an activity or action. As opposed to activities, practices are more systematized, which grants them characteristics such as periodicity, monitoring and adjustments, applicability across the educational community (institutionality) and, lastly, some degree of innovation or attractiveness that could lead other educational communities to adapt them after finding out about them. Conversely, an activity or action could be a measure adopted autonomously by one teacher, a program implemented for a brief period or, in summary, any intervention that does not meet all the criteria above. Finally, the term strategy is used to refer to both practice and actions (regardless of their degree of rigor).

Another conceptual distinction for conducting the study was the difference between institutional and teaching practices. Institutional practices are those carried out by the education establishment as a unit, and consist of guidelines commanded by the management team of the institution and do not necessarily have a solely academic approach, while teaching practices are those in which the teacher plays a fundamental role, with a more academic approach and/or conducted in the classroom, as some studies in the pandemic context have progressively distinguished (Flores & Gago, 2020). Below, the methodology derived from these approximations is described.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach in order to understand—from a comprehensive perspective—the phenomenon under study (Hameed, 2020; Kelly, 2023), which in this case corresponds to student retention practices. The scope is descriptive, as the objective is to specify and analyze all the practices that appeared in these educational contexts (Hernández et al., 2014). This scope not only allows us to characterize these practices in depth, but also constitutes a first approach to reflect on what elements make them successful and potentially reproducible in other educational environments.

Regarding design, the study is quasi-ethnographic, and sought immersion in each educational community, as well as finding the activities these performed and the relationships between their different stakeholders (Guber, 2001; Jociles Rubio, 2018). The selection of this design had to do mainly with the fact that the educational establishments were not available for field work extended over time, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, interactions and observations of specific scenarios were privileged and that, in any case, provided relevant information for the study (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004).

Sample and Data Collection

Based on the studies conducted by Mendoza Lira et al. (2022) and Mendoza Lira and Ballesta Acevedo et al. (2023), the inclusion criteria for selecting the establishments were: belonging to the region of Valparaíso, Chile (the region in the

country with the second highest school dropout rate), being a state funded or state-subsidized private school (due to the same reason above), having a School Vulnerability Index (in Spanish, IVE) above 75% (which indicates some critical conditions of students at the socioeconomic status level), and a Student Retention Score above or equal to the national average (which shows that schools manage to retain students despite such conditions, and therefore have practices of interest for this study). A total of 237 educational establishments met these requirements. With this information, the Local Public Education Service (in Spanish, SLEP), the administrative body of the educational centers in the region, allowed contact with five high schools that, in principle, were interested in participating in this study. Finally, four secondary education establishments decided to participate, providing comprehensive education, that is, the arts and sciences and technical and vocational education at the secondary level.

Theoretical sampling was conducted in each establishment, following Glaser and Strauss (1967), and aimed to find the perspectives of the management team, teachers, support professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists), students, and students' families (in this way, including the whole educational community). In the case of the management team, teachers, and support professionals, individual interviews were conducted (which lasted approximately 60 minutes), while students and their families participated in group interviews of a similar length. This distinction was due to the convenience criterion. For both cases, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview guideline (Tonon, 2012) that addressed, on the one hand, general aspects of school retention (based on the theoretical framework that supports this study) and, on the other, institutional practices and pedagogical practices that - from the point of view of those interviewed - favor the continuity and permanence of students in the school context. Valenzuela et al.'s (2019) guidelines and the Agency for Education Quality of Chile (2016) recommendations were followed, but leaving space for actors to contribute their perspectives (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

In total, the research team conducted 47 individual interviews (11 individuals with the management team, 21 with teachers and 15 with support professionals) and 10 group interviews (4 with students and 6 with families, with an average of 4 to 6 people each). Finally, it should be noted that, of all the participants, 64 were women and 20 were men.

Analyzing of Data

Information was analyzed using the Grounded Theory methodology, which - trough open, axial and selective coding -, seeks to determine fundamental characteristics, as well as the bases and principles of the associated concepts (Gibbs, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 2016); in this case, different strategies that educational communities employ for promoting student retention. In the first stage, open coding was performed to find all the strategies, regardless of their degree of systematization or institutionalization in each school (regardless of whether they were practices or activities). To define the peculiarities and idiosyncrasy of each educational community, the primary unit of analysis was the establishment; i.e., interviews were first conducted in the same establishment in a search for these strategies, and then the following school was analyzed until completing the four educational centers.

