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Understanding aspirations: why do secondary TVET students aim so high in Chile?

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ABSTRACT

The interest in educational and professional aspirations of students transiting to post-secondary education has gained prominence in academic debates and policy agendas internationally. Political interventions for raising aspirations quite often draw on narrow instrumental and rationalistic assumptions of individual decision-making that, as we will argue, do not capture adequately the meanings students attribute to these aspirations. By means of in-depth interviews and combining a critical realist approach to social action with capabilities approach, the paper explores the educational and professional aspirations of students at the end of secondary TVET in Chile. We consider that high educational aspirations of secondary TVET students in Chile need to be understood as a reflexive response to significantly high social inequalities in the country, the precarity of working conditions in a highly liberalised labour market, and the enduring neoliberal tenet of meritocracy. We also argue that understanding aspirations is key to reimagine TVET's roles and purposes at individual, institutional and national levels, towards fairer opportunities for human development.

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Introduction

The interest in educational and professional aspirations of students in transition to post-secondary education has gained prominence in academic debates and policy agendas targeted at widening participation (UNESCO 2018; OECD 2017a). In capitalist societies, the expansion of education has been rationalised by governments as crucial for creating globally competitive economies and tackling poverty, unemployment and social inequalities; a fundamental assumption of Human Capital Theory (HCT) (Olssen and Peters 2005). Educational aspirations have been assumed as key drivers of this expansion and, consequently, participating in Tertiary Education (TE) has been linked to higher aspirations and achievements. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) interventions draw heavily on HCT's narrow assumptions of

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instrumental rational decision-making when making transitions (Valiente, Zancajo, and Jacovkis 2020). This approach, we argue, is insufficient and has resulted in inaccurate theoretical explanations and inadequate policy interventions.

Despite its academic and policy relevance, little is known about how TVET students form their aspirations in their transition to adulthood, and the meanings and motivations they attach to these. Understanding aspirations is key to explain macrosocial transformations like the large and sustained expansion of education in emerging economies like Chile. The country currently achieves higher levels of upper-secondary completion and access to TE than the OECD average (Zancajo and Valiente 2019). Paradoxically, in a country where secondary TVET was originally designed as a direct route to the labour market, an increasing number of such students have been transitioning to TE.

Our research aims to shed light on this apparent paradox by interrogating the aspirations of students in the final year of Chilean upper secondary TVET. We draw on Margaret Archer's critical realist (CR) approach to social action and on Capabilities Approach to understand the meanings these students attributed to their educational and professional aspirations, and the relationship between these aspirations and social structures. We argue that the high educational aspirations of secondary TVET students in Chile need to be understood as a reflexive response to the large social inequalities in the country, the precarity of working conditions in a highly liberalised labour market, and the enduring neo-liberal tenet of meritocracy.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section briefly reviews theoretical approaches to studying youth aspirations. The second section provides an overview of the socioeconomic and institutional context of youth transitions in Chile. The third section outlines the study's methodology. Section four presents the findings, and the final section discusses the theoretical and policy implications emerging from the findings.

Structure and agency in youth aspirations

Literature on the construction of educational and professional aspirations of youth in transition to adulthood is scarce, and the meanings young people ascribe to these aspirations remains relatively under-researched (Baker 2017). Aspirations have extensively been described in comparative and hierarchical terms (e.g. 'high' vs 'low'), and associated with young people's intention to accumulate academic credentials, especially through university education (Fuller 2009) and to attain professional jobs (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). Some authors have looked at aspirations as proxies of individual and collective identity formation, stressing the importance young people attribute to the moral implications of high aspirations (Baker 2017). Understanding the meaning

of aspirations is crucial to challenge narrow neoliberal rhetoric that emphasises economic advancement as individuals' main concern and university education as the main route for enabling this.

Rational Choice Theorists (RCTs) assume agential power of young people over structural constraints. RCTs explain aspirations in terms of perceived future economic returns to education, compared to alternative labour market paths, assuming young people can identify their 'best' option given their circumstances (Goldthorpe 1998; Boudon 1996). Glauser and Becker (2016), for example, extrapolate from regional-level indicators that Swiss students' aspirations for TVET over baccalaureate schools can be explained by students' assessment of limiting local opportunity structures. Malin and Jacob (2019) draw similar conclusions about rational adaptations to opportunity structures in explaining German students' career aspirations.

Conversely, in structuralist approaches, factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity are crucial predictors of aspirations, and educational and labour market trajectories. Such work is largely grounded in Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu 1977). Therein, the interiorisation of social structure as embodied *habitus*, is shaped by the 'fields' of practice individuals are positioned in from infancy (e.g. family), and then move through throughout life (e.g. education and work). Individuals accrue different levels of competency, or capitals, depending on the particular forms of field they encounter, which tends to reproduce social structures (Bourdieu 1977; Hatcher 1998; Akram 2013). When individuals move across fields, they may experience different *doxa*, 'what goes without saying' (Bourdieu 1977, 170), causing conflict and exclusion. According to Bourdieu, aspirations are essentially determined by the probability of success in achieving a desired goal, given individuals' social positioning.

