

Merit in Dispute - Between Equity and Rigor in Schools of Academic Excellence in Brazil, Chile, and Peru

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Abstract

This article examines how students enrolled in public high-performance schools in Brazil, Chile, and Peru make sense of merit, equity, and excellence within highly demanding educational contexts. Drawing on focus groups with 43 students in their final year of secondary education across six schools — the EREM in Pernambuco, the Liceos Bicentenario in Chile, and the COAR in Peru — the study adopts an interpretive-phenomenological approach to explore the subjectivities and tensions that shape school life in these programs. Three central findings are identified. First, students oscillate between defending selective mechanisms as legitimate recognition of individual effort and demanding that schools take institutional responsibility for cultivating — rather than merely attracting — excellence.

Second, competition undergoes a subjective redefinition: moving away from explicit rivalry toward an internalized, emotionally mediated self-demand that students describe through situated categories such as "healthy competition," which functions as a technology of subjectivity that makes institutional pressure livable without dismantling its logic. Third, collaboration emerges as a daily practice of mutual care that sustains a sense of community yet proves fragile when confronted with structural inequalities and institutional mechanisms — scholarships, rankings, and awards — that continue to hierarchize trajectories. These findings reveal that schools of academic excellence, despite their equity-oriented rhetoric, tend to reproduce the neoliberal meritocratic logics they claim to overcome, and that any genuine effort toward educational justice requires reconceptualizing merit beyond individual performance.

Keywords: *Social Justice, Education, Meritocracy, Equity, Schools*

1. Introduction

The problematization surrounding the expansion of the right to education is a global phenomenon of increasing frequency (Mesa, 2019; Nos Aldás, Farné & Trujillo, 2019), a process that is ongoing and unfinished. During the 20th century, in the Latin American context, this process was strongly marked by the expansion of school enrollment. In Southern Cone countries such as Chile and Peru, this expansion was strongly shaped by the introduction of private actors into the management of the educational system through direct state funding mechanisms (Stonic, 2020; Cuenca & Urrutia, 2020). In contrast, the state played a more significant role in countries such as Argentina and Brazil, fostering the expansion

of public institutions (Prieto, 1977). However, this expansion did not necessarily mean greater justice, as it was undertaken with insufficient funding, negatively affecting the working conditions of educational workers and the learning conditions of students (Feldfeber, 2021; Oliveira, Pini & Feldfeber, 2011; Saforcada, 2021).

The expansion of educational systems in Latin America did not achieve satisfactory levels of quality, and responsibility for this failure was largely attributed to public education, its schools, and their teachers (Ramos, 2021). In this context, the idea of creating special schools for meritorious students gained strength as a critical response to the perceived limits of public schools and teachers' performance. These schools began to take shape as a way to achieve certain degrees of justice, operating within the framework imposed by neoliberal ideas, which have greatly influenced the development of the educational system in the region (Angulo & Rendon, 2012). During the first decades of the 21st century, several countries on the continent institutionalized the initiatives that created schools of academic excellence with public funding.

The schools of academic excellence are an example of targeted policies that aim to promote social mobility pathways for meritorious students in vulnerable contexts (Angulo & Rendon, 2012). They are guided by economic efficiency criteria and possess a compensatory nature that seeks to “balance a situation where the scales have always favored hegemonic groups in the access to social goods” (Cury, 2005, p. 24). In their discourse, the policy of the schools of academic excellence intends to create small pockets of educational quality and social mobility for talented youth who would otherwise remain trapped in low-quality public schools that replicate their conditions of inequality.

In countries such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru, this type of project has expanded through various initiatives, using public-private partnerships and promoted by

business groups and conservative or liberal governments. The *Escolas de Referência em Ensino Médio* (EREM) in Brazil, the *Liceos Bicentenario de Excelencia* (LBE) in Chile, and the *Colegios de Alto Rendimiento* (COAR) in Peru represent educational initiatives that exemplify this trend.