In the second stage (axial coding), these strategies were categorized as practices or activities based on the guidelines and the work conducted by Valenzuela et al. (2019) and the Agency for Education Quality of Chile (2016). This implies that it was analyzed, in a matrix, whether each strategy was (1) systematic, (2) regular, (3) institutionalized, (4) monitored and assessed over time, (5) consistent with its purpose, (6) innovative, and (7) mobilizing for educational communities. It is noteworthy that, as in that study, "these criteria were assessed in a flexible way, understanding that not all of them could be met or fully addressed" (Valenzuela et al., 2019, p. 16), while this study aimed to discuss the strategies and the degree to which these reflected more methodical efforts. In any case, systematicity, regularity, and institutionality were maintained as excluding criteria for a strategy to be considered a practice. Lastly, in a third stage (selective coding), these practices were differentiated as institutional or teaching practices.

It should be noted that, in each of the stages - and in order to ensure reliability between coders - the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) was used. This, according to the guidelines of Grounded Theory, is an iterative and inductive process that allows both interaction between coders and the reduction and recoding of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings/Results

Of the total strategies analyzed, 12 fulfill the characteristics to be denominated practices, and 15 are activities to manage student retention that, due to their implementation mode, require more systematicity. Below, practices are classified into institutional and teaching, and assigned to the corresponding centers that perform them. Regarding activities, only the most significant are mentioned (either because they are related to a practice, or because they are common to the four educational centers).

Institutional Practices

-Attendance Protection (Practice in 4 Establishments): A key indicator at the moment of protecting educational trajectories is the safeguarding of class attendance. This monitoring, broadly speaking, is included in the latest international agreements and standards signed by Chile on the right to education and the obligation of secondary education. Therefore,

all four high schools have a set protocol to apply this central government guideline, with slight variations across the institutions.

In broader terms, the protocol is activated after the student has missed class several times. Once activated, it has a progressive nature, as the different authorities are asked to monitor the situation and establish measures for the student to return to class. The first step is that the teacher in charge of the student's class contacts their guardian via telephone or other means. With this contact, the teacher gathers information about the reality of the student that is unknown by the educational center, after which agreements or remedial measures are established to ensure class attendance.

If this contact was unsuccessful (whether because the guardian did not reply or the family did not fulfill the commitments made), the teacher in charge of the class reaches out to the support professionals and/or management team of the school to conduct a more intensive follow-up of the case. If follow-up does not yield results, the last stage is activated and the establishment denounces the situation to the corresponding authorities (local police) arguing child neglect.

The success of this practice, in general, is variable and depends on the complexity of the case. In some cases, the student returns to class, but in others, the situation is challenging and the student, unfortunately, drops out. This scenario has diverse opportunities for improvement, which are related to the timely detection of these cases and the joint work with parents and/or guardians.

-*Case Management and Detection (Practice in 4 Schools):* As mentioned above, attendance is a key indicator in the identification of possible risk situations and the achievement of student retention. However, considering the multiple factors due to which students may be forced to abandon their studies, educational institutions should have a full overview of the psychosocial and academic situation of the student. The multifactor diagnosis conducted by educational communities (emotional, socioeconomic, family, and academic situation, among others), together with the establishment of remedial measures, is denominated case management and detection.

There are different ways in which educational centers conduct this practice. In general, the head teacher first detects the case (in collaboration with other teachers from other subjects), although this is not excluding, and the initial alert may originate from, other education stakeholders. Subsequently, the case is referred to the support professionals, who in some high schools, are assigned a specific number of students depending on workload, while in other establishments, there are professionals specialized in specific work axes (e.g., migrant students, students who work, SENAME [National Service for Minors] network, among others). These professionals make the final diagnosis and corresponding referrals to the social service networks or even to other programs (or practices) from the educational center. This practice, consequently, mobilizes the entire educational community and, in some cases, is even stated in its written Institutional Education Project. It should be noted as an innovative element that in one establishment, a teacher was also certified in alternative therapies (as a floral therapist), and depending on the case, support professionals referred students to this person. This activity is innovative and shows that the skills from different education stakeholders can be employed in the benefit of student well-being.