Following this tradition, post-16 transition studies have focused on how class structures determine aspirations, choices and experiences. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, 34) argue that 'horizons for action' behind career aspirations and choices are negotiated through personal experiences, advice from significant others and opportunity structures. Likewise, Reay (2001) contends that class-inherited cultural capital and *habitus* heavily influence individual's aspirations and educational attainment with post-secondary choices also gendered. Similar findings have also been reported by Furlong (2009) and Polesel, Leahy, and Gillis (2018), suggesting aspirations are informed by 'realistic' and grounded assessments. In the field of TVET, this reproduction of social inequalities has mainly reflected the classed and gendered 'head/hands' division, and the orientations of TVET students to waged labour (Lahelma 2009; Avis and Atkins 2017), sometimes reinforced through teachers' expectations.

Both RCT and structuralist approaches have shortcomings. Empirical evidence of RCT in youth transitions and aspirations remains controversial and thin (Jüttler et al. 2016). Methodological limitations of RCTs result from studying

aspirations as abstracted from quantitative data examining correlations between other (more macro) variables, not critically exploring the values students ascribe to their aspirations. Qualitative studies on TVET student aspirations have largely shown how narrow the instrumental rationality assumption of RCT is. For example, Atkins and Flint (2015) found serendipity rather than instrumental rationality played a bigger role in vocational students' educational aspirations and choices. Tarabini and Curran's (2018) study stressed the role of emotions in guiding post-secondary transitions, alongside gendered and classed dispositions. Critiques of rational choice approaches also question their assumption of relatively stable aspirations, when aspirations are, in fact, changing and adaptive (Polesel, Leahy, and Gillis 2018).

Structuralist approaches fail to consider the complex interplay between socioeconomic structures, culture and individual factors. These approaches overlook working-class young peoples' ability to exert their agency and aspire to alternative futures, other than those determined or constrained by their social positioning. They also fail to problematise the meanings that working-class young people attribute to their aspirations, tending to label them as inferior lower achievers in aspirational 'deficit'. Finally, they fail to capture how changing, subjective, social group orientations affect aspirations' formation. Some critics highlight that in the neoliberal age, disadvantaged youth have different attitudes towards education. Young people now sometimes feel that opting out of education after compulsory schooling is untenable for their life advancement (Stahl et al. 2018). Zipin et al. (2015) argue that aspiring entails a process of identity and strategy formation within future orientations, understood if considered in the 'thick of social life' (Appadurai 2004, 67). Limiting aspirations to habituated and doxic manifestations neglects individuals' capacity to desire, imagine and pursue emergent visions for alternative futures. This lack of flexibility and the risk of over-determinism make it necessary to combine approaches, 'to continually "evoke and provoke" Bourdieu's work to provide meaningful analyses of the empirical' (Webb et al. 2017, 153).

To address these limitations, Critical Realist (CR) approaches understand aspirational complexities of transitions in late modernity as resulting from the dialectical interaction of structure and agency, mediated by individual reflexivity (Archer 2003, 2007). For Archer (2003), structure and agency are ontologically separate. While structures are 'emergent' social properties that pre-exist individuals, agents are not merely passive subjects of them. Likewise, social structures can be affected and shaped *by* individual agency, albeit in temporally distinct moments. It is the irreducibility of structure and agency that allows social researchers to understand how agents exert their power to achieve their concerns and life projects, whilst reflexively considering their circumstances (Archer 2007). While for Bourdieu reflexivity is a moment of crisis that can occur when the *habitus* does not 'fit in' a new field, for Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) reflexivity is inseparable *from* human agency.

A growing, but still scarce, number of scholars have applied a CR framework/reflexivity in their empirical studies on young people's aspirations and choices. For instance, Powell and McGrath's (2019) study on South African TVET College students used Archer's approach and found students made choices which were not necessarily structurally or economically determined. Instead, students actively reflected upon subjective evaluations of opportunity costs, risks and benefits of different options. Czerniewicz, Williams, and Brown (2009) also drew on Archer to explain the motivations that led South African students from poor socioeconomic background to use ICTs to access universities off-campus. In both studies, CR challenges the homogeneous theorisation of young people from low socioeconomic background as lacking agency and capacity to confront their structural circumstances.

Archer's theorisation of reflexivity has not been without critique. One critique refers to her over-reliance on reflexivity as an undisputed capacity of individual agency and, consequently, her failure to acknowledge unconscious human predispositions behind aspirations and actions (Decoteau 2016; Akram 2013). Acknowledging the centrality of reflexivity to understand social actions, but critiquing Archer's underplaying of pre-reflexive actions, some scholars interpret aspirations as a combination of unconscious *habitus* with reflexivity and consciousness. They conceptualise it as reflexive *habitus*, a new perspective that recognises forms of reflexivity emerging within different manifestations of *habitus* (Akram 2013; Decoteau 2016). Decoteau (*ibid*: 304), questioning those who view Bourdieusian habitus as deterministic, argues, '*habitus* is layered (reflecting different structurations of the field from different times in its formation), reflexivity can occur because of horizontal disjunctures (across field positions) *or* vertical disjunctures (due to the temporal layering of the *habitus* itself)'. *Habitus* is thus open to change over time, due to exposure to multiple fields, via reflexivity.