In Brazil, the *Escolas de Referência em Ensino Médio* (EREM) were implemented in 2008 by the government of Eduardo Campos in the state of Pernambuco. This program originated with the public system's incorporation of a network of charter schools inspired by the U.S. model, implemented by the previous state administration. The Brazilian case is represented by a state-level policy, reflecting the federative organization of the country's educational system, in which upper secondary education is primarily the responsibility of state governments, and they enjoy considerable autonomy to design and implement educational policies within the framework established by the Federal Constitution and national educational legislation. Consequently, Pernambuco's EREM constitutes a large-scale, institutionally consolidated public policy that is analytically comparable to the national programs examined in Chile and Peru. The program comprises approximately 420 schools that operate under an integral (45 hours per week) or semi-integral (35 hours) regime, offering students an extended school day and an enriched educational environment (Gomes & Abranches, 2017). The curriculum is based on the Brazilian national curriculum, with emphasis on Language and Mathematics, and is complemented by extracurricular activities that develop diverse skills and competencies. In the EREM's curricular structure, the *Life Project* and *Entrepreneurship* courses, as well as the *Youth Leadership Program*, embody key educational principles that guide young people in constructing their futures. These initiatives became the hallmark of the charter school network that gave rise to the EREM and were subsequently incorporated into it. The admission process transitioned from a direct and selective one based on exams to an indirect

one where one of the main criteria for assigning slots is location, proximity to the school. The financing of the EREM is the responsibility of the Secretaria de Educação de Pernambuco (state-level education authority in Pernambuco, Brazil), with support from the World Bank in the program's initial stages. Evaluation focuses on standardized tests, setting performance targets, and publishing results. In addition, a system of bonuses was adopted for schools that achieve better results.

In Chile, the *Liceos Bicentenario de Excelencia* (LBE) were established in 2010 during the government of Sebastián Piñera. This program comprises a yearly-expanding network of 320 high schools, including new, rebranded, and expanded establishments distributed throughout Chile (Quaresma & Zamorano, 2016). The LBE curriculum is based on the Chilean national curriculum, with particular emphasis on Language Arts and Mathematics, as they are considered fundamental to students' academic development.

Among the pillars established with the purpose of “instilling the Bicentennial Culture” (Mineduc, 2020, p. 21) are the following: High Expectations, understood as the belief that all students are capable, demanding rigor, close monitoring, and the celebration of effort to ensure success; Focus on the Classroom, conceived as the central space for overcoming external disadvantages and promoting equal opportunities, especially in vulnerable contexts; and Academic Leveling and Re-teaching, aimed at strengthening students' foundational knowledge through curricular reviews to ensure that everyone has the necessary basis before advancing to new content (Mineduc, 2020).

Initially, admission to these high schools was selective, but in 2016, they were incorporated into the *Sistema de Admisión Escolar* (SAE), eliminating selection based on performance. Their financing is provided by the Ministry of Education, which funds improvements to the infrastructure and educational resources of the

selected schools. Evaluation in the LBE places strong emphasis on standardized tests, such as SIMCE (*Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación*, or System for Measuring the Quality of Education) and university entrance exams, and establishes performance goals and makes their results public.

In Peru, the *Colegios de Alto Rendimiento* (COAR) were implemented in 2014 during the government of Ollanta Humala, inspired by the *Colegio Mayor Presidente del Perú* created in 2010 under Alan García's administration. This program consists of a network of 25 schools, one in each region of the country, operating under a boarding school regime. The COAR curriculum is based on the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, offering students a globally recognized certification. The admission process is highly selective, including requirements such as coming from a public school, demonstrating high academic performance, and passing Math and Language Arts content exams. The financing of the COAR is provided by the Ministry of Education of Peru, with private sector participation in the construction and equipping of some schools. As for evaluation, emphasis is placed on IB standardized tests and on process and results indicators, ensuring that students achieve the standards of excellence offered.

These three initiatives share, in their origins, a selective nature and the targeted distribution of resources that benefits a small group of students. Their origin is a response to the expansion of the right to education, which broadened its reach but did not always do so while safeguarding quality. They share a notion of “excellence” centered mainly on achieving quantitative results based on standardized evaluations, a common factor across various educational contexts (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2015; Fernández, Alcaraz & Sola, 2017; Duran del Fierro, 2019; Demarchi, 2020).

In Chile, the School Inclusion Law of 2015 prohibited the selection process based on academic merit in all educational establishments, including the LBE. This generated a strong debate on the role of meritocracy in the educational system (Atria et al., 2019; Miranda-Molina, 2024; Zambrano, 2024), creating a tension between the pursuit of excellence and the democratization of access. This creates an important gap in terms of its impact on students' subjective views of justice and equity.