In some cases, the situation is detected in a timely manner and a plan is created for the student to remain in the institution. In other cases, the attempt fails, mostly due to late detection, the severity of the case, or the gaps in the remedial measures established. Despite having room for improvement, case management and detection is a practice that can be shared and applied in educational communities.

-*Extracurricular Workshops (A Practice in 2 Establishments, and an Activity in 2 Establishments):* To nurture a sense of belonging and promote opportunities beyond the parameters defined by the Ministry of Education of Chile as minimum content, some institutions offer extracurricular workshops oriented to the different interests of students, such as choir, painting, theater, sports, and musical instruments, among others. In these high schools, the variety of workshops is stated in the Institutional Educational Project, and the institution schedules the months for calls and enrollment, notice for parents and/or guardians to authorize the participation of their child in a workshop, execution of the workshop (by the school teachers and/or by external teachers paid with state funds), and evaluation for the following year. Regarding the last point, these establishments evaluate which workshops had the most students and modify their offer based on this. This practice, in the end, makes students perceive high school as a place for personal development, increasing the motivation to continue studying.

Although the 4 educational centers display this strategy, some are more systematic than others. Therefore, there are both institutions that address workshops as isolated activities, and institutions that consider it a systematized practice. Finally, educational communities indicate that—complementarily—they celebrate the high school's anniversary and national festivities (e.g., national day), as well as other dates that create a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, these are not addressed as deeply as the extracurricular workshops.

-*Vocational Guidance (A Practice in 2 Establishments, and an Activity in 1 Establishment):* A relevant strategy when protecting the educational trajectories of students is to insert secondary education as an extra link to achieve meaningful professional and work development. With respect to this, some establishments provide their students with vocational consulting and guidance to achieve student retention. In the high schools where this strategy is a practice, vocational orientation is not an isolated activity but rather a sequential plan that comprises support to select a secondary education

technical specialty (when students pass to eleventh grade), monitoring the performance in the specialty program, protocols in case someone wants to change specialties, and even support for their integration into the labor force or the continuance of their studies. On this last point, high schools that have this strategy as a practice: have agreements with universities and technical training professional institutes; help students score better in the Admission Test for Higher Education (in Spanish, PAES); invite universities to give talks in the high school; or conduct guided visits to centers of interest (especially to those that grant higher education technical-professional degrees). In addition, these establishments often have a support professional fulfilling this role (a vocational counselor) and/or monitor the number of students that continue their studies (and then report it via the Institutional Educational Project).

In the case of one specific establishment, some support professionals prepared complementary material to go further and work with students on their life plan (and how completing their education will enable its success) Although this was a highly innovative initiative, unfortunately it had almost no influence on other support professionals or educational stakeholders, and therefore is considered only an activity.

-*Withdrawal Management (A practice in 1 Establishment, and an Activity in 3 Establishments):* Inevitably, there are situations when families and/or students desire to withdraw from high school and continue studies in another educational community, whether due to moving out of town, the educational program, or situations of another nature (e.g., bullying). Nevertheless, ensuring that the student is effectively enrolled in another establishment (rather than not enrolling and therefore dropping out) is an imperative from the Chilean legislation; consequently, the four establishments guarantee this process in one or another way. It should be noted, however, that one educational center of the four studied has a more specific procedure for the matter, which should be highlighted as a practice in that case.

In this high school, the procedure starts with the guardian manifesting their intention to withdraw their ward. When this occurs, the guardian is called for a meeting to find out the reasons for the withdrawal and assess if there are some compensatory measures for preventing the student from transferring to another high school (e.g., if due to bullying, the possibility of moving the student to another class is evaluated). If the negotiation does not succeed and the guardian insists on withdrawing their ward, the educational community monitors that the guardian in fact has enrolled the student in another educational institution through the online platform offered by the Central Government ([General Student Information System]. In Spanish, SIGE). This monitoring, in some cases, provides information when the guardian has not conducted the corresponding transfer, which leads to contacting the family once more, or even calling the authorities to make a report. These steps have the ultimate goal of the student continuing their studies, despite not being in the institution. In this way, withdrawal management is a practice that should be underscored, as it is a strategy that focuses on the student's well-being even over the interests of the educational establishment (which is interested in ensuring an enrollment percentage due to state funding).