Despite critique, the reflexive approach is seen as fruitful in bridging the divide between structuralist and RCT approaches, which both conceptualise agency naively. Understanding the significance of aspirations by taking into account the reflexive component that contributes to form these is crucial to challenge narrow neoliberal rhetoric that stresses economic advancement as individuals' main concern and university education as the main route for enabling this, and that holds a 'deficit view' of working-class young people's aspirations (Powell and McGrath 2019).

A further, complementary, recent body of work has looked at aspirations drawing on the Capabilities Approach (CA) (Powell and Simon 2019; Robeyns 2017). Pioneered by the Indian economist Amartya Sen (1999) the CA provides a normative framework that puts students' well-being, quality of life, social development and freedom to choose at the centre of discussions and evaluations of educational programmes. Like reflexive approaches, looking at young people's educational aspirations from the CA implies focusing on the degree of agency they have to form and express their aspirations (their freedom to choose), without

underplaying the role of different structural factors in enabling or constraining these capabilities (their freedom to achieve) (Mkwananzi 2019). For example, Hart (2013), informed by a Sen-Bourdieu analytical framework, shows students from low socioeconomic backgrounds' choices about participating or not in HE were influenced by several internal and external factors. In some cases, students had felt constrained (lacking agency) in their freedom to choose, and for the development of their life projects. Hart explains an important difference between the freedom to aspire, and the functioning (e.g. voicing) of aspiration, stating that policies neglect the former and espouse a narrow view of the latter. She concludes neoliberalism promotes only certain aspirations as valuable (e.g. the aspiration to HE), and that re-examining aspirations via the CA will give a truer picture of what young people *really* value.

For these reasons, the CA has been increasingly used as an alternative to HCT, to gain a better understanding of students' instrumental and intrinsic values in shaping aspirations (Mkwananzi 2019). TVET scholars have started to draw on CA to problematise, through student perspectives, participation in TVET and its role in expanding students' freedom to choose and aspirations, especially those marginalised by social inequality and injustice. What it is argued is the need to better understand 'what matters to the students', especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, to be able to develop new and more appropriate TVET theories, policies and practices (Bonvin 2019).

To answer this call, McGrath et al. (2020) propose a critical capabilities account of vocational education and training (CCA-VET) which combines the normative framework of CA with critical sociological theories, particularly CR, to help understand how individuals make decisions and, 'how aspirations are formed, enacted or transformed' (ibid.: 15). Their approach challenges the naïve orthodox view of TVET students as poorly performing, instrumental, and at the mercy of material constraints. Their person-centred approach instead revealed (agentic) consciousness about students' limitations; constraints; need for support to develop their capabilities (Appadurai 2004); but also the idiosyncratic reasons students enrolled in TVET. While clearly economic advancement was important for everybody to escape material poverty, there were a range of different capabilities that equally mattered to them (Powell and Simon 2019).

This study applies these approaches to aspirations of secondary TVET students in Chile, a context that is both dominated by neoliberal HCT assumptions, and resplendent with structural constraints. This context, we believe, is ideal for examining both the structured and agential elements of aspiration formation, and to understand existing tensions between policy rhetoric and the realities of TVET students in neoliberal capitalist societies.

The context of TVET transitions in Chile

The implementation of a radical neoliberal model of economic development under Pinochet's military dictatorship in the 1980s had severe effects on social inequalities in Chile, lasting until today. These stretch beyond economic conditions and include social discrimination and frequent violation of citizens' basic rights (Araujo 2009). Access to basic social rights (e.g. health or education) and the allocation of opportunities have been mainly regulated by markets and ruled by the principle of profitability (Valiente, Sepúlveda, and Zancajo 2021).

Neoliberal reforms in education gave birth to an extreme version of the market model of skill formation (Sung, Turbin, and Ashton 2000), which exacerbated already rampant social inequalities (Bellei et al. 2018). Much socioeconomic segregation occurs in secondary education, where TVET (public) schools are mainly attended by students that belong to the poorest quintile of the society and represent the least valuable option in the educational hierarchy (OECD 2017b). Prospects are poor for secondary vocational students who, 'face even more difficulties gaining access to higher-level education opportunities and the labour market' (ibid: 270) than their peers from academic secondary education. The system also frequently struggles to equip students for jobs that interest them, even at the skill level they are trained to (ibid.).

