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Do national test scores and quality labels trigger school self-assessment and accountability? A critical analysis in the Chilean context

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Do national test scores and quality labels trigger school self-assessment and accountability? A critical analysis in the Chilean context

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Using qualitative data from two Chilean public schools, I interrogate the expectation that standardised testing motivates staff to critically self-assess themselves and to be accountable for failing evaluations. The research findings bring new insights into looking at ways in which school members, especially head managers, strategically debate, highlight and obscure scores, classifications and ranking positions to generate narratives of institutional success, while defending themselves from negative outcomes. Members are both disciplined by state technologies, but are also actively committed to produce school identity narratives in creative ways as a manner to make sense of the school and maintain its value.

Keywords: accountability; school markets; school identity; Chile

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Introduction

Measuring, ranking and labelling school 'quality' is an expanding policy among national educational systems, linked to market reform agendas. The state distances itself from school management and daily processes, while becoming a target-setter and performance monitor, demanding school accountability. In this way, the state takes on new forms of power and influence, related to governance and managerialism, attempting to ensure control 'at a distance' over multiple public and private educational providers. Schools are centrally assessed, classified and ranked, according to a competing logic. Individual schools are considered to be comparable institutions and responsible for their outcomes. It is expected by policy-makers that these national evaluation tools lead schools' staff to assess their work critically and to be accountable for their performance outcomes, and encourage staff to continuously improve the quality of their educational provision in order to avoid acquiring a negative reputation and sanctions from the state.

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The aim of this paper is to critically interrogate the effects of these policies in schools, engaging with Foucault's theoretical thinking as well as some of Bourdieu's conceptual tools.[1] Although the effects of accountability policies in school teaching have been extensively studied (Falabella 2014), there is little analysis on the effects of these policies on school members' understandings of their own institution. In this paper, I examine how school members, particularly head managers, internalise, resist and recreate official judgements and classifications, and how they produce and make sense of their own institutional identity. Therefore, I interrogate the supposed benefits of these state assessment tools; that is, in what ways they trigger critically self-assessment and motivate educational improvement.

The research was conducted at five case-study schools in Santiago, Chile, involving in-depth interviews, staff meeting observations and documentary analysis.[2] In this paper, for reasons of limited space, I select qualitative data gathered from two schools with different performance outcomes, allowing me to contrast the effects of these policies. Similar findings drawing on all case studies are developed in the research conclusions (Falabella 2013).

The paper is divided into four sections: the next section presents a brief analysis of the educational model in Chile; the subsequent section is a theoretical examination of school assessment, labelling and ranking policies; the following section is an analysis of policy effects in the two case studies; and the final section defines the conclusions deduced.

Educational policy context in Chile

Chile has gradually introduced accountability policies into its market-driven school system. In the 1980s, in the context of the civic–military dictatorship, multiple neoliberal reforms were implemented in the welfare system. In education, school choice and privatisation was increased (allowing the state to subsidise for-profit schools), while public and private schools started competing for per-child funding. Since the return of democracy in 1990, the market model has been maintained in combination with stronger state support, and a set of centralised accountability policies that include national assessments, school test targets, league tables, and official school classifications linked to rewards and sanctions.

A national test was instituted in 1988 called SIMCE (English: Education Quality Measurement System). The census and annual results have been published in the media since 1996. Later, in 2001, a system for classifying schools was created to determine the quality of education that schools provided, also taking into consideration the percentage of socially disadvantaged students per school.[3] Subsequently, schools started to be classified as high performing, intermediate performing or low performing, although the precise names, categories and criteria for classification have changed over the years. This system of classification dictates the degree of school

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autonomy and the extent of state support granted for 'low-performing' schools, following principles of positive discrimination.

In the last few years, accountability policies have been expanded to include higher performance requirements for schools that receive extra funding for serving pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (a policy referred to as the Priority School Subsidy[4]). Recently a new institutional schema was created, made up of a Quality Agency and a Superintendent of Education, in charge of setting standards, inspecting and labelling schools, providing guidance and imposing sanctions. Overall, Chilean schools function in a competitive marketplace where they are expected to attract parents, to position themselves favourably in national league tables and to cultivate a respectable reputation.

