

The discursive formation of the affirmative action policy in Chile: Right to higher education, public education, and deficit

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Abstract

Global scholarly narratives have identified a strong influence of anti-racist, anti-discrimination, and gender equality movements and discourses on affirmative actions in higher education in different national contexts. While empirically valid for various cases, this portrait overlooks affirmative actions' problematic entanglements with other conflictive rationalities and political projects. This article focused on the discursive formation of the affirmative action policy in Chile within a hegemonic context of meritocratic and neoliberal ideologies in higher education arrangements. It delves into a case that has been scarcely considered within the progressive narratives framing affirmative actions in higher education globally. Based on 61 policy documents and 16 interviews with key policy actors as part of a broader critical policy ethnography, we uncover three crucial contradictory and yet articulated discursive lines constituting this policy—higher education as a social right, recovery of public education, and deficit alongside key ideological policy technologies: situated meritocracy, improvement, and leveling. These discursive formations were associated with significant struggles and intertwinement with neoliberal higher education and reorientations at the State level. This work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the discursive porosity and multiplicity of affirmative actions in higher education as they are assembled by social justice and exclusionary logics and participate in broader discursive struggles, ideologies, and contradictory state projects.

Keywords

Affirmative action, higher education, meritocracy, deficit, education policy, neoliberalism

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Introduction

Chilean affirmative action policy (AAP) in higher education (HE) is underexplored and scarcely problematized. In contrast to affirmative actions in Brazil and the United States with a growing body of literature and heated debates and contestation (Hirschman and Berrey, 2017; Lee, 2021; Lloyd, 2015), the Chilean AAP—known as PACE¹ for its acronym in Spanish—launched in 2014 has received transversal support from all political spectrums and policy actors across different governments. While affirmative progressive discourses of anti-racism, non-discrimination, and gender equality have amplified the enactment of affirmative actions across nations in about a quarter of the world's countries (Dudley and Moses, 2014; Warikoo and Allen, 2020), the AAP in Chile reflects a case whereby other discursive forces and contradictions are at play in its formation.

PACE has been the main focus of research oriented to steer and improve it through suggestions and *what works* identification to advocate for its legitimacy and effectiveness (e.g., Gil et al., 2019; Lizama et al., 2018). This approach resembles the tendency in other countries, such as Brazil and the United States, where the production of knowledge has been directed to defend and sustain AAP's social legitimacy against the backdrop of rising authoritarian coalitions that articulate meritocratic ideologies with white supremacist sentiments to debunk affirmative actions (Morrison et al., 2023). A less frequent approach has been taken by critical policy sociology. One of its strands has explored the inscriptions of PACE in debates, potentialities, and contradictions (e.g., Slachevsky and Moreau, 2021; Villalobos et al., 2017). A second and more marginal strand within this approach has developed a post-structural interrogation of the regimes of subjectification unfolded through this policy (Briones-Barahona and Leyton, 2020; Leyton, 2022). This body of research has identified PACE's meritocratic exceptionality regime featured by neoliberal technologies anchored in entrepreneurial ontologies of the self, mobilized for the reshaping of working-class students (Leyton, 2022). Continuing this path, we draw on discursive sociological analyses of affirmative action policies in HE (Baez, 2003; Iverson, 2012). This theoretical position interrogates the ideological and political conditions and struggles over the categories and framings that construct affirmative actions and their role in challenging and reproducing social inequalities, othering, and power relations.

In this article, we argue that the AAP in Chile has been discursively constituted as a public policy amidst struggles over dominant meritocratic and neoliberal ideas in HE. Our analysis identified three significant, contradictory, and interconnected discursive forces shaping these struggles: HE as a social right, the recovery of public education, and deficit. Additionally, we identified key micropolitical dynamics and policy technologies—situated meritocracy, improvement, and leveling—that have played a crucial role in deploying these discourses, their tensions, and contradictions. By analyzing the AAP's formation in Chilean HE, we emphasize diversity, contingency, and polyvalence as defining features of strategic discourses constituting affirmative actions and their re-contextualization by different political and State projects and their inclusionary and exclusionary logics.

In the following sections, we present PACE's background and its general organization. Then, we develop our theoretical framework based on critical policy sociology and through the sensitive concepts of discursive formation and policy technologies, followed by our methodological approach. Finally, we present our analysis and discussions based on the identification of three policy technologies associated with the main discursive formations shaping the AAP in Chile.

PACE as an affirmative action policy in Chilean higher education

Chilean HE has undergone a privatizing-based universalization featuring an over 600% gross enrollment rate increase since 1985 vis-a-vis enduring class-based access inequality (Leihy and Salazar, 2017). In such privatization-led expansion, lower-prestige and quality universities controlled by for-profit companies concentrate most low-income students (Kuzmanic et al., 2023). In this context, the National Selection Test (NST), consistently, and despite several recalibrations, has shown lower performances in working-class students from public schools, the facto acting “as an entry barrier for elite universities, segmenting access according to students’ educational background” (Espinoza et al., 2023: 9).