-*Prevention and Management of Possible Grade Repetition (A Practice in 1 Establishment, and an Activity in 3 Establishments):* Another factor that can trigger school dropout is related to students who, due to their academic performance, must repeat a grade. In response, one of the high schools established a unique system in which repetition is not automatic but can be applied under certain causal factors; instead, the system focuses on the early detection of risk factors and a follow-up process. The procedure is initiated when a specific teacher (or other education stakeholder) detects warning signs and calls both the student and their family to generate mutual commitments. The rest of the educational community also participates in this work by getting involved in the creation of actions and measures for mitigating and/or eliminating risk factors.

This practice originated from the study the high school conducted for the repetition phenomenon among its students, which concluded that students who repeat grades do not necessarily learn better or obtain higher grades. After this analysis, the practice was formalized through an internal decree of the establishment, which allowed for its institutionalization. It should be noted that, in the Chilean education regulations, all establishments should have a procedure that seeks to prevent grade repetition. However, the high school above used a system that has two sequential stages and a degree of continuous assessments, which is considered a practice.

-*Flexibility and Considerations for Protected Groups (A Strategy in 3 establishments, and an Activity in 1 Establishment):* Achieving student retention is also related to how to take measures for students at risk of being excluded from the system. This is the case of adolescents who have to work and/or face early parenting. In such cases, teachers (with the support of the management team and support professionals) unfold a series of measures denominated "flexibilities" that are aimed to protect educational trajectories at risk.

One of the first flexibilities is related to schedules, attendance, and authorizations to perform or attend other activities (e.g., go to work, in the case of adolescents who work, or to a medical appointment, in the case of pregnant adolescents). These authorizations are negotiated with the students and/or their families, are within the institutional and governmental framework, and in general, imply the commitment of students of keeping up with their subjects. Second, in addition to attendance, an assessment calendar is planned that allows the student to continue studying and, at the same time, meet their personal obligations. Regarding the effectiveness of these practices, although in some cases these measures are insufficient and the student drops out of school, in other cases retention is successful and translates into the student completing compulsory secondary education.

It is noteworthy that one establishment also had a strategic support and protection plan for adolescents from the LGBTIQA+ community. In this high school, instead of providing flexible attendance and assessments, this strategy focused on awareness about how the educational community, especially teachers and students, should treat these students inside and outside school. In turn, extracurricular activities (such as workshops on the topic) were prioritized, as well as support and counseling opportunities. Another educational center had similar measures but targeting the migrant population, in order to improve and strengthen school coexistence. Both cases together show how the establishments identify groups at greater risk of school dropout and take specific measures to protect their educational trajectories.

-*Economic Support (An Activity in 4 Establishments):* Finally, since one of the factors involved in school dropout is the poverty and vulnerability faced by adolescents, a strategy of educational communities to address these issues is the provision of materials and resources to both students and their families. This support may come from the government or be self-managed funds (i.e., from the establishment itself), or originate from campaigns in which the educational community participates (including other families with better socioeconomic situations). Some examples of this support are transport vouchers (to fund bus passes for students), grocery basket with basic foods, or direct monetary donations. In any case, economic support starts with the detection of families in greater need, and then delivering these resources. However, in general, these contributions were not systematic enough and therefore are considered an activity.

In this line, it is worth mentioning the specific strategy employed by one high school during the pandemic. This establishment implemented the program "Cuarto Conecta" (Fourth Year Gets Connected), which aimed to provide materials to promote the connection to online classes in the last year of secondary education (12th grade). These resources covered anything from the provision of Wi-Fi sim cards or tablets to cooking ingredients (for students in the gastronomy technical specialty). Although this initiative was highly innovative, it was only conducted during the remote education period due to the physical distancing dictated by the health authority. Thus, it is not considered a practice.