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School identity, classifications and league tables

Following Foucault (1977, 1979, 1980), I argue that market performative technologies in Chile – such as vouchers, national tests, public league tables, 'SIMCE maps'[5] and official school classifications – position and subjectivise institutions to compete within the marketplace by 'the power of rational classification', as Foucault calls it (1979, 34). Year after year, through the SIMCE test, the political ritual of disseminating school examinations and rankings is fulfilled. Scientific power/knowledge assesses schools and adduces their diagnosis, as the doctor to the patient, the teacher to the pupil, the judge to the criminal. These regimes of truth are produced by omnipresent 'experts', who lay claim to knowing better than the schools themselves 'who they are' and 'who they should be'. These are disciplinary discourses that emerge as scientific, neutral and standard for all schools, and are circulated as 'judgments of normality' (Foucault 1977).

To critically analyse the effects of these policies from a Foucauldian perspective is to study the relationship between the subject and truth – that is, how the subject is constituted through truth – as an ongoing activity. Rose (1992) argues that classifications and naming are core disciplinary technologies that must be carefully analysed in order to understand the constitution of the subject.[6] As Rose explains, the task is to examine:

> the categories and explanatory schemes according to which we think ourselves, the criteria and norms we use to judge ourselves, the practices through which we act upon ourselves and one another in order to make us particular kinds of being. (Rose 1992, 161)

Youdell (2006, 2011), studying the constitution of identities at schools, argues that individuals are shaped, recognised and self-recognised through categories, allowing them to exist, make sense, act and also resist through discourse. From a similar perspective, Gewirtz (2002) claims that classifications of 'school quality' have productive discursive effects, which

constitute the 'successful' and 'failing' school. These are deep-seated consequences internalised by school communities, strongly affecting school morale.

Despite the constraints of market policies, official school classifications are also contested, negotiated and readjusted. Ball and Maroy (2009) suggest that school communities produce and reproduce the institutions' meaning as a collective activity by circulating school identity narratives. The authors employ this idea, suggesting that:

> By this we mean all the accounts through which members of the establishment proclaim the specificity of their school. This identity could, in various ways, be linked to its past, its social or institutional characteristics, its pedagogical philosophy or its more general ideology. (Ball and Maroy 2009, 111)

These identity narratives, drawing on Foucault (1997), are a kind of permanent collective elaboration of the intimate social and political identity within frameworks of truth, as a response to a need for school members to constitute and make sense of the school. Additionally, schools' discursive identities, here employing Bourdieu (2007, 2011), are tied to their institutional history, market position and kinds and volumes of capital within the marketplace. The production, embodiment and dynamism of school staff identity is shaped within a market field where institutions are hierarchically ordered, classified and positioned according to their specific symbolic, cultural and economic capitals. Thus, to analyse school identity narratives it is crucial to study the links between institutions' market position and members' subjectivities.

Nonetheless, as subjects shape and circulate school identity narratives, it is important to notice that they are neither monolithic nor do they represent a unified consensus. Institution's meaning is shared, struggled over and negotiated over time (Ball et al. 2011).

Contrasting two case studies: Rose Hill and White Hill schools

The purpose of this section is to explore how staff members of a 'successful' school and a 'failing' school interpret state assessments, classifications and league tables, and how they make sense of the school in view of these external judgements, as well as the feelings, tensions and motivations that they elicit. Both case studies, White Hill and Rose Hill, are public schools managed by the same municipality. These schools were selected because they represent contrasting results in performance outcomes and reputation; therefore, these cases allow me to analyse the effects of state testing and labelling policies in two different contexts of social and academic advantage in the marketplace. Interview data exemplify key research findings. I use extracts from different staff members, although I privileged the head teachers' narratives because they are core actors in articulating a school identity narrative.

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Rose Hill: the continuous narration of success

Rose Hill Public Primary School is known as a traditional school for girls. Founded in 1928, it is highly regarded in the borough. It is classified and denominated by the Ministry of Education as an autonomous school that is understood as 'successful', with 'good' learning outcomes. The school mainly serves pupils from a 'middle–middle' socio-economic background, according to the Ministry's classifications, and most parents are skilled workers rather than professionals. The school is ranked second in SIMCE scores on the Spanish language test and third on the mathematics test among 15 public schools in the borough. Hence, it is an outstanding public school within the municipality, and, according to the Ministry of Education's classifications, it does not require any extra support or intervention. But at a national level and compared with private-sector schools, it ranks among the middle-level performers.[7]

The primary discourse at Rose Hill is of enduring, deeply-rooted success that circulates within the school. This discourse is symbolised within the school building. In spite of the worn appearance of the school building, it is traditional in design and of historic significance, with key symbols of success in areas of high traffic inside the school, such as trophies placed in the reception area together with framed school awards and photographs of well-known personalities that have visited the school. A long silky ribbon, hanging in the main school corridor, features the school's slogan 'excellence with love'. A bulletin board announces the latest school awards. Similarly, the school's webpage shows pictures of triumphs and celebrations in sports and SIMCE results from the previous year.