Against this backdrop, several affirmative action programs have been implemented since the 2000s. As in other international contexts (Warikoo and Allen, 2020), this development was connected with historical struggles around class, gender, and ethnic inequalities (Kim and Celis, 2021; Leyton, 2022). However, in most Chilean universities, affirmative actions have been conceived from a class-based perspective to redress socioeconomic inequalities in admissions and participation (Briones-Barahona and Leyton, 2020). In response to this unequal landscape, AAP leaders from a few public and private universities, UNESCO, and other NGOs were publicly vocal in critiquing the admission system and its support by the most prestigious universities as a mechanism of reproduction of inequalities (Leyton, 2014). This conflict resonates with the persistent tension between redistributive social justice and performance-based selectivity as measures to forecast student readiness (McCowan, 2016). This critical and public diagnostic formed the technical-moral basis for the mobilization of affirmative action programs towards their institutionalization of PACE as the first national State policy of its kind.

PACE’s dynamic and organization

PACE started officially in 2014 as a policy to open up universities for working-class students who prove to be gifted and hardworking (MINEDUC, 2015). The program design was inspired by the United States percentage-plans admissions and the UNESCO affirmative program for postgraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds, which focused on pre-entry preparation and post-entry support to foster retention and graduation. This model was first implemented in 2007 as a university-led initiative. Since its beginning, PACE was conceived to be implemented by the universities participating in the centralized admission system—38 out of 58 universities nationwide. Until 2010, this admission system considered NST scores and GPA in secondary schools for their selection process. However, since 2013, it included a high-school ranking as a measure of relative student performance within their school. This formula was one of the central battles of affirmative action advocates and policymakers promoting a fairer and contextualized understanding of meritocracy (Catalán et al., 2022; Villalobos et al., 2017). They assumed that the proper measure to realize the equality of opportunity principle is the competition between students from the same school as a proxy of similar class, similar educational conditions, and fairer meritocracy, given the highly segmented by social class school system.

A network of actors has supported PACE: UNESCO through the support of the Propaedeutic program and the UNESCO Chair “Inclusion in University Higher Education” (Gil, 2019); Ford and Equitas foundations oriented to promote inclusion and liberal democracy in Latin America, where several components of PACE were first developed; university scholars and officials; and university student movements which were noticeably active between 2006 and 2011 to demand HE reforms, including the introduction of affirmative actions as State policy (Leyton, 2022). Such a policy

network, plus a distinctive public display of evidence of success, provided PACE with political leverage and legitimacy.

PACE depends on the Ministry of Education, and it started as a pilot program in 2014 in five universities and 67 public schools. It was initially designed based on the previous so-called Propaedeutic program and its post-entry model, supported by UNESCO and the Ford Foundation. Currently, it has been implemented by 29 universities (18 public and 11 private), working with 638 highly vulnerable public high schools representing around 70% of low-income public schools for underage youngsters (Slachevsky and Moreau, 2021). Three components organize its main structure: (1) *Preparation in secondary education*, oriented to vocational guidance and training in the so-called 21st-century skills promoted by UNESCO; (2) *Admission*, which prescribes reserved seats to the top 20% performers in each university; and (3) student *support and follow-up* in HE, through socio-emotional or psycho-educational approaches and leveling for students during their first 2 years of HE (MINEDUC, 2022b). Reserved seats account for 9% of the total seats offered per year—about 8000 out of 86,000 (DEMRE, 2022b)—benefiting more than 25,000 students to date.

In about 10 years, PACE has managed to be institutionalized as a public policy, reaching a State funding close to \$21 Chilean billion (£17,000,000) for half of the universities—usually the most selective—in contrast with other initiatives focused on race, gender, or disability inequalities which remain in a subaltern position, as part of a pool of special seats depending on each institutional policy.

Outcomes and effects of PACE: Between achievements and shortcomings

Recent studies focusing on the outcomes of PACE have shown that about 60% of students who qualify for an equity spot actually enroll in universities with PACE, while 20% enroll in technical/vocational HE institutions (MINEDUC, 2022a), thus fostering the participation of working-class students in universities, and somewhat breaking the segmented tendency that funnels these students into these technical/vocational institutions where most of them are segregated (Espinoza et al., 2023). Moreover, impact evaluations have shown that PACE increases the 15% top-performing (within their schools) students' likelihood of entering selective universities by 32% (Cooper et al., 2022). However, the distribution of equity quotas in PACE is subject to the discretion of each university, within certain prescribed minimums, and universities have shown a strategy of greater openness in less demanded programs that concentrate a majority of working-class students, and stricter closure in programs where middle-class and elite students are formed (Rodríguez Garcés et al., 2024). These results suggest a policy design allowing for institutional practices that reproduce a segregation pattern of working-class students signing into less prestigious programs within selective universities. This elitist logic limits the policy's potential to reduce HE participation inequalities and democratize access to spaces of power where the interests of the working class and other racialized groups are less represented.