Teaching Practices

-*Phase 0 (A Practice in 1 establishment):* A good way to start with teaching practices is to describe one practice of this high school at the beginning of the school year. The class lead teacher—and teachers of other subjects—devote their first lessons to explaining the curricular content addressed during the semester, establishing some basic coexistence norms, and opening the communication channels for students to manifest their opinions about these two points. This initiative has been denominated "Phase (or Unit) 0," as it marks the start of the academic year. This practice, despite being led by teachers, is accompanied by support professionals (e.g., when coexistence rules are defined) and is established in the Institutional Educational Project. According to the interviewees, although it was not designed with the specific objective of managing student retention, this practice does achieve this goal, as it allows students to be active subjects in their learning process and own the structure and content of the class.

In another establishment, some teachers hosted an end-of-semester activity in which a brief survey was applied to students, asking them which aspects of the class they liked and which could be improved. Although this strategy was highly valued by the students, only a few teachers applied it, and therefore it is more an activity than a practice.

-*Subject Practice (A Practice in 1 Establishment, and an Activity in 1 Establishment):* To increase the involvement of students in classroom learning (thereby promoting student retention), many teachers make important efforts to link the contents of their lessons with daily topics or knowledge directly necessary for adult life. One example of this is using math class to teach how to interpret/calculate severance or a pay slip, or history and social sciences class to analyze the current affairs of the country. In the establishment where this takes place, the practice is part of its educational seal and is widely acknowledge by all of the educational community (including families), but especially by teachers, who ask for constant feedback on how to plan lessons that adapt better to the real needs of students.

-*Curriculum Adjustments for Special Educational Needs (A Practice in 2 Establishments):* A protected group that could see its educational trajectories at risk are students with special educational needs. In this case, the Central Government has specific support plans, such as the School Integration Plan (in Spanish, PIE). However, these two educational communities created practices beyond the legally requested, which are worth mentioning. Concretely, they conduct actions that not only involve students from the PIE program but the whole student body that may have special educational needs. The above implies a procedure that starts with the detection of these cases, to subsequently establish remedial measures and referrals when necessary. Additionally, in these institutions, the protection of these educational trajectories is established in the Institutional Educational Project and in the teacher, profile found in the same document. This initiative, as an extension of the PIE program, reduces the percentage of withdrawals and dropouts, as it dissuades parents from withdrawing their children from the establishment (or entire school system) due to, for example, their low academic performance.

In turn, as an activity, the proposal of one high school during the pandemic is worth mentioning. Specifically, it consists of a tutorship system where some students could connect to receive additional teaching hours to work on certain learning gaps. Although this activity was implemented only because of the health emergency, as well as the difficulties in delivering all content and achieving all learning goals through remote education, it is worth noting, as it could be implemented in other contexts with students that require extra support.

-*Emotional Support (A Practice in 3 establishments and an Activity in 1 Establishment):* The teaching profession in the establishments studied is not limited to delivering content, but also should fulfill (on many occasions) the role of support for students with psychosocial problems or difficulties. This strategy has been denominated "emotional support." In the high schools where this is a practice, "emotional support" is not only part of the teacher profile in the Institutional Educational Project, but also mobilizes other education stakeholders, especially support professionals, who conduct workshops for teachers to learn how to deal with crisis support and self-harm, among other situations. Additionally, in these establishments, it is clearly regulated that in more severe cases, a timely referral must be made so the adolescent receives treatment or support from social assistance networks. However, due to this factor, one of the main challenges faced by this practice is that students should feel enough trust to disclose sensitive topics. Despite the above, one of the outcomes of this practice is the early detection of critical cases by teachers, through which the school could be one step ahead and take measures to prevent students from abandoning their studies due to psychosocial problems.

As an activity, it should be highlighted that in one establishment during the pandemic, some teachers implemented an "emotional activation" activity at the beginning of all their lessons, which consisted of asking students the affective state with which they entered the classroom (on a Likert-type scale that replaced numbers with "memes"). This activation enabled students to communicate their difficulties, promoting closeness with their teachers. However, long times were required in some situations to address complex topics (e.g., suicidal ideation), which affected daily academic planning.

-*Family Support and Guidance (A practice in 1 Establishment, and an Activity in 3 Establishments):* In addition to providing due emotional support to students, teachers must also provide counseling and support to the nuclear family of the student in order to promote an external environment that promotes student retention. This activity has been denominated "Family support and guidance."