This article will analyze the perspectives of young students who attend these schools of academic excellence. It will explore their views about justice, equity, and merit, with the aim of identifying emerging relationships between the conditions of implementation of these programs and the student narratives, their meanings, and the gaps that may arise from the existing contradictions in their educational experience.

The data analyzed in this article derive from a comparative doctoral study that examined the phenomenon of public schools of academic excellence in Brazil, Chile, and Peru, with an emphasis on the strategies these programs use to develop a particular student profile.

Fieldwork was conducted in two schools from each of the studied programs. This decision was motivated by the field of possibilities offered by comparing different realities within the same policy. Data were gathered through visits to the six schools and collected by forming focus groups with students in the final year of secondary education across different classes.

2. Neoliberal meritocracy and new public management

The creation of selective public schools of excellence aligns with the mechanisms described by Ball and Youdell (2007) as endogenous privatization. A form of

inward privatization in which techniques and practices from the private sector are incorporated into educational systems (i.e., market-driven logics and managerial models). The objective is to make them function more similarly to the business field, applying the principles of New Public Management (NPM) and establishing “a market logic between providers and clients or consumers, where notions of rights grounded in the relationship between the State and citizenship once prevailed” (Oliveira, 2018, p. 45). During this process, education becomes a commodity, governed by market logic and competition. Thus, a *neoliberal morality* is enshrined, characterized by the legitimization of “shortcuts” based on individual merit, where success is accessible only to those who make the right decisions and “deserve it” (Oliveira, 2020, p. 14). The implementation of neoliberal educational policies reinforces the idea that social inequalities can be considered fair, insofar as they are understood as the result of individual trajectories developed within a formal context of equality of opportunity—apparently guaranteed by inclusion policies—where personal merit defines social destinies.

At the same time, the existence of these programs reinforces the creation of a merit-based common sense, which claims that those who succeed owe it to their ability to take advantage of the system’s targeted opportunities. On the other hand, those who fail to do so because they cannot—or do not want to—take advantage of these opportunities. Thus, the strategies utilized by programs that build a profile of “students of excellence” can be understood as the construction of human types (Popkewitz, 2013; Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2000), in which educational policies operate through categorizations, linguistic resources, and pedagogical strategies to construct types of people. Hence, it is important to identify how these schools of academic excellence mobilize educational practices to “create identities or shape subjectivities” (Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2000, p. 25).

It should be noted that many of the processes of subjective construction inherent to neoliberal logics metaphorically produce the destruction of subjectivity and of human nature, a human modality built on cannibalistic, voracious logics against new existential modalities. As Nancy Fraser (2022) observes with respect to contemporary society:

“[It] invites them to make a meal of our creative capacities and of the earth that sustains us—with no obligation to replenish what they consume or repair what they damage. And that is a recipe for trouble. Like the ouroboros that eats its own tail, capitalist society is primed to devour its own substance. (p. 14).

Thus, neoliberal subjectivity is characterized by the alignment with values such as meritocracy, individualism, competitiveness, and efficiency. It is based on the idea that individual success depends on each person's effort and ability, and that social inequalities result from differences in talent and dedication. In the educational sphere, neoliberal subjectivity translates into the pursuit of academic excellence as an end in itself, the valorization of competition among students, and the targeted distribution of resources towards those who demonstrate greater potential.

3. Meritocracy Centered on Equity and Social Justice

The notion of a meritocracy, centered on equity and social justice, challenges the traditional meritocratic vision that emphasizes individual competition and progress based on talent, effort, and performance. Perspectives grounded in equity and justice argue that the traditional view of meritocracy ignores the structural inequalities that limit the opportunities of certain groups before individual merit can even come into play. Iris Marion Young (1990) argues that inequalities are less about individual differences and more the result of systems of domination and

oppression that operate through exploitation, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, marginalization, and violence. Profoundly affecting individual trajectories. These systems hinder the possibilities of full and equitable participation of certain groups in society.