Mrs Carmen, the head teacher, has been working for over 20 years on the school's management team and for the last five years she has occupied the position of head teacher. As she talks about the school she employs a discourse of 'success' in academic, sports and other areas:

> We have made important achievements, and this is something to be proud of. We have 'academic excellence' [state award], the best [national test] scores, the best gymnasium in the borough, the best library … We have received various prizes, such as the one for science; we got third place. And that's a reason to be proud of ourselves; plus it raises pupils' self-esteem … The teachers are excellent; they are highly committed to teaching. So, we always have good SIMCE results. (Mrs Carmen, head teacher)

The head teacher 'talks' a school of success and pride. She is aware of the school's symbolic and material capitals and knows how to show and talk about them, constructing the narrative of the successful school through ongoing discourses. Test scores are understood and employed as objective proof that describe and catalogue success, producing the notion of the good school. This is also a positional discourse. It is a comparative discourse, in

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which she makes explicit the advantaged position of the school in the marketplace in relation to other nearby schools.

This narrative of success is broadly practiced among school staff members, involving school managers and teachers. For instance, a teacher who began to work in the school only a year ago comments:

> I have always been told that this is the best school, the best in Hill [borough]. Yes, discipline is better here, the girls are more docile, well-behaved, and parents are more preoccupied with their children's progress. (Primary teacher, Year Three)

There is a collective knowledge that circulates and is transmitted from generation to generation as a continuous discourse that collectively forms a prevailing school identity narrative, as this teacher shows. The Curriculum Leader also comments:

> What happens is that the girls who arrive here have to be Rose Hill School girls. That's the difference, we transform them, here we educate ladies [*señoritas*], and [we educate them] pedagogically, obviously. In fact, I don't know if you know that we have the best SIMCE scores in Year 8 and 4. We have maintained school excellence while being the only school that has maintained more than 1000 pupils enrolled. You see? And sometimes we're oversubscribed. We used to have a waiting list in Kindergarten and in Pre-Kinder. So, it makes me feel happy. [Although] I get annoyed when they [colleagues from other area schools] bother us when they tell us – *Hey, here come the teachers from Rose Hill* [teasing tone] – but we have earned our place, and that's important, we have identity.

The speaker asserts that the school is renowned for educating young girls that are part of a continuing tradition of academic excellence and 'ladies' discipline'. Pupils have to learn 'to be Rose Hill School girls', which works as a school distinction that confers school identity and pride. Moreover, it is stressed that that the school has the highest pupil enrolment and ranking position. Interestingly, these school 'truths' are not entirely true or, in other words, school actors strategically select and compare the school's results with certain schools, making them appear successful. Rose Hill does not have 'the best' ranking position in the borough, because there is another public school that continuously achieves higher test scores. Rose Hill has high performance results in Spanish tests in Year Four, but lower results in mathematics, particularly in Year Eight. This school also ranks favourably among the borough's public schools, but when the school is compared with private subsidised schools it is ranked at a middle-upper level; that is, it is not the best-ranked school (eighth of 31).

Additionally, pupil enrolment has decreased in recent years, and the school does not have oversubscription in Pre-Kinder and Kinder as it did years ago. Nevertheless, the Curriculum Leader highlights that pupil

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selection was practiced in the past (for school admission) and is mentioned as a present and ongoing symbol of success and distinction. The speaker explains that the recent decrease in school enrolment is due to a drop in national birth rates and a preference among parents for private schools that they perceive as having higher status, and it is thus not the fault of the school.

Interestingly, although the school is ranked second or third, or, on some occasions, eighth in the borough's league tables (depending on with which school it is compared), and even though enrolment has gradually declined, it is still regarded by the school staff as being 'the best' school. To understand this discourse it is important to consider the school's trajectory, since discourse is accumulated historically. Rose Hill has traditionally been well renowned. As the head teacher says, 'the school's success is given historically.' Therefore, it is not that the school has a blank self-identity awaiting test scores and enrolment numbers to determine the school's self-assessment every year. On the contrary, there are complex and multiple socio-historical conditionings that intertwine in the production of the school life, identity narratives and outcomes.