Until recently, accessing TE was largely uncommon for TVET students. This was particularly the case for university education, due to: (a) the relative academic disadvantage TVET students face in the University Admission Test (known as *PSU*); and (b) its prohibitive costs (OECD 2017b). Despite these institutional barriers, in the last few years more than 40% of secondary TVET graduates have enrolled in TE institutions (SIES 2017). This growing pattern of education expansion coexists with large inequalities in accessing a highly segmented and stratified TE system. Students from the lowest-income quintiles and low-achieving students tend to concentrate in tertiary TVET institutions and low-quality universities (Larrañaga, Cabezas, and Dussaillant 2014).

In the last few years, some significant policy initiatives have been adopted to compensate for these large inequalities in accessing TE. First, the free-tuition programme (*gratuidad*) was introduced in 2016 for students from the bottom six income deciles. Funds for *gratuidad* are provided by the government to tertiary institutions that meet quality-related criteria (traditional universities created before the dictatorship and a small number of tertiary TVET institutions) (OECD 2017b). Second, the Programme for Support and Effective Access (*PACE*) was implemented in 2014 to support access to universities of the top 15% of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, without the accomplishing *PSU* score requirements (DIPRES 2019).

It is in this institutional context that secondary TVET students have to make crucial decisions for their educational, professional and life trajectories. This happens in a cultural environment dominated by the illusion of equal social

opportunity through education. The marked contradiction between meritocratic imaginaries and a highly unequal education system makes Chile a perfect case for exploring the interplay between structure and agency in the construction of TVET students' educational and professional aspirations (Canales Cerón, Opazo Baeza, and Camps 2016).

Theoretical framework and methodology

This qualitative study looks at the meanings that upper-secondary TVET students ascribed to their aspirations to understand the rationale behind the increasing demand for TE from these students, alongside institutional drivers/constraints. We draw on the ontological distinction of structure from agency, and on the concept of reflexivity, to interpret how disadvantaged young people exert agency, respond to their contexts and formulate aspirations (Archer 2003, 2007, 2012). Within this framework we use the CA to examine what students consider to be valuable, their freedom to choose, and how they envisage turning aspirations into reality (Hart 2013). We also examine the role of reflexive *habitus* and *doxa* in aspiration formation, given that the students are from a relatively homogenous social group (Akram 2013; Decoteau 2016). Consistent with the above approach, our notion of aspirations encompasses concepts of participants' professional and educational wishes; intentions; ambitions; preferences; and projects negotiated against their perceptions of their present circumstances and subjective exploration of available opportunities (Appadurai 2004).

Participants in this study all attended the same public secondary TVET school. The school was located in an urban municipality of Santiago whose socioeconomic and educational characteristics (poverty; levels of illiteracy; and the education level of the population) are relatively similar to the national and Metropolitan Region's (MR) average (Gajardo Polanco 2016). Among the three, public secondary TVET schools in the municipality, the school selected offered four of the most popular vocational tracks in the MR (Administration and Logistics; Electricity; Mechanics; Telecommunication). Twenty-eight students (12 female and 16 male) who had just completed their secondary education (age 17/18) took part in the study. All participants belonged to vulnerable socioeconomic groups with experiences of poverty

Table 1. Number of participants (and total n. of students of the same cohort) by sex and field of studies.

	Electricity	Mechanics	Telecom.	Admin. & Logistics	Total
Female	2 (6)	0 (8)	1 (7)	9 (31)	**12 (52)**
Male	5 (31)	3 (29)	5 (27)	3 (9)	**16 (96)**
Total	**7 (37)**	**3 (37)**	**6 (34)**	**12 (40)**	**28 (148)**

beyond economic deprivation. Table 1 shows how students in the school (in parentheses) and those sampled were distributed across sex and field of studies.

We used semi-structured biographical interviews (Nilsen 2008), where students were asked to share and reflect upon their past experiences and their possible future pathways. This data provided insights into the relationships between participants' recollection of lived experiences, their preferred educational and professional self-projections, and their perceptions of the feasible opportunities available to them. Also, by analysing these different relationships between past experiences, self-projections, and perceived opportunities, we were able to critically interrogate the formation and meaning of aspirations against their institutional background.

The interviews were recorded and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes to allow in-depth conversations and develop comfort and familiarity with participants. Although interviews were tailored and personalised according to each participant's narration of specific life events or experiences, the interview guidelines targeted three main sets of themes. The first concerned their recently completed upper-secondary educational experience, which was fresh in their mind and helped build participants' confidence in elucidating their subjective experiences. The second covered their personal biography, particularly their past educational choices, family situations, parental expectations and support, role models, and relationships with friends and peers. The third referred to future orientations, centred on their educational and professional aspirations and how they thought they would achieve these.

Interviews were transcribed and coded. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify what type of educational and professional aspirations students had, and the meanings ascribed to these. Patterns across participants were identified and findings were organised in a typological analysis of aspirations. Participants' aspirations were classified according to their perception of the highest and most ambitious educational or work trajectory available to them. The project had approval from the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee and relevant educational authorities in Chile. Students were given pseudonyms for anonymity.