Nancy Fraser (2006), in turn, highlights the need to simultaneously address the redistribution of resources, recognition, and participation to achieve social justice, since injustices arise from both the misdistribution of resources and cultural contempt and political exclusion. Dubet (2012) critiques the meritocratic ideal as a “legitimizing fiction” that justifies the exclusion of those who fail to adapt to its demands, thereby sustaining structural inequalities. In other words, in contexts of structural inequality, the promise of equal opportunity merely serves to justify the exclusion of those who cannot adapt to its demands. Far from guaranteeing justice, meritocracy tends to reproduce and naturalize the very structural forms of injustice it claims to overcome.

From a micro and pedagogical perspective, theorists such as Michael Apple (2011), Stephen Ball (2003), and Paulo Freire (1997) have analyzed how power structures within schools turn differences among students into inequalities that shape their educational and life trajectories. The diversity of experiences and the multiple ways in which structures of oppression—such as class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and geographical location—affect pedagogical relationships, thus transforming merit into a positioned social construction, shaped by dominant values and institutional mechanisms of legitimation. Furthermore, people do not experience inequalities in isolation but as multiple entanglements of disadvantage that cumulatively and differentially affect their educational and life trajectories. In this sense, advocating for a “fair meritocracy” requires not only redistributing opportunities but also reconceptualizing what we understand by merit, success, and justice.

Using an equity-centered perspective, the redefinition of merit would no longer be limited to rewarding only individual achievements under supposedly neutral conditions, but would, for example, consider merit as effort relative to context, or include criteria of historical reparation and cultural recognition within evaluation processes. In line with a decolonial perspective (Quijano, 2014; Walsh, 2013), redefining what is meritorious does not consist solely of adapting existing standards, but rather of decentering dominant epistemologies and opening pedagogical spaces to alternative ways of knowing, being, and coexisting. This entails questioning the cognitive and cultural hierarchies on which meritocracy has been built, while making visible and valuing local, Indigenous, community-based, feminist, or epistemologies from the Global South, usually relegated to the status of “subaltern” knowledges (Mignolo, 2003).

Although policies at schools of academic excellence in countries such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru have been presented as strategies to promote social mobility and educational equity, their implementation has been shaped by logics of selection, competition, and systems of accountability that reproduce neoliberal epistemologies of merit and justice. These initiatives, promoted as strategies to expand opportunities in vulnerable contexts, are situated within neoliberal management frameworks that privilege efficiency, systems of accountability, and individual meritocracy (Ball & Youdell, 2007; Oliveira, 2018). However, various authors warn that this approach tends to obscure the structural inequalities that condition access, performance, and educational trajectories (Dubet, 2012; Fraser, 2006; Young, 1990). In this context, the Chilean case is particularly relevant, as the 2016 Ley de Inclusión Escolar (Law for School Inclusion) has progressively prohibited academic selection, thereby challenging the meritocratic foundations of academic excellence programs and creating a normative contrast with the Peruvian model. This raises the need to understand how students in schools of academic

excellence create meanings about merit, justice, and equity within the framework of their educational experience, and how these mental representations relate to the real-life, discursive, and pedagogical conditions of the programs in which they participate.

4. Methods

The methodological choice for this study is framed within an interpretative humanist perspective, with a phenomenological design, aimed at a deep understanding of the subjects' lived experiences. Under this approach, the research does not seek to establish generalizations but rather to immerse itself in the subjectivity, interpretations, and meanings that students attribute to their educational trajectories and to the policies that shape their school experiences. In line with this perspective, focus groups were chosen as the main data collection strategy. These focus groups provided an ideal dialogical space to capture students' intersubjective experiences in their last year of high school in Brazil, Chile, and Peru. This methodological choice draws on the interpretive richness of group conversations, especially when exploring shared experiences during an unprecedented event such as the forced transition to remote education during the pandemic.

As previously reported, two schools from each program investigated were selected for fieldwork.

The first selection criterion was that the schools offered upper secondary education in the generalist modality—or *scientific-humanist*, as it is called in Chile. The second criterion for selecting the schools was that they had to have at least five years in the program of excellence, since a longer track in the program indicates

more established relationships—whether of adherence or resistance to policy guidelines.

A total of 43 young people aged 16-18 participated in the study. Six focus groups were formed, each with six to eight participants, including students from different classes. The semi-structured script, organized into thematic blocks, covered topics such as the meaning of school, their impressions of the program's pedagogical aspects, their relationship with their studies and evaluations (i.e., school subjects and assessments), and their expectations for the future. The discussion groups were recorded and transcribed, then categorized and analyzed using thematic content analysis techniques.