In the high school where this strategy arose, a meeting calendar was established, in which meetings not only should have one specific objective (e.g., meeting the guardian) but also follow a set script for this objective. These interviews were led by the class head teacher, together with support professionals (psychologists and/or social workers). Finally, this practice served as an additional opportunity to detect problematic situations, promoting the generation of other strategies in the educational center.

In general, the call for meeting and the actual meeting with parents and/or guardians is an activity already installed in the different educational communities. Nevertheless, in other establishments, this agenda does not seem to have the same systematicity and institutionalization and therefore it is considered an activity rather than a practice.

-*Keeping High Expectations for Students (An activity in 2 Establishments):* Finally, an activity performed in the classroom that aims to improve the involvement of adolescents with their educational process is related to the high expectations of teachers for their students' skills. This activity comprises activities from the acknowledgment in the classroom of the relevance of achieved learning (of which students should become aware) to sharing stories of success from people who students know or are close to and that encourage them to complete their secondary education. After all, this activity centers on fostering the skills and resilience of students rather than focusing on their weaknesses and difficulties. Although this is an activity not closely related to the practices gathered in this study, the value it gives to the protection of students' educational trajectories is undeniable.

Discussion

The following article sought as a general objective to describe and analyze the institutional and pedagogical practices deployed by the four educational communities of the Valparaíso region in Chile to promote school retention. After the field work and subsequent analysis, a series of initiatives—both institutional and teaching—were found, which are applied in these establishments to protect educational trajectories.

The conceptual framework that guided this study was the concept of 'enactment' (Ball et al., 2012), which refers to the study of how some guidelines, regulations, and policies from the Central Government are implemented in educational contexts. Regarding enactment, it was found that the practices are related to international agreements on the right to education (UNESCO, 2016), internal laws such as Law No.19876, which defines the obligation of the same (Library of the National Congress of Chile, 2003) and the Pro-retention Program (Budget Office of Chile, 2018). In this scenario, educational communities should protect class attendance, manage cases in which students exhibit a problem that requires referral to a health care and/or justice center, and deal with due school withdrawal procedures, seeking that students leaving the establishment are enrolled in another education center. All these practices are directly related to the obligation of the establishment to ensure that students continue studying and receive the necessary care (e.g., in the case of family abuse) since the reverse could constitute child neglect. Perhaps this is the reason why both protecting attendance and supporting students at risk were also found in the establishments analyzed by Valenzuela et al. (2019).

On the other hand, it was observed that several of these have a deep connection with scientific literature. For example, if school dropout is a multifactorial problem (Gil et al., 2019; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2021), it makes sense that when students systematically miss classes, their case is analyzed from a psychosocial perspective. In this sense, case management analyzes the student's family, socioeconomic, and motivational situation to develop a specific and compelling action plan. It happens in a similar way with other institutional practices such as the creation of

extracurricular workshops (Gil et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2019), the flexibility and consideration for protected groups (Majzub & Muhammad Rais, 2010), and the vocational guidance (Valenzuela et al., 2019). Regarding pedagogical practices, it is worth mentioning the emotional support (Mendoza Lira et al., 2022; Tvedt et al., 2021), the establishment of a learning environment characterized by high expectations for students (Majzub & Muhammad Rais, 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2019; Van Houtte & Demanet, 2016), the curriculum adjustments for special educational needs (Valenzuela et al., 2019) and the family support and guidance (Valenzuela et al., 2019) as practices that find their mirror in scientific literature. However, this study made it possible to identify these ideas and conceptualize them as practices with clear stages and roles, so that they can serve as an example for other establishments.

However, not all practices arise exclusively from the legal or have a clear connection with literature, and the installation of innovative practices could be verified in the fieldwork. These strategies, such as the incorporation of a "Phase 0" where learning objectives are identified or the promotion of enrollment of the student in another school when the decision is made (even if it means a drop in enrollment at the current school), are highly innovative despite receiving less attention from the scientific community.

