

## Discussing school socioeconomic segregation in territorial terms: the differentiated influence of urban fragmentation and daily mobility

*Discutir la segregación socioeconómica escolar en términos territoriales. La influencia diferenciada de la fragmentación urbana y la movilidad cotidiana*

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**Abstract.** Chile is one of the OECD countries with higher levels of socioeconomic segregation in its educational system. This may be explained by the incidence of institutional factors (fees and school selection processes), sociocultural factors (families' appraisals and behaviors towards school choice) and contextual factors, among which residential segregation would stand as the most relevant.

This article analyzes the relation between school location, students' socioeconomic status and student's place of origin (mobility). The data used was gathered from 1613 surveys responded by primary students' families. The results evidence that residential segregation only partially influences educational socioeconomic segregation, since the capacity of mobility is a key factor to "break" the association between both phenomena. Therefore, residential segregation would affect to a greater extent low socioeconomic status students who attend schools near their homes and travel distances shorter than children from higher socioeconomic status, who tend to cover longer distances between home and school. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis of the cases

complicates drawing conclusions, because students of equal socioeconomic status travel very different distances. The characteristics of the territories where schools are located shed some light on the cause of these differences. From these results, we propose re-discussing the use of the residential segregation concept for explaining phenomena like school segregation, due to the complex interrelations between both territorial fragmentation and urban mobility.

**Key words:** school segregation, residential segregation, daily mobility.

**Resumen.** Chile es uno de los países OCDE que exhibe mayor grado de segregación socioeconómica en su sistema escolar. Esto se explicaría por la incidencia de tres factores: institucionales (como los cobros y procesos de selección de estudiantes por parte de las escuelas), socioculturales (valoraciones y comportamientos de las familias frente a la elección de escuela) y de contexto, entre los que la segregación residencial aparece como el más relevante.

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Este trabajo analiza la relación entre localización de las escuelas, composición socioeconómica del alumnado y procedencia (movilidad) del mismo. La información utilizada proviene de 1 631 encuestas a familias de alumnos de enseñanza primaria. Los resultados evidencian que la segregación residencial influye sólo parcialmente sobre la segregación socioeconómica escolar porque la capacidad de movilización es un factor determinante para “romper” la asociación entre ambos fenómenos. La segregación residencial afectaría en mayor medida a estudiantes de nivel socioeconómico bajo que asisten a escuelas en las inmediaciones de sus hogares, recorriendo distancias menores que niños de niveles socioeconómicos superiores quienes tienden a movilizarse más

entre casa y escuela. Sin embargo, el análisis comparativo de los casos complejiza esa conclusión, porque estudiantes del mismo nivel socioeconómico pueden recorrer diferentes distancias. Las características de los territorios donde se localizan las escuelas parecen tener relación con tales diferencias. A partir de los resultados del estudio se plantea rediscutir el uso del concepto de segregación residencial para explicar fenómenos como la segregación escolar dada la complejidad de las interrelaciones entre procesos de fragmentación territorial y movilidad cotidiana.

**Palabras clave:** segregación escolar, segregación residencial, movilidad cotidiana.

## INTRODUCTION

In Chile, there is a consensus regarding the high levels of socioeconomic segregation that characterize the school system<sup>1</sup> (Ministry of Education, 2012), which has been endorsed by international reports (OCDE, 2013). In turn, there is also agreement on the different nature of the elements that explain school segregation. Bellei (2013) organizes them in three dimensions: institutional factors from the educational system (fees and school selection processes), sociocultural (families' preferences) and contextual factors, among which residential segregation would stand as the most relevant.

International studies have shown how the link between both school and residential segregation would be especially evident in school systems subjected to zonification policies that limit school choice to the institutions closest to the student's home (Taylor & Gorard, 2001; Ong & Rickles, 2004; Alegre *et al.*, 2008). Along with the spread of the neoliberal economic model, school zonification has been questioned and replaced by a market orientation (Collins & Coleman, 2008), emphasizing freedom of school choice as a key mechanism to stimulate competition between schools, and to promote the improvement of the quality of education. Therefore, in theory, the link between a school and the population that inhabits its location is weakened in the free choice scenario. As aforementioned, in the Chilean case, despite the existence of zonification policies and the relevance of free choice, it is assumed that “urban segregation has a direct incidence on the school system, since more segregated neighborhoods and cities tend to reproduce social differences in the school system” (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2013:12). Moreover, some authors proposed that school segregation might be the mere reflection of residential segregation<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, from the geography of education perspective (Taylor, 2009; Collins & Coleman, 2008), it is considered that educational processes

<sup>1</sup> During the military government, a comprehensive reform was carried out. This reform included, among other areas, the educational area. In this way, the financing system of per student subsidy, which was the heir of Milton Friedman's voucher or school checks proposal, was adopted. This system, albeit reformed, is still in effect. It consists in the State delivering the same amount of money per student attending state or subsidized private schools, which would grant the families the right to choose schools. The expectation was that, in a context of competition under equal conditions, subsidized private schools would show a considerably higher quality than state schools. However, the accumulated evidence does not confirm that theory. On the contrary, a variety of studies points out that the main effect of the implementation of this system has been social segmentation (Hsieh & Urquiola, 2006; Mc Ewan, Urquiola & Vegas, 2008).

In addition, there are private schools that are not granted state funding, i.e. completely financed by the families. At a state level, schools concentrate 37% of the system's students, whereas subsidized private schools and non-subsidized private schools concentrate 55% and 7%, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> “Residential segregation in Chile (at least in big conurbations) is considerable and schools, especially during early ages, tend to attract students close to them, geographically speaking. Not surprisingly, part of the segregation observed at a school level is merely a reflection of territorial segregation” (Hernando *et al.*, 2014:29).

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