In this sense, standardised test scores and categorisations reinforce and legitimise the school narratives of success in sophisticated ways, deepening and naturalising the notion of school attainment within a comparative market matrix. In no way am I suggesting that speakers at Rose Hill are lying, cheating or purposely changing school assessment information. I am saying that they truly believe the school to be well renowned, public, traditional and the 'best school' in the borough. It is believed to have (had) long lists of applicants, while test assessments are tacitly (not deliberately) and confidently exhibited as symbolic capital, maintaining and reproducing the notion of success. As Bourdieu (2011, 173) explains, these are a 'collectively concerted make-believe'; *ad hoc* representations, which have a practical and convenient social function.

Official school categorisations, scores and 'objective information' are alive and not unilaterally imposed as immobile, fixed data. School members playfully and creatively rework these supposedly neutral judgements and classifications within the game of truth, adjusting them tactically to their triumphant narratives and historical dispositions of a successful school. In other words, the successful past is still present in active and continuous ways. These productive narratives about the school are significant components of its historically constructed school identity, (re)produced and circulated both individually and collectively, affecting what it means to be a student, teacher or a senior manager at Rose Hill.

The preceding data also show that speakers maintain that positive school outcomes are a product of the school's good work and effort. For instance, the head teacher says: 'We have made important achievements, and this is something to be proud of'. So it is we that have produced these

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achievements; that is, the school is responsible for pupils' successful outcomes. Similarly, the Curriculum Leader explains that some pupils 'come from broken families, who have serious emotional problems; nevertheless we educate and transform them [pupils] into "ladies" within the school identity'. As a primary teacher says: 'these are our achievements … yet this involves an enormous amount of effort and staff exhaustion. We get the most out of the girls, because we are really demanding of them.' This school's achievement may produce 'exhaustion', but they also generate pride and happiness in the school community, boosting overall school morale.

This discourse of success is linked to a meritocracy discourse and there is a sense of deservingness of institutional privileges. For instance, the school has recently received a budget from the Ministry of Education to enlarge and improve the school library. Within this context, the head teacher comments: 'we must have the best library, because we are the best school in the borough'. Similarly, staff expect and demand that the Municipality allocate highly qualified teachers, as the Curriculum Leader told me that 'they [Municipality] should make sure that we have the best teachers; with our [test] results, they should make sure to boost the school, not drive us down.'

In conclusion, Rose Hill generates and preserves a school narrative of success and pride, which is made possible and reinforced through national policies of comparing schools, division and labelling. These policies strengthen the school's sense of having an advantaged position in the marketplace and empower managers through a discourse of school merits and deservingness. The school plays 'games of truth' to carefully protect and maintain the formation of its genealogically successful discourse. It is the narrative of an outstanding school, in spite of some negative outcomes, such as drops in enrolment and decreasing test performance. School members rework prevailing regimes of truth and classifications in creative and sophisticated ways, investing narrative efforts in maintaining the story of the school's meritoriously advantageous position.

Hence, this school is located within a scenario in which the social world order and symbolic divisions are broadly consistent with the discursive formation of the school identity narratives. However, there are bits and pieces of failing school figures that do not match the narrative of a successful school, yet these inconsistencies are adjusted, silenced or justified to maintain the story of the traditional successful school for ladies. Thus, market assessments and standardised categorisations are not only unproblematic for the school staff, but furthermore they are reused to reaffirm a historically positive self-understanding of the school.

White Hill Primary School: troubled identity in disadvantaged positioning

White Hill is located in an inner-city area of Santiago where there is a high rate of unemployment and crime. It is an under-enrolled school, with low

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test performance outcomes, and it is ranked last on the borough's league table.[8] The school serves a high percentage of children from poor communities[9] and many of them have complex social problems, such as suffering domestic violence, being victims of child abuse or having relatives in prison.

Mrs Susana, a founding teacher, began working at White Hill as an undergraduate. Now, after more than 40 years at the school, she is the head teacher. She is heavily committed to the well-being of school, the pupils, their families and the community. Similarly, among most school members there is a commitment to serve highly deprived communities. This commitment is central to the school; in this way, teachers make sense of the school's daily work and its professional ethics. For instance, interviewees usually start their interviews by detailing the difficulties they face on a day-to-day basis and declaring a significant vocation to work with this kind of underprivileged population:

> This is hard-core poverty; you have to teach kids everything here, everything; to wash their face, their hands, talk properly. Families are hardly present. We have a lot of parents that are delinquents, drug addicts … But, you know, I like working here. Here kids need a lot of support, a lot, they need love, care, to feel your concern. That's so important. I have friends that ask me: how do you work there?! Heehee. But I feel a strong vocation. It's difficult, not just anybody can work here. We say that when somebody makes it through the first three months here, it means that they are going to stay. Really, many [teachers] come here and quickly run away. (Primary teacher, Year Four)

The teacher talks proudly about the school. It is a difficult and challenging milieu to work in, 'not everyone can do it'. The school staff feel that it is valuable contribution to serve highly underprivileged children that particularly need community support and a loving environment. Nevertheless, at the same time, most members' sense of positioning of the school within the marketplace is at the very low bottom, a sense that is rationalised through league tables and state classification as a 'failing school'.