For data processing, the content analysis method outlined by Bardin (2011) was used, with the theme as the recording unit. This analytical decision enabled us to work with significant fragments of their interviews, prioritizing semantic content over its linguistic form. From this perspective, the emerging themes were not treated as predefined categories but as interpretative constructions closely related to the research questions and the discursive context in which they were produced. It is worth noting that, although this kind of analysis has traditionally been associated with qualitative approaches, its application in interpretative phenomenological studies has been widely validated in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mieles, Tonon & Alvarado, 2012). When it is used as a pathway for constructing meaning from the narrated experiences rather than merely as a descriptive technique, we can acknowledge the active role of the researcher in interpretation. Accordingly, the coding process was conducted manually, supported by digital tools for textual organization, which ensured closeness to the empirical material and a situated comprehension of the meanings expressed.

5. Results

The themes presented below capture the meanings that students attribute to their school experiences regarding excellence, competition, and collaboration. First, we examine the contradictory meanings of excellence and the tension between attracting and cultivating excellent students. Second, we address how competition manifests in the student experience and is internalized within the inner realm of subjectivity. Finally, we examine collaboration as a strategy of mutual care that reveals its vulnerabilities in the face of structural inequality.

5.1 Cultivating Excellence vs. Attracting Excellence

In the voice of students, the meanings attributed to excellence are contradictory. On the one hand, a widely held understanding among students—across different national contexts—is that excellence is a student identity that combines personal effort, intelligence, and merit. Under this premise, entrance exams serve as a form of accreditation, granting them legitimacy. Vicente, a student at the Liceo Bicentenario, describes the admission exam as a system in which “the person most... willing to study, who puts in the most effort, will be the one who ultimately achieves the best result,” and asserts that being part of an elite high school requires him to be constantly studying and taking exams. Similarly, Cristian, a COAR student, defines discipline as a necessary value “that we should all have,” and describes it as “doing what we don’t want to do in order to achieve what we want,” emphasizing that it is the key to staying in a school of excellence. Likewise, EREM students describe their school experience by emphasizing the heavy workload, the pressure of frequent assessments, and the exhaustion they experience. Yet they speak of these demands with a certain sense of pride, as if sacrificing the present were the necessary price to pay for a more promising future.

This disposition appears in Lucas's understanding of ambition: "For me... well, we use the word ambition, and a lot of people see it as something negative. But to me, ambition means always wanting more, stepping outside your comfort zone, and always striving to go further" (Lucas, EREM). Across the three contexts examined, students associate their identity of excellence with a process involving sacrifice and sustained effort, while simultaneously linking it to a status attained through personal effort.

A closely related position, though with an important nuance, is one that questions the exam as a valid admission criterion and proposes alternative selection mechanisms. It points to the importance of identifying trajectories that are meritorious but may have lower exam performance due to educational inequalities beyond the student's control. As Constanza from Liceo Bicentenario states:

"I think it should be based on grades, but not on a test, because... because there are kids who attend schools that aren't good and don't provide quality education, and that doesn't mean they don't deserve to be in a good high school."

In her words, it is possible to identify a critique of the methods, but not of the selective principle or the notion of excellence associated with merit. While she acknowledges some inequalities, she omits others. Introducing justice into the selection process, but without transforming it in depth.

In Chile, where students experience the implementation of a reform that prevents academic selection, voices questioning the idea of excellence based on individual merit emerge, shifting the responsibility to the educational institution as an agent that cultivates excellence. As Javier from Liceo Bicentenario points out: "A school of excellence does not have to bring in people of excellence; it has to form them." This perspective coexists with a consensus among students regarding the negative impact that, according to them, the elimination of selection has had on their

identity as students at a school of excellence. Anaís, also from Liceo Bicentenario, states: “They stopped being of academic excellence, because it was no longer possible to make a selection of the students who were admitted; it was all by chance.”

In their dialogue, Anaís and Florencia reflect on the current limitations of the school and express concern about what they consider poor management in addressing the challenge of forming students for excellence. In their words, the school had abandoned this goal, opting instead for a “leveling down” rather than a “leveling up.” Florencia adds: “Exactly... I mean, so... so that the less advanced students feel more comfortable.” In this exchange, nostalgia is expressed about the dilution of their identity of excellence, or rather, for the shift in the school’s focus: from excellence to comfort.