TVET students' aspirations: a typological approach

This section presents the typological analysis of aspirations. It introduces the classification of students into three categories of aspirations, namely 1) university education; 2) tertiary vocational education; and 3) work. Second, for each type identified, it brings together data that illustrate the rationale for students' aspirations, presenting institutional, structural, and individual factors.

University education aspirers

Despite the low odds of TVET students accessing university education in Chile (Larrañaga, Cabezas, and Dussaillant 2013), 11 (39%) of the 28 students interviewed shared the willingness to go to university as the highest preferred post-secondary transition. University aspirers considered enrolling in university as a possibility within their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 34), which they would attempt to fulfil in the forthcoming or following academic year. Deferring their university aspirations depended mainly on their *PSU* results and being granted free tuition fees under the *gratuidad* scheme. In order to understand the different meanings students ascribed to university aspirations, an analytical distinction was made between aspirations *for* university and aspirations *through* university (Carling and Collins 2018). As it will be shown, to certain degrees, this reflects the intrinsic/instrumental value of education distinction, with the former especially concerned with the CA (Bonvin 2019), although in reality the difference came across as less intuitive and neat. Those aspiring *for* university justified their choice in the instrumental symbolic value and prestige of these institutions. The aspirers *through* university showed a stronger intrinsic/vocational motivation for available fields of study, which would allow access to the professions.

Aspirations for university

The academic prestige of university was prominent and determinant in the decision-making of aspirers *for* university (3 students), as the next quote from Enrique illustrates:

> I will continue studying … […] at the university, I think it will be a cool environment […] Because it has more prestige … Besides, I have always liked it more than a [TVET] institutes […] everyone sees [university] as difficult. Instead, they think it is easier [in TVET institutes]. […] I don't care if it is more difficult or easier. I feel that university is going to be a better environment.

This higher social value ascribed to universities was perceived as influencing individual's social status through credentials. As explained by Maria, the symbolic meaning students had reason to value was seen as instrumental in gaining respect from others and increasing their self-esteem:

> Actually, it was not in my plans to continue studying, I always thought 'I'll go to work' [but] now here you cannot do much with a secondary certificate […] the best thing is to get a university degree so that people have a higher consideration of you.

Enrique and Maria were the only participants in this study who had been selected as *PACE* beneficiaries for their high academic achievement. Findings suggest that their university aspirations were encouraged by *PACE* as they would be academically facilitated in accessing a *PACE*-affiliated university institution and would receive support to make informed decisions on choices

concerning institutions and programmes. Interestingly, both had decided to attend university institutions that were offering programmes in the same field of studies they had taken in their secondary vocational education (Accounting and Electricity and Industrial Automation, respectively). The continuity in the field of studies between secondary TVET and university education can be interpreted through a combination of individual and institutional factors. On the one hand, the subject knowledge they had already accumulated, their interest for the field, and the positive perception of their own abilities (being the best performing students of their cohort) contributed to their confidence in succeeding in university. Furthermore, both had a positive learning experience at school and appreciated the combination of in-class and hands-on learning. They also affirmed that they had good relationships with their teachers, which motivated them to further their studies in the same area of specialisation. Such interactions, enhanced by their reflexivity, may have augmented their perceptions of 'doxic fit' with these fields in HE. On the other, as *PACE* recipients, they had the possibility to receive the psycho-social and professional support to make informed and reflected transition decisions, which is not provided for most students.

The third aspirer *for* university had high aspirations in terms of universities she was considering and attributed significant value to the institution of university. Gabriela confidently said she was aiming for the most prestigious universities in Chile and the highest ranked in Latin America as 'it would be cool to be recognised as someone who graduated from La Católica'. Yet, she showed an ambiguity between *for*/*through*. She had less definite ideas around what to study and what career to pursue but made clear she would change specialism. The main reasons for this lack of continuity between her secondary TVET and university specialisation were a combination of an overall disengagement with, and perceptions of gender discrimination in, her TVET sector (Telecommunication) and personal interests in new and liberal professions. She felt very confident in her own intellectual abilities, and she firmly believed in the meritocratic principle that education in Chile was offering endless opportunities to be or become whatever she wanted in life. This represents an emblematic example of the limits of interpreting aspirations in terms of rationalistic cost-benefit analysis, but also of social positioning as a predictor of aspirations.

These findings challenge the homogeneous theorisation of young people from low socioeconomic background as lacking agency and capacity to confront their structural circumstances. Among students' motivations behind the aspiration to access (the most prestigious) universities, were benefits in terms of life projects, and social redemption through acquisition of university credentials. These aspirations were informed by unique reflexive deliberations on what they valued, made against their circumstances, to strategically utilise their opportunity structures.

Aspirations through university

Aspirers *through* university (8 students) looked at university as a means for self-development and were drawn to specific subjects by personal interests more than other considerations. Differently from aspirers *for*, aspirers *through* did not ascribe a strong symbolic meaning to university, but saw it as a way to establish themselves in their dreamed professions. Three students wanted to become teachers; one a veterinary; one a sports trainer; and some wanted to work in creative arts. A minority aspired to set up their own business. As found in other studies (Walker 2007), probably due to the fact that achieving their aspirations implied abandoning their TVET routes and navigating new and less defined trajectories, some students in this sub-category showed less clarity on what university degree to pursue and on how to link their imagined future professions to a specific field of studies. This, in Bourdieu's terms, implies a degree of doxic and habitual discontinuity.