Mrs Susana is constrained by the need to improve test results and uses diverse strategies to improve performance outcomes. The aim is to change the school's categorisation as a 'failing school' to a 'borderline school' (i.e. intermediate level). She and her school colleagues are concerned about test scores and school classifications. National assessments are described as formative information that record pupils' learning performance, which (at least partly) is owed to school quality, and helps schools to see their strengths and weaknesses and act accordingly. However, in this disadvantaged scenario, these regimens of truth are not practiced evenly and continuously. Official school assessments and classifications are also problematic for making sense of the school and composing a consistent narrative:

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> The results haven't been good in numbers, in scores, in spite of colleagues' enormous efforts year after year to change results. But last year was when we had our worst crisis with the SIMCE test. Not just because the results worsened, but because we started to despair. Then came a moment when we started to question ourselves. Because we have worked so hard during these years and we didn't achieve what we had set out to achieve. A general desperation started, it was a singular discontent. (Mrs Susana, head teacher)

Mrs Susana has trouble making sense of the SIMCE 'verdicts'. She desperately tries to reconcile contradictory perspectives in order to understand the school, but the puzzle is incomplete, the pieces do not fit. It is difficult to articulate one coherent and heroic narrative under these circumstances. On the one hand, Mrs Susana feels that she and the teachers make an enormous effort and sacrifice to provide the pupils with the best education. For example, faithfully implementing governmental programmes, working late to fulfil different kinds of government assessments and planning formats, working over weekends overseeing extracurricular activities, providing individual teaching to children with learning difficulties, talking to parents, working with community social services to provide family support, and so forth. On the other hand, in spite of their efforts, the school is classified by the state as a failure, a bad school, where children do not learn, and therefore as a school that does not accomplish its main *raison d'être*.

These contradictory evaluations describe the clash between two discourses; the Ministry's managerial discourse, with the school's communitarian–vocational discourse. These discourses involve opposing ways of understanding and assessing schooling. The Ministry is a proponent of a standardised system that assesses schools through observable, quantifiable outcomes, while White Hill calls for the comprehension of particular contextual features and the consideration of non-measurable daily efforts and (affective) commitments involved in schooling. These are not only clashes between the Ministry and the school's narratives, but are also internal clashes within school managers, such as Mrs Susana. The head teacher experiences a divided self who confronts multiple and contradictory discourses.[10]

The opposing assessments produce confusion, doubt and despair; 'we have worked so hard over these years and we have not achieved what we had set out to; so, we started to question ourselves,' Mrs Susana says. As I talked with her she showed me a folder and a notebook where she has the borough's league tables, the school's scores over the last few years, and all sorts of statistical analysis that the school staff have done. While she looks at and reviews the papers, trying to explain the school test results to me, I could imagine how she asked herself repeatedly: 'Why? Why do we have low scores? Why can't we achieve good scores if we do our best?' These condemnations cast doubt on the value of the school and therefore on her own professional identity. These are interrogations that attempt to

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understand the school and try to put together the incomplete pieces of the puzzle; that is, a profound understanding of the school's meaning and value.

One of the most difficult moments for Mrs Susana, a couple of years before I interviewed her, was when the regional Head of Education made harsh criticism of 'failing schools' (*escuelas críticas*) and made a public plea in the media to all parents to withdraw their children from such schools. As Mrs Susana recalls:

> We head teachers were insulted by Mr. Carlos [Regional Ministry Head]. I would like to tell him to his face. We were insulted. [Paraphrasing Mr Carlos:] That poor performance schools are useless from the head teacher downwards; that they [the Ministry] have to get rid of them. He can't say that. He doesn't know the job we do here. In that meeting, you know … I went to the bathroom, I went to cry … He told us that we were useless, head teachers, teachers. I have given my whole life for this school. His words really offended me.