In this first topic, students' voices reproduce meritocratic discourses while also problematizing and complicating them. They oscillate between defending personal effort as a marker of value and recognizing trajectories situated in structurally unequal contexts. At the same time, they express an ambivalent understanding of excellence, moving between compliance with the meritocratic logic of effort and an incipient questioning of the structural conditions that mediate access to educational opportunities.

These tensions are not resolved in a linear or definitive way. Rather, students work through them in narratives marked by ambivalences, displacements, and partial commitments to different notions of educational justice. In particular, the notion of “leveling down” appears as a way to name the discomfort they feel regarding the—perceived or real—neglect of the project for academic excellence with which they identified. However, this feeling does not necessarily imply a frontal opposition to inclusion. Rather, it underscores the difficulty of envisioning an inclusive model that, in their experience, does not entail a loss of rigor.

5.2 Internalizing Competition

The meanings that students attribute to competition appear intertwined in their voices, not as irreconcilable opposites but as dimensions that coexist in tension. Competition is no longer expressed primarily as explicit rivalry among peers; rather, it has shifted toward the realm of self-demand, internalized as a personal imperative for performance. This form of “inward” competition emerges strongly in the accounts of Chilean students, who recognize that recent reforms—particularly the elimination of academic selection—have altered interpersonal dynamics: “before, that happened more often,” notes Ángel, a student at the Liceo Bicentenario, alluding to a past where competition was more visible and overt. In the Peruvian context, students also refer to a form of competition that has been redefined. Mateo, from COAR, speaks of a “healthy competition,” where “they don’t tell you that you have to come first, but that you have to learn in the process, which is the most important thing.” This redefinition suggests a shift from a logic of comparison and hierarchization toward an ethic of shared learning, though without entirely eliminating the pressure to stand out individually. This resignification is reinforced in Julián's words, who elaborates on how observing the work of others can serve as an internal driver of improvement without turning into hostility, a dynamic he refers to as “healthy piconería.”

“There is a healthy competition among all of us, since seeing how others finish their work kind of motivates you; it’s a “healthy piconería” [laughs]. And it’s not envy, but rather that we enjoy doing it, and I feel that I can and will do it.” (Julián, COAR).

Competition here takes the form of a relational emotional catalyst, a shared playfulness among peers in which the desire for self-improvement is activated through observing others. What might be experienced as a threat or rivalry in other contexts is re-signified as inspiration. The expression “*piconería sana*” introduces

a situated cultural category that functions more as a socioemotional justification than as a stable analytical concept: it enables naming competition without burdening it with antagonism or guilt. From this perspective, competing does not imply exclusion or disqualification, but rather the opportunity to improve oneself through the example of others. It is not about “winning,” but about “self-improvement.”

This type of competition, mediated by social and emotional bonds, becomes a survival skill for highly demanding spaces. It saves them from succumbing to the pressures. It also challenges the idea that excellence can only be constructed through individualized performance, though without completely dismantling the logic that sustains it. Competition can still generate internal pressures, performance anxiety, and silent comparisons, even if these are not always verbalized as problems. In this sense, “healthy competition” can be understood as a technology of subjectivity: it softens the system’s demands, makes them livable, even enjoyable, while at the same time exposing their fragility, as it operates within an environment where pressure for performance, constant evaluation, and implicit comparison persist.

At the same time, this form of emotionally mediated competition does not occur in a vacuum. It coexists with, and at times clashes with, more explicit forms of competition promoted by institutional structures. Several Peruvian students acknowledge that obtaining external scholarships or accessing differentiated academic opportunities depends directly on their ability to rank at the top of the class: “recently they announced some scholarships, and they were going to give the opportunity for scholarships to the top 20, but from the whole cohort. So, well, of course, it is understood that scholarships are always limited” (Luana, COAR). These external rewards reinforce the pressure to perform and tend to reaffirm a

logic of scarcity: only some will attain the benefits, even in contexts where teamwork and collaboration are officially promoted.

Similarly, in Chile, students report that university admission is mediated by a ranking system that compares individual averages with those of their classmates from both the current and previous cohorts. As Paola notes: “competition is a bit more internalized... but still the fact that one has to depend on the grades of others... the ranking depends on the grades of other classmates.” Here, competition is established, not necessarily as antagonism among peers, but as a structure of constant comparison, where one’s own performance is defined by its relative position within the group.