Contrary to some previous research on the strong employment value that working-class students ascribed to university (Bradley and Ingram 2012), these students attributed more normative and pro-social meanings to aspirations. For example, becoming good educators and role models for young people by helping them form critical thinking towards their society was the motivation of those who wanted to become teachers, despite being aware that the low salary that teachers receive could be a deterrent. Francisco commented that:

> What I like the most is to be a teacher. Teaching something that could help youth to not being carried away by our mass and consumerist culture [which controls us]. [I want them to know] the truth of things, to open their minds, to not being narrow-minded and blind, that's what motivates me [. . .] at the same time, I could be put off by the low salary of teachers [. . .] although I am not a capitalist, I will still have to provide for myself [. . .] but if I like it . . .

Findings also suggest that an overall negative learning experience in school played a role in motivating aspirers *through* university to change their specialisation. For example, in the case of students aspiring to become teachers, having had disengaged and unmotivated teachers themselves, or having felt unappreciated by them, contributed to inform their intentions to become good educators. These messages sent by educators, reinforce the roles of teachers in shaping students' aspirations, although here they acted as anti-role models rather than reinforcers of *doxa* and *habitus*.

Aspirers *through* university were not exempt from instrumental considerations on the costs and benefits of their desired future professions. For example, Antonio, a student of Administration and Logistics, affirmed that he aspired to become a professional dancer and had already started the process of enrolment in a private university. Yet, he knew that the vocational sector he was leaving behind had good career prospects whereas 'in Chile everything related to (performing) arts or humanities is not valued and artists need to do more than one job to survive and even sell their personal stuff'.

This demonstrates that theoretical assumptions of rationalistic individual decision-making frequently only provide a narrow and one-dimensional interpretation of TVET students' aspirations. This echo studies that challenge the market-model's assumption that Chilean secondary TVET graduates make their transition choices based on instrumental rationality and thorough information (Valiente, Zancajo, and Jacovkis 2020). Instead, we argue that the rationale for high aspirations, and for discontinuity of fields between secondary and tertiary education, were a desire for social mobility and a reflexive response to social inequalities and meritocratic discourses. Aspirations were not, however, purely instrumental, and often reflected moral concerns. Archer's emergentist explanatory framework of social action allows us to understand TVET students' university aspirations as not structurally or economically determined, but as actively reflected upon (however realistically) through subjective evaluations of opportunity costs, risks and benefits. Furthermore, through the CA it was possible to understand that what students had reason to value through education was not solely linked to economic advancement. Motivations included desires to raise self-esteem, contribute to their family, expand life aspirations, feel proud in their work, and be treated in an equitable and dignified way.

Tertiary vocational education aspirers

For most of the 13 students (46%) who aspired to enrol in a tertiary TVET institution, acquiring a tertiary vocational qualification was instrumental to achieve economic security and social mobility in their life. 'Stability', 'making money', 'buying a house' and 'providing for their family' were some of the goals associated with their life projects. Equally important aspects informing the aspirations of these students were to 'do better than my parents in life' and 'to become someone'. In other words, as for university aspirers, what students valued through acquiring a tertiary vocational qualification was not just economic advancement, but a certain financial stability and social recognition to escape a life of deprivation, exclusion and discrimination and to be valued at work and in their society.

In contrast to *through* university aspirers, tertiary TVET aspirers displayed more awareness of the social structures that constrained their choices. They recognised that having just a secondary TVET certificate would not guarantee a dignified life as 'without tertiary qualifications, people look down on you'. Yet, they considered university as not for 'the likes of us' (Bourdieu1977: 77) for both economic and educational reasons. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (ibid.) doxic view of aspirations as informed by the probability of success and what is (in)accessible 'for the likes of us'. However, it also shows 'a classed-based aspirationalism' (Bradley and Ingram 2012, 59) informed by the 'experiential capital' (e.g. the experienced struggles of their parents and the limited

opportunities they have grown up with) and the emotional, psychological and economic investment in education to succeed in 'the making of (middle-)class' subjects (Avis and Atkins 2017). As Carlos commented:

> I see myself with my flat … finishing my TVET studies in 5 years, having my own place … not having to depend on anybody, being my own source of support … I want to see myself happy, stable, with my job, my house, without debts, without worries … bring my family to live with me. […] I know I have limits [university] is like a step out of my reach […] it is already tough to access a TVET institution, I cannot even imagine how much university could cost financially and academically. (Carlos)

The empirical evidence suggests that these students' aspirations were rationally bounded and adapted to the restrictions they faced within their opportunity structures (Bernard, Dercon, and Taffesse 2011). In other words, in aspiring to tertiary vocational education, students may be reflexively transforming their habituated class dispositions into a logic for aspiring in bounded and differentiated ways, which reflected structural constraints as well as individual dispositions and preferences. As Bonvin (2019) argues, by looking at education from the CA rather than from HCT, it can be potentially transformative rather than simply as adaptive to the requirements of the labour market.