This episode turned out to be not a silent or hidden symbol of violence for Mrs Susana, but rather a harsh and obvious form of violence (Bourdieu 2003). The regional authority was telling her that all her commitment and effort was useless. White Hill was a non-school,[11] and she was a non-head teacher. White Hill was unworthy of the community, a failed school from which children and parents should flee. The charge of failure was aimed at the school level. The Regional Head's stance directly questions Mrs Susan's worthiness as a head teacher. She is named, exposed and regarded a failure.

That day, after Mr Carlos's statement, Mrs Susana recalls that she was unable to contain her emotions; a mixture of sadness and anger. She went to the bathroom and she cried while Mr Carlos continued talking to the audience of head teachers. These are the affectivities of the market at work. The more than 40 years of her professional life was questioned by the highest regional authority of the Ministry of Education, questioned by a representative of the state, to which she gave authority and legitimacy.

However, as Mrs Susana cried that day, she was resisting the imposed symbolic power system, resisting the state discourse that defines a successful or failing school. She felt the imposition of the verdict, the violence of being classified as a 'bad school'. She felt it was an unfair accusation towards her, towards a 'non-guilty' and well-meaning head teacher. Her tears were a protest against competing schemas and standardisation policies that blame schools and deny the complex nature of working in disadvantaged communities. Her tears were a protest, a 'politics of feeling', as Youdell (2011) terms it; a political productive power that resists power/knowledge settlements through the deployment of feelings.

Thus, the data do not show a school identity smoothly adjusting to its positioning within the social structure as Bourdieu's theory suggests; neither are there disciplined subjects coerced by power technologies in a

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Foucauldian sense. On the contrary, the data suggest a troubled identity, which is triggered by the encounter between a hegemonic performative/market discourse, the school's discourses, its own historicity, and practical conditions in a disadvantaged context, involving scant symbolic and material capitals for competing within the marketplace.

The encounters between these different discourses produce strong feelings among staff members who cannot meet policy demands within a competing landscape. The Curriculum Leader, for instance, claims:

> We don't have the pupils that the Violeta Parra [School] has, or those of the Antonio Varas [School], or those of the 248 [School]. We don't have [those type of pupils], we aren't even close to having the resources, buildings, parental commitment [that these schools have;] it's very different … We can't. We can't do it all. They [the Ministry of Education] want everything to be solved through education, but we can't – not with the overcrowding at home, the problems in social housing, drugs; it's very tiring. We work with the most disadvantaged population. We receive all the troubled kids [*niños cachos*], the ones that nobody wants.

The speaker, as well as other school members, calls for contextual understanding and for just assessment of the school. Ultimately, it is argued that schools cannot be judged or compared by the state if contextual factors are not considered first. The school's Curriculum Leader 'calculates the gap' between the social reality at White Hill and the national school targets and standards. The result is an incommensurable distance; 'we can't', in his words. The speaker challenges the classification of the failing school. It is an attempt to tell the school truth and demand a comprehensive understanding of White Hill and its position in the marketplace.

A further attempt to find answers and explanations for divided and contradictory school narratives (fraught with national assessments and classifications) is developed by shifting the blame from the school towards pupils and their families, as they are blamed as the main cause of outcome failures:

> Look, I'll show you something [she opens a notebook with various calculations based on school test scores]. Here the highest [individual] score in [Spanish] was 298, [and] on a national level 308, and in my class 298. *That means that the school justifies itself*, that the school covers the curriculum and that the child that had the highest score was the best pupil, or not? In [Spanish] you notice, and in Mathematics we had 281 as the highest [score], and the national average was 302. In natural sciences, the highest was 308 and we had 302. So, we are not *so* bad. In fact, our lowest [score] was 149; that's a boy with serious learning difficulties. I tell you that boy has problems with calculating, he could have had that score. In Mathematics the lowest was 125 and the highest 282. But if these lowest [scores] are earned by these [children] that I tell you about, these are pupils with attention deficit, with serious learning problems. (Mrs Susana; emphasis added)

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Then she adds:

Mrs Susana:	What I would like from SIMCE, or if you can tell them [Ministry policymakers], is that they should give us the test results for each child.
AF:	Per child?
Mrs Susana:	[Yes], so we could say, ah, this one had these results because of learning problems; ah, this one because of attention deficit. Then it would attract our attention if a good pupil had bad results. But now we don't know the results of each pupil. Because in that way we would know what happened. And we wouldn't question ourselves so much … We could also make parents responsible [for pupils' results], and tell them: look, this is how your son is; how many school meetings did you attend during the year?