Other authors have identified a tendency to reproduce inequality in the school ranking mechanism adopted and fostered by PACE as a strategy for valuing students' relative performance. Catalán et al. (2022) have shown that the school ranking mechanism significantly guides students in higher-performing schools to actively undertake diverse strategies to improve their ranking, compared to those in schools with lower academic performances on average. These differences in performance, in turn, were significantly associated with the cultural capital background of the students. Following these findings, we need to see the school ranking as a core dispositif—within PACEs' admission scheme—embedded in a wider class-based governmentality that conducts more

privileged subjects within a given school to take advantage of the new sense-of-the-game introduced by the ranking into schools, in the competition for access to HE (see [Catalán et al., 2022](#): 427).

Alongside these results, studies have shown the positive impact of PACE on retention. PACE students have similar academic performances and retention rates to non-PACE students ([Gil et al., 2019](#); [MINEDUC, 2023](#)). Qualitative studies with a more pronounced psychological approach ([Morales et al., 2022](#)) have highlighted the relevance of self-efficacy, achievement motivation, effort, self-demand, and perseverance as personal factors contributing to retention in PACE students. They also highlight a high appreciation for PACE students by educational agents who attend to their needs, expectations, and motivations over the academic demands in universities ([Guzmán Utreras et al., 2024](#)). While these studies do not point out the direct effects of PACE on these personal dispositions, they suggest PACE's possible influence over this subjective grit.

While these results and effects have been made visible predominantly by psychology and economics' logics of knowledge based on human capital, rational choice, social mobility, socio-emotional education, and methodological individualism assumptions, in this work, we want to build on a critical policy sociology perspective based on the notions of discursive formation and policy technology, and their constitution and effects at micropolitical, meso, and broader ideological contexts of the State. As [Morley and Leyton \(2023\)](#) argue, the predominance of individualized understanding of HE policy serves to self-responsibilize working-class students for their own inclusion by focusing on their inner characteristics and assumed strength rather than on the social structures and institutional dynamics of exclusion. This epistemic tendency makes it relevant to undertake post-structural sociological perspectives that problematize how this AAP is discursively constructed and struggled over and the effects of power it produces in the constitution of rights, injustices, universities, and their subjects of inclusion and exclusion.

Affirmative action policies as discursive formations

From a critical policy sociology perspective, examining affirmative actions as a discursive formation is to approach them as a multiplicity of competing and articulated discourses with unequal capacities to stabilize power/knowledge relations and subjective positioning ([Petersen, 2015](#)). This intricate discursive landscape summons a diverse array of actors grappling with how to think and feel HE and struggling over its meaning, normativities, and boundaries. This approach directs our attention to the way in which these diverse discursive lines configure education policies, their interplay and tensions in policy texts, and the contexts and influences that give rise to such policy texts, making them possible to circulate as instruments forging sense, thoughts, aims, compromises, and subjectivities. We can also locate those discourses outside the policy utterances, texts, and regulations that enact them. *Policy discourses* are the forces that enable policy to appear ([Ball, 2015](#): 311). Policies as strategic wield of power are inscribed in a "certain economy of discourses of truth" ([Foucault, 1980](#): 93), that is, in a set of broader and foundational-like discourses "that systematically form the objects of which they speak" ([Foucault, 2002](#): 54).

From a discursive perspective, policy formations are not the result of common or logical elements, but rather, they emerge from discursive variations and disparities and the substitution and distribution of diverse functions (Foucault, op. cit: 44). In our analysis, we aim to make these features of affirmative actions visible. When analyzing education policies as discursive formations, we need to take into account the heterogeneity, contingency, and contradictions of the objects formed and struggled over, the statements and knowledges strategically deployed, and the themes narrated and problematized in their rendering as true, better, and right ([Petersen, 2015](#)). Therefore, following [Bacchi and Goodwin \(2016\)](#), our analysis focuses on how the AAP is formed through the

construction of problematic objects, such as access inequalities or the notion of fair meritocracy; the creation of subjects, such as those labelled gifted or in deficit; and the way universities and schools are problematized and reoriented as educational spaces.

The exploration of policies as discursive formations demands a sociological lens that hones in on the contexts of influence and the micropolitics of text production. It is within the context of influence that the formation of policies is initiated and their discourses set in motion, and it is within the context of policy text production that these policies are interpreted, translated, and contested (Bowe et al., 1992). In our study, we have focused on three analytical levels regarding the context of PACE: the role of policymakers as intellectuals and policy entrepreneurs at the micro-political level, the interpretive meaning of events marking off some ruptures and reorientations at the meso level of the State, and broader shifts in ideological, political, and economic spheres (Ball, 2008).

Finally, policy discourses do not shape policies in the abstract; they are materialized and reinforced by policy technologies that, in turn, materialize them. These technologies are understood here as expert techniques and modes of implementing affirmative action by linking methods—improvement, monitoring, training, and leveling—ethical frameworks and values underpinned by main discursive lines. Policy technologies strive to organize subjects/objects' capacities and orientations and bolster the visibility of the discourses of truth-forming policies.