For most tertiary TVET aspirers, an overall positive learning experience and good relationships with teachers resulted in the growth of an enduring individual/dispositional interest in TVET and strong vocational orientation. Indeed, most of them, who wanted to continue in the same specialism, were not just aiming to get technical qualifications (2-year-programmes) but showed 'high' aspirations, for eventually getting professional qualifications (4-year-programmes) to become engineers and attain professional jobs. Whilst they displayed an intrinsic motivation for their chosen vocational specialisms, they did thus demonstrate more bounded rationality than the *through* university aspirers.

Besides having more instrumental motivations, some students were prompted to enrol in tertiary TVET institutions by the desire to further their knowledge in the same specialisation they studied in secondary TVET. This was mainly found among students who had the possibility to gain some practical experience through internships. For example, speaking of her experience in a logistics warehouse, Isabel explained that it helped her understand that she particularly enjoyed carrying demanding physical labour that did not require contact with the public:

> I realised that if you work in logistics you wear cargo pants, safety boots, reflective vest … I said 'yes, this is for me', because I am not so formal. […] I like movement. In logistics there is much more movement than … than being in an office, or if not being on the phone, or sitting at the computer … From what I saw in the internship […] I really liked it … I loved it. That is what I want work there. […] [That's why I want to study] technician in logistics management.

Tertiary TVET aspirers that expressed their willingness to follow a different specialisation in their tertiary studies justified this decision based on strong personal interests in a different career. Similarly to aspirers *through* university, for them TE was the means to pursue their dreamed vocations, although they had mulled over the implications of embarking on riskier and less familiar pathways. In some cases, these positive projections on alternative careers, were made realistic by Chile's marketised education system and liberalised labour market, reinforced by a general sense of disaffection for their secondary TVET field, or by concerns about gender discrimination in certain occupations.

As in the case of university aspirers, the logic behind tertiary TVET aspirations included some instrumental rationality but less than encapsulated in conventional HCT and rational choice approaches. The high educational and career aspirations of this group included the need to gain social respect ('become someone'); end social abuses such as 'constantly being treated like rubbish by the society' that they also experienced by observing their parents; and live a life with dignity. These students were fully aware that tertiary TVET offered them the only feasible route to TE in an extremely marketised and socially stratified education system. Continuity or discontinuity in fields of study were better explained by past educational experiences, vocational interests and gendered occupational choices, rather than simply returns to education. This might represent a degree of reflexive *habitus* and of *doxa* related to certain fields. Thus, these students were not passive victims of structural constraints. In fact, they reflexively assessed their concerns against their context, demonstrating a range of bounded, reflective and motivational reasons for their choices.

Work aspirations

Interestingly, only four students (14%) hoped to find a job as their first and preferred choice. Work aspirers prioritised economic independence for their near/short-term future over possible transitions to TE. What differentiated work aspirers from the other students was a stronger work than educational orientation, which they had developed since young age. The following quote summarises the habituated nature of aspirations (Zipin et al. 2015) of work aspirers and their desire for their near future, which from a CR perspective can be interpreted as reflexive *habitus*:

> What I have always wanted has been to finish my upper-secondary vocational education and work in my area of studies [. . .] I want to work, more than anything [. . .] and I want to have my things, my money, my house and all that [. . .] Since my young age, I have had this dream to finish compulsory education and work to be independent. (Natalia)

Importantly, none of them excluded the possibility of going back to education in the long-term. It is unclear whether participants talked about going back to studies as a trajectory they would want to follow because it was a real desire

they had, or because they 'had to' align with the high (doxic) aspirations encouraged by institutions in their very aspirational society. When elaborating on this point, going back to study was a distant possibility that could become a concrete plan if their life circumstances allowed it. That means having reached economic stability such that they would be able to pay for their education and avoid being a financial burden for their families.

They made references to the high costs of TE in Chile as a significant structural barrier. They used expressions such as 'studying in Chile is very difficult for the average people [. . .] there are many barriers [. . .] you need money to study', 'I need to see whether I can afford to study, some can study [not everybody], at the end studying is a luxury'. Alongside these structural factors, the lack of clear ideas on what to study made the TE option even riskier and not worthy. Individual factors such as motivation, dispositions, self-perceptions, and the ability to identify realistic possible paths or opportunities played a significant role in prioritising work and short-term plans. Their family's economic hardship weighed heavily on their short-term intentions to reach economic independence from their parents.