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These quotes suggest ways in which senior managers deliver diverse test score interpretations, calculations and move numbers from one place to another, seeking to deconstruct and reconstruct school assessments and classifications in ways similar to Rose Hill. Mrs Susana notes that there are high-test performing pupils within the school. Even though these cases are rare, she claims that they are enough to show that the school 'justifies itself.'

The head teacher concludes, together with the teachers, that the cause of poor results is not the school, but the children and their families. Hence, there is no institutional fault. Instead, the failure lies with the pupils and their parents. In this way, low-performing outcomes are explained and the school is excused from its responsibilities. Meanwhile, a smattering of high individual scores rewards school staff with satisfaction, as tiny and partial successful achievements serve as proof that they are a 'good' school. So, the same national test scores that had denominated the school as a failing school now enable the staff to alter the school assessment, renaming themselves as a 'proper' school. This is the reworking of the school narrative, which is a strategy for survival, to making sense of the school's existence and as a kind of defence of honour.

All in all, this case study exemplifies a troubled school identity. This implies a conflicted identity that confronts the 'self against the self', fraught between coexisting identities, placed under tension by market pressure and accountability policies, and within a disadvantaged setting. Therefore, not only do the school staff face the challenges implied by serving an underprivileged community, they have to process and make sense of negative assessments and classifications, and translate them into a relatively coherent, creditable and positive narrative to continue to exist as a school.

Conclusions

In this paper I draw upon three meaningful research findings. In first place I argue that market and state artefacts, such as national test scores, league tables and official state classifications, as well as enrolment figures, produce regimes of truth around what defines a school as 'good' and 'bad', 'successful' and 'failing' or 'efficient' and 'inefficient'. This has created a hegemonic cliché of the ideal school that narrows down the imagination for thinking about schooling and teaching. Although interviewees suggest critiques and interrogations of these kinds of policies, they are constrained by these prevailing policy discourses. Given this rationale, schools are subjectivised and recognised through hierarchically ranked identities, according to who is above and below them. Individuals, then, employ a positional discourse and, based on a competitive matrix, schools are compared and contrasted. These new forms of governance not only change school norms and routines, they imply an ethical transformation of meaning, the way of thinking about education, constructing identities, aspirations and moral values based on a logic of competition.

What is at stake regarding school performance outcomes is not only schools' future capacity to survive in the market and to increase pupils' enrolment. More profoundly, in both case studies, state assessments and classifications produce truths about the meaning and worth of the schools, affecting what it means to be a head teacher, teacher and pupil of that school. These technologies not only judge the school, but are also judgements that extend to the individual; working as both individualising and totalising forms of power (Foucault 1977). Within the unpopular school studied, these policies awaken feelings of incomprehension, despair and anxiety among staff members from knowing they are at the bottom of the league table, while they reinforce a sense of success and pride at the popular school, as well as of deservingness, reinforcing their sense of positioning within the marketplace. In this manner, these state devices significantly build the self-esteem, reputation and dignity of school staff, which entails an emotional dimension. Scores, classifications and league tables do not just name, measure or rank schools, but they shape and produce them, affecting people's understandings, desires and practices. These are the productive effects of school labelling, as Gewirtz (2002) has argued, that may mirror schools, yet also constitute them as the 'good' or 'bad' school.

Secondly, I argue that although these policies have powerful effects on institutions, the data bring new insights into looking at ways in which staff strategically remove, debate, highlight and obscure scores, classifications and ranking positions to generate institutional success, as well as to justify or separate themselves from low performance indicators. The data evidence that they use state-market data for celebrating and producing narratives of success (however large or small they may be), understood as results of

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school merit, while defending and excusing themselves from failing outcomes, and shifting the allocated responsibility and blame for failure towards others, such as pupils and their families.

So although market performative examinations and classifications may produce prevailing truths and even deception in some cases, they are far from being indisputable and consensual statements. Members are both disciplined by market technologies, but are also actively committed to creating, individually and collectively, school narratives as a way to understand and make sense of the school and their individual practices within the school. Hence policy discourses and state judgements are not accepted and reproduced in passive ways. This exemplifies schools' activity for 'doing policy', as Ball et al. (2011) argue. School narratives are produced in creative and sophisticated ways.