In sum, from this approach, framed in the critical policy sociology tradition and informed by poststructuralist theories of power/knowledge, we analyze the relationship between objects, subjects, and sites of intervention as the building blocks of this policy. From here, we argue that the main discourses identified in the construction of PACE institutionalize and are institutionalized by three technologies: *Situated meritocracy* as a method of affirming the new working-class subject of the right to HE, *school improvement* as a technology of public schools' recovery, and *leveling* as a technology oriented to supplement the lacking subject of the AAP.

Methods

The following analysis is part of a broader 1-year policy ethnography focused on how PACE was constructed and enacted in two universities. Following the foundational work of Geertz (1977) and Dubois' policy ethnography (2015), the fieldwork consisted of understanding how institutional processes and policy officials made and were made by PACE, considering the social discourses influencing actors' words, narratives, and actions as expressions of how discourses were inscribed and made sense to them.

We identified strategic discursive sites that framed policy production and policy actors' engagements:

1. The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), where this policy is prescribed and overseen;
2. Non-governmental organizations associated with the United Nations and other philanthro-capitalists such as Ford and Equitas foundations, which were instrumental in PACE's trajectory;
3. Inter-institutional networks of coordination between universities and high schools; and
4. Two universities implementing this policy.

These universities were strategically selected as contrasting contexts. One is a public and highly selective university funded in the XIX century, with over 30,000 students, 36% from private high schools—associated with middle and upper classes. The second one is a 30-year-old private

Catholic university, mainly focused on social sciences and humanities. It is less selective and admits about 50% of its students from the lowest income groups, but it is highly prestigious in its areas of knowledge.

Through observations, interviews, and conversations, influential policy documents—regulations, norms, guides, articles, theses, books, governmental reports of results and good practices, policy event recordings, and multimedia materials—were gathered to capture the discourses participating in this policy formation. We also identified policy actors who played strategic roles in the contexts of influence and policy-text production to shed light on the processes of policy formation.

We selected 61 policy documents, which we organized into four primary purposes:

1. Advocacy for affirmative action to compensate for socioeconomic class biases of the admission system.
2. Prescriptive guidelines for universities to implement and account for the policy deployment.
3. Institutional advertisement and information diffusion signaling achievements and specific ways for policy actors to participate.
4. Assessment of the policy's design, implementation, results, and good practices.

We also conducted 16 interviews with key policy actors at the Ministerial and university levels. They assumed multiple positions across the policy trajectory, as policy advocates and entrepreneurs, policymakers in middle ranges and managerial positions. They were also authors—sometimes in the shadows—of many selected policy documents. In addition to the empirical novelty of these interviews, the vast majority of these documents have not been analyzed in previous studies, and policymakers' experiences of struggle to exert influence over this policy have been rarely investigated (e.g., [Briones-Barahona and Leyton, 2020](#); [Leyton, 2022](#)).

Given our familiarity with this policy—the first author worked in these programs for 8 years and has devoted his PhD to them, and the second author carried out his PhD on the AAP in Chile—we developed a dialogical reflexivity to identify our differential attachments to PACE, the related power/knowledge relations in which each was involved, and how they influenced our analytical stakes and assumptions. This dynamic was critical for us to reflect on our investment in the formation of this policy and on PACE's actors' tactics to enlist the first author's insights towards the "improvement" of policy. Our reflexive conversations revolved around making the effects of those appealing interpellations and investments thinkable as they configure influential researchers' ideological relations with PACE, the State, and the university.

The analytical strategy began with systematically reading documents vis-à-vis interviews, locating them within broader processes and contexts. An inductive coding process ([Strauss and Corbin, 2002](#)) associated with PACE's main sites of interventions—high-school students and teachers, admission policy, and post-entry support—and an axial coding—to construct relations between categories and subcategories—were developed. The axial categories that structured our analysis were high-school strengthening, meritocratic inclusion, academic vulnerability, effective access, and college readiness. This allowed us to identify how HE as a social right, meritocracy, and deficit, as dominant discourses, shape this AAP and their conflicts and limits.

In what follows, we develop the analysis of these main discursive lines and their corresponding technologies that have driven the formation of PACE.

The right to higher education and meritocracy

Within this educational reform, PACE emerges as an inclusive public policy to promote equity, by restoring the right to higher education of vulnerable youth through the promotion of a quality, integral education that values situated academic merit to overcome the socio-economic and cultural segregation generated by the current admission system. It reaches out to secondary education to promote a shared responsibility of several educational actors for their students' education (MINEDUC, 2016c: 15).

This quote comes from a technical guide of PACE prescribing the core implementation requirements for universities. In it, crucial discursive lines forming PACE are revealed: The right to HE, the recovery of public education, and a new meritocracy. Noticeably, to “restore the right to higher education” was presented as the ultimate goal to be achieved by improving the quality of secondary education, creating a new meritocratic admission mechanism, and deepening the responsabilization of school actors for students' educational outcomes.