All the four participants under this type were studying Administration and Logistics, and the majority were women. Two of them wanted to build a career in Administration or Logistics as these are large sectors in Chile. One of them had entrepreneurial aspirations to be able to 'manage everything the way I want'. In this case, entrepreneurship also reflected a desire to escape from vulnerability, discrimination and precarity that exist in waged labour as consequence of highly competitive and neoliberal systems and that often these students had been experienced by observing their parents. The other two students expressed the intention to work in their TVET specialisation only for the near future. As highest ambitions for their future, both aspired to move abroad to study and work in Europe or US. Furthermore, both had the intention to leave behind the linear achievement of a professional life through TVET to be free to explore what would fulfil them.

The case of work aspirations shows how, in a very aspirational society, only those that perceive no viable path to TE decide to abandon the education route. Structural socioeconomic barriers in access to TE, together with perceptions of low academic abilities and low motivation for studying, explain the work aspirations of these students. However, even in these cases, students were not passively accepting their structural constraints. Rather they showed engagement in internal conversations to identify their concerns and the course of actions to achieve these. Access to TE still appears in the future plans of these students, although they cannot delineate a realistic strategy to achieve these long-term goals. Again, social disadvantage in a highly stratified society and education system, together with a neoliberal aspirational culture, explain the work aspirations of students better than instrumental calculations based purely upon future wage benefits

weighed against the costs of education. Whilst instrumental rationality was apparent, so was reflexivity on what was possible in students' current circumstances, going beyond both HCT and purely structural considerations.

Conclusions

We have argued that in neoliberal contexts, such as Chile, aspirations must be understood against the backdrop of highly unequal societies and education systems. In other words, it is precisely, and paradoxically, the high social inequalities that push young people to have 'high' aspiration. In this context, the poor job prospects awaiting secondary TVET graduates, alongside the meritocratic hegemony of endless opportunities through education, tend to inflate the educational aspirations of a sizeable minority of TVET students. A sense of agency, control over life and the belief in choices emerge as important agential dimensions for analysing the meanings attributed to aspirations, strongly encouraged by the neoliberal 'enterprise culture' (Rudd and Evans 1998, 57). When students reflect upon these assumptions, they develop high aspirations which are rational regarding the rhetoric that young people face, but which may not be realisable.

We have shown that educational and professional aspirations of TVET students can only be properly understood if linked to the construction of individual self-worth, to the determination of escaping poverty and to individual plans for a life with dignity, as considered by the CA (Powell and Simon 2019). Findings suggest the rationale behind TVET students' aspirations and decision-making is informed by reflections that include, but also go beyond, instrumental thinking and economic calculations. Indeed, these entailed (reflexively) habituated class dispositions and *doxa* but also hope for better futures, redemption narratives and desires to aspire high as it is the right thing to do in neoliberal contexts (Zipin et al. 2015). At the theoretical level, this study demonstrates the need to depart from drawing exclusively on traditional structuralist or instrumental rational choice analysis, and to engage in more dynamic understandings of the interplay between agential and structural factors at the roots of differential aspiration development.

Within this study it was the aspirers *through* university, that seemed to have the least clear links between their aspirations and the capabilities to achieve these. Within this group, it appeared that strategies to overcome doxic discontinuities between previous and intended fields of study had yet to be finalised. Whilst these students were still clearly reflexive, their thinking was not quite grounded in a bounded consideration of their structural constraints. In other groups, however, different aspirations were grounded in reflexive and seemingly contextually bounded rational thought processes (for example the aspirers *for* university were more likely to be receiving support from the *PACE* programme). It is the aspirers *through* university that appeared most at risk of disappointment.

Alongside theoretical contributions, the findings of this study also have important policy implications. We have demonstrated that investigating how aspirations of TVET students are formed is key to develop new approaches that go beyond rational instrumentality and narrow employability perspectives. These findings respond to the need for looking at TVET from a human development (CA) approach to inform new international TVET agendas as claimed in recent studies (McGrath et al. 2020). Our study echoes the need to reimagine TVET's roles and identity in the light of human flourishing, and not just as easy access to the labour market after compulsory education. Given that students attributed development and their flourishing to different outcomes, this has implications for the design of educational pathways and careers guidance.

The transitions that students in this research aspired to envisioned extended trajectories for which they would take individual responsibility. Students showed a tendency to carve out their own post-school paths within existing opportunities in the TE sector, which included different possible courses of action and non-linear trajectories to achieve aspirations, often high risk. As already denounced in previous studies, these high aspirations and risky choices have been strongly encouraged by governments' neo-liberal policy rhetoric and reforms which have promoted the 'higher aspirations/higher education/higher chances to meritocratic upward social mobility' discourse. This discourse justifies assumptions about working-class youth's 'deficit of aspirations' and the individualisation of structural disadvantage (Bradley and Ingram 2012). New policy agendas in TVET cannot then be blind to systemic structural barriers that limit post-secondary educational and labour market opportunities for socially disadvantaged students. In contexts of high social inequalities with scarce quality job opportunities, education policies will not be able to single-handedly address these structural problems, but they also face an issue in instilling high aspirations within some TVET students that they may not be able to fulfil, despite the façade of meritocracy.

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