Following Foucault's (1997) later work, school members in both schools exercise 'technologies of the self' as they are compelled to understand and explain themselves politically. They are eager to produce and tell truths of the value of the school as a vital and ethical necessity for school recognition, for survival and for the maintenance of their existence. One could argue that self-justifying narratives avoid their responsibility to ensure academic progress for every child. Nevertheless, from a policy analysis perspective, even though school staff may suggest specific critical views of their own work, the crucial issue here is to note that standardised assessments in particular do not help to trigger, as expected, critical thinking, self-assessment and accountability, nor do they motivate school improvement and innovative thinking. On the contrary, the evidence shows that they stimulate the elaboration of narratives of satisfaction and self-defence.

Thirdly, although both case studies attempt to put together fragmented and even conflicting data, discourses and historical identities, the intensity of this job and the internal tensions that emerge are uneven. In Rose Hill, the production of school narratives are much more easily articulated and adjusted. The market categorisations and divisions are not only unproblematic for the school staff, but, furthermore, the construct of the 'high-performing school' is made available and reinforced through national policies of school testing and labelling. On the other hand, White Hill illustrates conflicted and ambivalent identities, demanding a significant degree of energy and narrative effort to make sense of their school. Hence, besides the staff having to face complex difficulties implied by serving pupils from disadvantaged areas, they are sanctioned by being labelled as a 'low-performing school' and split between conflicting visions to make sense of the value of the school.

This entails an 'injustice of misrecognition', as Power and Franji (2010) call it; pupils' social disadvantages, structural schooling inequities, and the degree and depth of the institutions' daily (unmeasured) contribution are disregarded by official classifications. In this sense, one of the most

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problematic aspects of these policies of comparison and division is that they naturalise systems of privilege by ignoring them, while performance outcomes appear as an individual merit and responsibility, independent of the policy setting and pupils' social backgrounds. In Bourdieu's terms, these policies are a symbolic system that hierarchically organises the social world, imposed and experienced as legitimate – therefore working as symbolic violence that not only displays school inequities, but also constitutes them (Bourdieu 2003; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Together, the case studies evidence that the expectation that national assessments and accountability policies lead school staff to assess their work critically and encourage them to improve the school provision turns out to be a simplistic and mechanical hope of people's responses to these kinds of policies. On the contrary, the research findings show that the ensemble of these policies: stimulate narratives of compliancy and justifications for failure, as well as shifting of blame towards children and families; intensify a competing ethos focused on comparison between schools' scores, rather than stimulating innovative thinking and quality improvements;[12] and reinforce a sense of defeat, shame and anxiety within the school serving disadvantaged communities, entailing an injustice of misrecognition towards the complex challenges that the staff faces and the daily work and effort they perform.

The arguments posed contribute to interrogate the expected benefits of these policies and to imagine alternative ways of understanding and practicing school accountability. I suggest that it is necessary to transform accountability policies reduced to mere test performance, scores and logics of comparison towards a notion of accountability that encourages school communities to open reflexive and complex dialogues about schools' work and ways of improving, led by ethical discussions and critical thinking of schools' concrete daily practice, providing space for professional development and for democratic principles.

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Notes

1. Both authors, at certain points, can be worked in a complimentary manner, but also they involve conceptual conflicts. In this paper I will work in a space of productive tensions drawing on both sets of ideas, rather than attempting any resolution.
2. The data collection was delivered during 2007 (March–August).
3. This model was first designed by the Metropolitan Ministry of Education, which was later expanded to the whole country.
4. Subvención Escolar Preferencia.
5. The Ministry of Education gives parents a neighbourhood map with the locations and SIMCE results of nearby schools.
6. Popkewitz (2012), following Rose, argues that numbers are 'an actor of change' that produce a truth-telling and establish values about social and personal life. What is important in terms of the powerful effects of numbers is that 'The fictions that are made-up also make-up!' (Popkewitz 2012, 174).

7. In the fourth grade SIMCE test, the school scored 277 points in Spanish and 273 points in mathematics (in 2007). According to the Ministry of Education, these scores are classified as middle level performance.
8. In the fourth-grade SIMCE test, the school scored 232 points in Spanish and 239 points in mathematics (in 2007). According to the Ministry of Education, these scores are classified as low achievement results.
9. Eighty-one per cent are classified as 'socially disadvantaged' pupils, according to the municipal bureau in 2008.
10. This notion is connected to Bourdieu's concept of the divided or torn habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), developed by Reay (2004).
11. I am re-using this idea from Youdell's work that discusses the implicit discursive production of the non-student and the non-teacher within educational market and performance schemas (Youdell 2011).
12. For further research findings related to accountability policies effects in school management and teaching, see Falabella (2013, 2014).

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