The arrival of PACE as a formation embodying the restoration of HE as a social right needs to be located within two waves of student mobilizations—in 2006 and 2011. It is especially linked to the latter, primarily led by university students. While they vigorously critiqued the NST as a sanctioned mechanism of reproduction of inequalities, they mobilized a new public imaginary that construed HE as a public good and social right, summoning the State to take responsibility for their realization in opposition to what was perceived as an extreme case of neoliberalism. The neoliberalization of HE from the 1980s onwards in Chile unfolded through the privatization, marketization, and financialization of universities. The dictatorship placed these processes as technologies of depoliticization oriented to prevent mass student mobilizations (Fleet, 2021) and create HE as a market, students as consumers, and meritocracy as the measure of justice. Then, Ricardo Lagos's socialist government in the 2000s furthered the financialization of HE through tuition fees loans as an instrument of inclusion into HE, deepening the hegemonic understanding of HE as human capital and economic investment.

The discourse on the right to HE, as championed by the 2006–2011 student movement, directly challenged the neoliberal model of HE. During this period, affirmative action advocates lingered onto the student movement, gained traction, accumulated support, expanded visibility, and strategically articulated with student unions as nodal points organizing student protests and strategies. As one of the main AAP leader made strategic sense of PACE's emergence:

...we talked with all the student unions and told them what we were doing. The student unions have incorporated the creation of affirmative action programs into their demands. We have helped them with all kinds of scientific evidence, and we have never told them what they have to do, but they have decided to promote these programs (Policy leader 3, interview).

Affirmative actions' advocates and leaders strategically read the student movement discourse of the right to HE to scale-up the Propaedeutic programs—affirmative actions supported by UNESCO that began in 2007 in seven universities. They were the model of affirmative actions that student unions in universities started to demand and organized, and the one that resonated with the political actors who participated in the construction of Michelle Bachelet's government program in 2013—a program that explicitly undertook the imperative of making HE “an effective social right” (Bachelet, 2013: 20) as part of a broader set of reforms to steer the neoliberal State towards a more substantial

commitment to social rights. In this line, Bachelet's program puts AAP ahead of policy solutions oriented to address the economic and academic barriers to access HE (Bachelet, 2013: 20-21).

During the beginning of the legislative discussion that led to the 2018 Higher Education Act, the Bachelet government presented PACE and tuition-free (gratuity) as critical responses towards the realization of HE as "a right whose provision should be available to all according to their skills and merits" (Congreso Nacional, 2018: 1). The new configuration of the right to HE, while maintaining selectivity with a baseline meritocratic principle, was also framed by a proportional principle of non-discrimination. This principle was deeply rooted in the assumption of equal distribution of talents across social groups in favor of low-income students segregated in public schools (cf. Bachelet, 2014: 9-11). The *equal distribution of talents* across social categories and conditions is the most repeated foundational statement of PACE. As an influential policymaker made it clear in a UNESCO working paper, the social justice imaginary mobilized by the leading policy actors' struggles over the admission system is a liberal proportional one:

Since talents are equally distributed amongst rich and poor, cultures, genders, nationalities and disabilities, all high-schools in the world house academically gifted students. This will enable universities [given fair admissions] to be as diverse as the territories they serve, without losing excellence. Universities will have, for example, ~50% male students and ~50% female students ... Similarly, they will have ~20% of students from the highest income quintile and also ~20% from the lowest income quintile, because in all quintiles they will find academically gifted students (Gil, 2019: 15).

The policy technology associated with such a foundational statement was shaped by the mobilization of a contextualized measure of students' academic performance as a corrected and more accurate expression of meritocracy, in contrast to a universal meritocratic admission system that deemed all students equal, regardless of their school and socio-economic context. This was named a contextualized meritocracy.

From the beginning of PACE, this was offered as a "change of paradigm" in the understanding of merit in admission policies: From a universalized—discriminatory—meritocracy to a fairer meritocracy in context that promotes competition between students within the same school assumed as reflecting homogenous social class contexts. This shift was oriented to identify and select outstanding students from low-income schools (MINEDUC, 2015) whose talents and efforts were deemed invisible by the universal meritocratic logic embedded in the admission system. As a program coordinator remembers how affirmative action communities received the announcement of this change:

We all agreed that it was very good news to tell all students that those who make an effort and get good grades will be able to choose a career without facing these discriminatory barriers. Because students who were the best of their courses or neighborhoods, who didn't reach the required minimum score to apply, were a crucial issue of meritocracy. And so, PACE offered them an opportunity not to face them with a test for which they were not prepared, because they came from underserved contexts (Program coordinator 3, interview).