In other cases, although the Ministry of Education of Chile and the scientific literature has provided some guidelines, more innovation is observed in the educational communities to face school dropout (Mendoza Lira, Muñoz Jorquera et al., 2023). For example, regarding flexible arrangements for protected groups, in the case of adolescent pregnancy and maternity, the Chilean law, through Law No.20370 (Library of the National Congress of Chile, 2023), clearly defines that this situation cannot become an impediment for the continuity of study, and therefore educational communities should provide a flexible assessment calendar (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2015b). However, it is interesting to highlight how some educational communities have broadened the concept of protected groups to include other groups of interest that the literature has started to detect as at potential risk of dropout, such as migrant students (Faas et al., 2015; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022) and the LGBTIQA+ community (Michaelson, 2008). These types of practices, then, show how some guidelines from the Ministry of Education of Chile can be worked on, reviewed and applied in other contexts.

Other interesting conclusions could be reached from possible gaps found in the study. Specifically, it is noteworthy that according to the literature, situations of poverty and vulnerability explain school dropout to a great extent (Gil et al., 2019; Mughal & Aldridge, 2017); however, in none of the educational communities studied did the socioeconomic factor appear as a practice (only as an activity), which is similar to the findings of Valenzuela et al. (2019), where only one establishment of all establishments analyzed showed more systematic efforts to tackle these situations. Although it might be considered that economic support is, to a large degree, the responsibility of the central government through the subsidies and scholarships it provides (Budget Office of Chile, 2018), this point clearly deserves deeper analysis and to be considered by the state of Chile.

Finally, a great advance of this study was the inclusion of the analysis of teaching practices employed by teachers that could promote student retention. Although the definition of "teaching practice" in student retention is found in some authors and documents from the Chilean government (Flores & Gago, 2020; Mendoza Lira et al., 2022; Ministry of Education of Chile, 2020a), its inclusion allowed for identifying—now as a practice—some topics already described in the literature, such as mentioned above.

Conclusion

The analyzed establishments—which shared characteristics of interest such as prevalence of high vulnerability indexes among students, and a student retention score equal or above the national average—manage to protect the educational trajectories of their students through a series of institutional and teaching practices.

In the case of institutional practices, these cover attendance monitoring and timely and efficient management of certain conflictive situations that the students may be experiencing (establishing remedial measures such as the flexibilization of the assessment calendar for protected groups), followed by the implementation of additional measures such as extracurricular workshops or vocational support, an adequate management of withdrawal, and follow-up in case of possible grade repetition. Teaching practices consist of setting clear coexistence rules (Phase 0), linking subject contents with practical elements, adapting contents for special educational needs, providing support to students and their families during their educational trajectory, and keeping high expectations for the learning students may achieve.

Recommendations

Considering the distance with which educational communities sometimes observe teachers, studies should increasingly center on how teachers understand, interpret, and analyze the guidelines from the Central Government (Meo, 2014), as well as those concepts from the academy (Mendoza Lira et al., 2022). In this sense, future researchers should be reminded of the relevance of this approach for new research questions. In turn, it is key that future research considers this approach for both sampling (which for each educational community comprised management staff, teachers, support professionals, students, and their families) and the concept of "practice" to then study what actions these educational contexts take to reach the relevant institutional objectives (e.g., to ensure education quality or in the transition from primary to secondary

education). It should be mentioned that this type of data collection required a considerable amount of time (around two years), and therefore future researchers should consider this point in their planning.

For practitioners, particularly people in central government positions, these studies allow for analyzing how educational communities are learning certain guidelines and adapting them to their reality, and, with these data, study how these policies can be assessed, given feedback, and improved for future decisions about student retention made by the government.

Limitations

Since a large part of the study was conducted during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) health crisis and the availability of the educational communities, other data gathering tools for quasi-ethnographic studies such as participant observation could not be used (Guber, 2001; Jociles Rubio, 2018). Although the quantity of information was large and theoretical saturation was achieved (Gibbs, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 2016) through multiple interviews, it would have been valued to have the possibility to, for example, observe parents and guardians meeting to analyze the practices found, such as the support from teachers to the families; or the teachers council to determine what place student retention occupies in the discourse and interactions of the teacher body.

Ethical Statements

This study was conducted following the ethical guidelines from the National Agency for Research and Development (ANID) of Chile. Data collection was carried out with the express and informed consent of interviewees.

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Authorship Contribution Statement

Mendoza-Lira: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis/interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, securing funding, supervision, and final approval. Ballesta-Acevedo: Data acquisition, data analysis/interpretation, drafting manuscript, and critical revision of manuscript.

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