Paradoxically, after historical efforts to reconstruct meritocracy to adhere to social justice and the right to HE principles, a shift away from the discourse of social rights took place just before the right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera took office in 2018. PACE's central policymakers—all at the left of the government coalition—tweaked AAP's general purpose of reestablishing the right for HE. The new purpose was now to "foster access of vulnerable students through mechanisms that

counterbalance the existing socio-economic bias in academic requirements” (MINEDUC, 2018: 3). However, this strategic move brought forth a crucial tension. On the one hand, policymakers wished to establish a social-justice-oriented meritocratic principle that would guarantee the working classes’ right to HE. On the other hand, they feared this policy would be at risk because it would be difficult to measure the achievement of recovering the right to HE within a pervasive accountability-performance-based evaluation policy system. As a MINEDUC coordinator recalls:

When the program was presented to the department of treasure the objectives set out were much more concrete, basically to allow students from vulnerable backgrounds to access higher education and continue towards graduation. I know, of course, that it is a reduction, but the other one was much more grandiloquent and difficult to assess with the tools that we had within the MINEDUC (Policy leader 1, interview).

This shift in the ideological context—from a government that attempted to position HE within a social democratic grid to a right-wing entrepreneurial government—significantly affected the meaning-making of PACE as a restoration of social rights. The delinking of PACE from the policy language of social rights was, however, justified as a strategic move to salvage the program and its struggles for social justice. Another policy leader defended this last positioning: “This change did not imply a change in the sense of the whole action and the vision of what had to be done” (Policy leader 3, interview).

On the one hand, this overall reorientation demonstrates that the trajectory of the social rights discourse signals the precarious process of its institutionalization based on a social justice imaginary despite the opening of a post-neoliberal horizon brought by the students’ movement. On the other hand, it reveals the achievement of PACE in the changes of the admission system, now including mechanisms of “meritocracy in context” and acceptance of affirmative actions in HE as a means to diminish inequalities and, at a discursive level, an understanding of inclusion as hegemonic demand.

One of the effects of this rupture with the discourse of the right to HE that is visible nowadays is the taming of the critique against the national admission policy, as PACE is currently part of the equity components of such a dispositif of selection. It navigates between the recognition of the importance of the neutrality of the admission system—based on advanced statistical assumptions—and school improvement discourse as a more sustainable, less confrontational—yet more costly—point of intervention to improve students’ preparation.

Recovering public education and technology of improvement

Alongside critiques of the admission system, PACE institutionalized a previous diagnosis of underrepresentation as an effect of the abandonment of the public school. This leads to a second discursive reorientation constituting PACE: From an affirmative action in and for HE to a policy aiming to recover public education. Recovering public education was a central commitment of Michelle Bachelet’s government program of reforms, acknowledging the central gravity of “re-positioning public education” (Bachelet, 2013: 16). This contrasts with the market-based discourse dominant in previous governments. During this period, PACE was also reconfigured as a school improvement strategy, making public schools, teachers, and all secondary students new intervention subjects. In 4 years, more than 1000 professionals were incorporated into 29 universities to work within 70% of public schools attending young people.

Recovering public education was linked to a technology of improvement. This reflected a discursive discontinuity in the AAP formation: From focusing on the transition of meritorious

working-class students into HE to bolstering high-school capacities, considering the totality of its students, and identifying and selecting top performers at the end of their secondary studies. This reorientation has shaped the national AAP's boundaries to this day.

PACE's policy design regarding public schools comprised a broad set of prescriptions involving several school agents and activities. These regulations made universities responsible for the improvement of public schools. Universities' intervention on public schools, under PACE's mandate, aimed at providing students with counselling, wellbeing, identity and life-project construction, critical thinking development, lifelong learning, widening aspirations, social participation, global citizenship, and cognitive competencies for a successful transition into HE (MINEDUC, 2017: 6). Such prescriptions made relevant a series of expert knowledges, summoning diverse professionals linked with school improvement, psychology, mental health, and vocational counselling fields. Teaching and school staff were also constructed as subjects of intervention (MINEDUC, 2016a, MINEDUC, 2016b). Positioning HE as a key site of school capacity-building meant intervening in teachers' practices as a better public investment. All these elements were conditions of possibility for expanding the PACE outreach strategy, as observed in a central technical policy document of 2016:

Preparation in Secondary Education considers actions aimed at students, technical teams, teachers and counselors ... it seeks to build capacities in the respective high schools, to ensure effective learning trajectories for the student body (MINEDUC, 2016c: 4).

From the moment Bachelet's program announced PACE, a crucial tension emerged between the broad governmental compromise to strengthen public education and the strategy of recruiting the best performers from working-class backgrounds. The symbolic starting point of the equal distribution of talents as a guiding principle of the policy was questioned. As a policy leader recalled:

The idea of equal distribution of talents made sense to the [university] rectors, but basically it meant cream skimming (sic) the best among the poor. And it worked for programs financed by universities, but not by the State (...) at some point that conflicts with the challenge and responsibility to develop a public policy. When we talk about rights, we talk about rights for all, (...) and this responsibility implies that we couldn't implement a program just for a few. It had to enact a right for everyone which conflicted with the Propaedeutic model (Policy leader 2, interview).

While the Propaedeutic recruiting strategy, based on the equality of talents principle, gained traction among universities and student movements, since the entrance of affirmative action into the State, it diminished its legitimacy. Focusing on the few talented is problematized as "cream skimming" and irresponsible as a public policy. The "rescuing" of the best performers was read as weakening the State's commitment to strengthen public education as it excludes most of the students from public schools. From this critique emerged the technology of improvement, now oriented to the materialization of the discourse of recovering public education. This technology expanded the duration and sites of PACE's interventions beyond a focus on admission and success in HE and interpellated universities to become responsible citizens for public education at the school level. The multiple spaces and capacities for intervention—cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal, vocational, expectations, abilities, and motivations—ensured a broader conception of learning trajectories beyond high schools. As a program coordinator interprets them:

What we have attempted in our intervention in high schools is not about just favoring access to universities, but rather a broad and varied post-secondary project, so they [students] can develop a life project which responds to what they know. Our bet is that the students that we work with in the schools know that university is only one post-secondary option, but there are many more, right? Like going into work and entrepreneurship, which are things that this group has taken off a lot (Program coordinator 1, interview).

In the policy narrative expressed in the above quote, learning trajectories became “life-projects” understood as alternative pathways to those who would not access HE. However, the life project discourse legitimates the meritocratic exclusionary logic of HE access and participation by paradoxically creating a narrative that diminishes the stigma of non-university life and supporting students’ planning for different trajectories outside universities as valid and valued life opportunities.

Deficit discourse and leveling technology

While the commitment to public education was vital to expanding the scope of this policy in secondary education, it is important to underscore that deficit discourse is a significant force in shaping this policy and reinforcing its orientation towards public schools. This discourse leads to a post-entry intervention focused on leveling working-class subjects. Deficit discourse and leveling technology constitute the third pillar of this AAP.

Leveling is constructed as a necessary means for successful inclusion while construing working-class students as ill-prepared for HE, given their socio-educational backgrounds. Policy agents assume working-class context to be deeply homogeneously internalized by students, and in the same way as public high schools are placed at the lower level, so too is the subject of leveling. As several policy actors interviewed in an official PACE assessment expressed, working-class students would need leveling to deter them from dropping out.

An important aspect is to see PACE as a mechanism that tackles the gaps that beneficiary students have and the difficulties they face given their vulnerable background of economic and educational inequality, which would not allow them to have adequate and relevant academic training, and positions them at a disadvantage in relation to other students who do have the necessary tools for good performance (PNUD, 2017: 63).

The above statement presents a particular problem/solution relation between deficits and leveling. However, the gap metaphor achieves a different meaning than the one usually conveyed in widening-participation discussions. Instead, the gap in which the leveling subject is inscribed involves a lack of preparation in relation to the dominant norm defining a desirable student.

Leveling as the technology of the deficit discourse has been a consistent and polyvalent discursive pattern throughout the AAP’s trajectory. For example, in the 2011–2012 student movements, leveling was placed as a necessity in different political and policy manifestos. From the most radical student proposals to eradicate selectivity (ACES, 2012) to the defense of admission tests’ neutrality (c.f. CIPER Chile, 2011) and the creation of an academic leveling voucher fund (cf. Lavín, 2011), there was a broad consensus to call for articulating equity quotas and leveling policies. In current discussions about quota policies, leveling still has a hegemonic aura, a univocal consensus, when “experts” from different perspectives and political positions meet to debate the future of university access (DEMRE, 2022a). PACE is constantly cited as a template for access and

retention policies in these spaces. In this context, the deficit discourse and its leveling technology place the university as part of the solution, leaving its hidden curriculum, exclusionary admissions, and culture highly unproblematized. Moreover, they contribute to displacing the complicities of universities with the reproduction of inequalities and othering of working-class cultures.

Quotas are inextricably associated with leveling-up technologies. Leveling is construed as responsible and committed actions necessary for the legitimation of AAPs as inclusive policy. Policy actors help to expand the leveling discourse into a broader sense of an integral accompaniment:

This component [leveling and accompaniment for HE] suggest that the action of the program cannot be reduced to academic leveling and cognitive preparation exclusively, but must be expanded to a range of actions, which also integrate non-cognitive variables, raised expectations and strengthened socio-emotional skills (MINEDUC, 2016c: 12).

The actions of the component seek to facilitate student integration, progress, and retention, through the implementation of devices that respond to their academic and psychoeducational needs, which are evidenced in an initial diagnosis, and whose evolution is observed from the information provided by the monitoring and early warning systems (MINEDUC, 2022b: 11).

The support strategies known as “accompaniment” unfold a range of psychoeducational techniques to foster attitudinal and socio-emotional skills seeking to address fundamental “lacks” in terms of dispositions towards knowledge, abilities, and attitudes, that hinder student retention and progress. In this strategy, autonomy is a crucial aspect to foster in students. Alongside educational and clinical psychologists, this requires social workers and pedagogical experts in basic sciences, mathematics, and academic writing. These experts consider this focus on constructing the ideal HE student subject—one able to adjust to a scholarly institutional habitus—critical for ensuring academic success.

However, other experts have also formulated regulations for diagnosing and monitoring student trajectories. These specialists are not necessarily supporting students directly but assisting in constructing what is called “early warning systems” from psychometric and data management expert knowledges. The leveling subjects are assessed at the beginning of their HE trajectory to measure their academic and psychoeducational needs. Then, their trajectories are monitored through systems that would refer them to other support programs if needed, such as health services and financial or information support, amongst others. Data and its association with the language of risk have recently become integral to the deficit discourse and its leveling technologies. While supporting policy professionals by alerting them about students facing barriers and challenges, data infrastructures re-inscribe the fears brought by the constructed and assumed lacks of working-class students in visible objective indicators and patterns performed by these data technologies.

Conclusion

This article sought to trace crucial discourses in the formation of PACE—the main AAP in Chile. In stark contrast with fierce contestations in countries like the United States and Brazil, this AAP has gained broad support and legitimacy, being placed as one of the exemplary initiatives driving recent transformations oriented to a more social justice-sensitive Chilean HE system. In a context of struggles over the role of universities in society, PACE was constructed by carefully and conservatively navigating discursive tensions, avoiding to publicly support struggles for justice

associated with migrants, recognition of black descendants or even gender diversities—although the latter seems to be timidly permeating during the last 2 years in some AAP's orientations. Moreover, by promoting a new form of meritocracy—meritocracy in context as a paradigm of social justice—its leading actors have garnered broader support from governments, university leaders, and representatives of university student movements, without putting at risk the hegemony and participation of professional middle-classes and economic elites in HE.

By aligning the core struggle of the student movement—the restoration of HE as a social right—with the discourse of meritocracy in context fostered as a new social justice paradigm for the working classes, PACE and its organic intellectuals and entrepreneurs moderated to some extent their conservative meritocratic technology, positioning policymakers and practitioners as advocates for the restitution of the social right to education.

However, once PACE became an unquestionable part of the State bureaucratic apparatus a shift towards distancing from the discourse of the right to HE took place. This was, paradoxically, a strategic response to the prominence of the neoliberal rationality of the State based on accountability and “value for money” approaches. In this framework, working-class students are not citizens but rather investments. The State's accountability metrics and procedures that supervise PACE's aims and outcomes are perceived as incapable of conceiving the *restoration of HE as a social right* as an investment that can be measured and economically valued, thus, holding back AAP's actors' historical struggles for the right to HE. This strategic response to a neoliberal audit culture shrinks policy capacities to reinforce new democratic common sense in HE. Instead of supervising progress in restoring the right to HE, the State focuses on access and permanence rates and the investment of resources. Such targeting is consistent with the assumption that working-class students constitute a risk for HE.

The dominance of “value for money” accountability, while forcing the rolling back of the discourse of rights, reproduces traditional liberal and meritocratic notions of equity and quality, reinforcing the discourses of public education recovery and deficit. Their trajectories, alongside their technologies of improvement and leveling, have made room for the continuation of a social justice neoliberal imaginary in HE in the formation of PACE, while excluding other voices, experiences, and knowledges that have participated in the construction of this AAP in Chile. AAPs have been navigating in an arena in which the political rationalities of the neoliberal State and University coincide in subverting political ideals of inclusion and human rights that promote the institutionalization of this affirmative action.

AAP's reorientation from widening participation in HE to the recovery of secondary public education right after its integration into a nationwide State policy as PACE is tied to the collaboration between deficit discourse and its leveling technology, on the one hand, and the recovery of public education discourse and its technology of improvement, on the other. This complicity drove universities to intervene as committed authorities of inclusion and quality in public secondary schools. Implicitly, the critique shifted from the HE system as a reproducer of inequalities to schools and their conditions. In accordance with [Warikoo and Allen's \(2020\)](#) analysis of other AAPs globally, these reorientations identified in PACE indicate the porosity of these policies and the variety of micro-political uses and aims they serve.

A further point regarding deficit discourse and leveling technology must be made. They are core norms in HE that enable a set of interventions targeting multiple lacks “within” working-class subjects to enhance their capacities to adapt to HE environments. Deficit, leveling, and adaptation are articulations of core normativities rooted in the othering of the working classes. Such rationality holds the working-class subject responsible for its exclusion and inclusion, making impossible or senseless to problematize and reconsider universities' exclusionary structural, cultural, and institutional conditions.

These findings expand the research on this policy by making visible the discursive forces and contexts that align the State's commitment to improving public schools by self-responsibilizing them with universities' commitment to recruiting and graduating meritorious students. We identified the context of influence as the ground where political actors exert pressure to institutionalize affirmative action as public policy and governmental micropolitics as a set of forces that frame its subsequent implementation and evaluation.

In summary, rather than understanding AAPs as ideological unitary entities constituted by progressive social justice discourses, we identified an AAP in Chile caught up in an ongoing constitution of various discourses and technologies embedded in broader struggles over the neoliberal State. By recognizing these discourses' contingent, diverse, and polyvalent nature, PACE and AAPs can be understood as changing formations deeply attached to non-linear ideological climates.

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Note

1. The current official name of the program in Spanish is “*Programa de Acceso a la Educación Superior*.”

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