Meanwhile, in Pernambuco, explicit recognition mechanisms are introduced in schools, such as certificates of academic excellence, performance awards, and placement on honor rolls. Students' accounts reveal contrasting responses to these practices. Vitória, for instance, states: "I'm a very competitive person, and that really motivates me [...] For me, it pushes me to do better." Taís, by contrast, recounts that watching her classmates repeatedly receive certificates while she never did made her feel left behind and intensified both her self-pressure and her family's expectations: "We already feel a lot of pressure within ourselves, pressure from the school, pressure from the teachers, and then having to compete...". These devices make merit publicly visible and shape school life around individual goals, even when the official discourse promotes student protagonism and holistic formation. They can be seen as mechanisms of symbolic regulation that encourage discipline and self-regulation while generating frustration and feelings of exclusion among some students.

These forms of structured competition do not necessarily oppose the “healthy competition” described by students, but they complexify it and, in certain cases, create tension. While the socioemotional discourse attempts to soften the emotional

burden of performance, institutional mechanisms intensify it and make it persistent. The coexistence of these issues reveals how student subjectivity is expressed through a double predicament: between the desire for self-improvement and the pressure to excel; between socioemotional stimulation and external validation; and between collaboration with peers and the structuralized comparison imposed by the educational system.

5.3 Collaboration under Pressure: Mutual Care and Logics of Performance

The meanings students attribute to collaboration function as both emotional and ethical buffers against the pressures of individualizing performance. In the three contexts analyzed—Chile, Peru, and Brazil—collaboration emerges not only as a regular practice but also as a transversal dimension of school life. It contributes to forming students as a community while simultaneously being promoted by institutions as a central value of school culture. Far from being mediated by calculation or competition, this practice is expressed as a natural gesture of care and shared responsibility. In COAR Peru, for example, Emma comments:

“Sometimes I feel I am not good at a subject or maybe at some topic that I did not understand very well, and I like that many of my classmates take the initiative to help me.” Similarly, in Brazil’s EREM schools, students highlight the role of monitors, who explain and prepare summaries outside class hours, thereby fostering an environment of support that extends beyond formal requirements. In all three countries, the idea of explaining until the peer understands—without showing annoyance or expecting anything in return—recurs. Collaboration, in this sense, not only allows students to resist the individualizing effects of merit but also sustains a form of solidaristic bond that gives meaning to the school experience.

Collaboration is also leveraged as a strategy to achieve shared goals, such as obtaining the IB diploma in the case of COAR, or maintaining the grade average in Chile or Brazil. The idea that “everyone should get the IB” (Anaís, COAR) or that “we should all do well” (Matías, Liceo Bicentenario) can be read both as solidarity and as a way to optimize collective performance, in which helping others also benefits the group. Helping others also positively positions those who provide support. For instance, Leandro, a student in Pernambuco, notes that students “feel good when they explain” or that “I like seeing that others understand better thanks to me.” This is a form of collaboration that produces symbolic benefits within school culture.

Although the student narratives in Chile, Peru, and Brazil describe a broad, emotional, and sustained collaboration, they also reveal its limits. Peer support, monitors, teacher accompaniment, and advisory spaces form a network of daily care that enables students to hold up contextually demanding school logistics. However, this socioemotional collaboration coexists with structured forms of competition—such as scholarships, awards, and rankings—that reinforce the pressure to perform. In these contexts, helping a classmate implies not only generosity but also time, energy, and a symbolic risk. Collaboration ceases to be an entirely disinterested act and becomes negotiated within a system that continues to evaluate comparatively. As students themselves have pointed out, there is a generalized willingness to help, but also an expectation that those receiving help will do their part and express a desire to improve.

These ideas highlight the celebration of effort—rather than talent—as a central aspect of meritocracy from students’ perspectives. After all, as Alicia from the Liceo Bicentenario states, “these schools are created for people who want to study.”

However, it is also recognized that in some cases, merely wanting is not enough:

There are people who, no matter their efforts, cannot concentrate or remain seated in a classroom chair and focus for 90 minutes. So it's not that they don't want to, it's just that they are not 'fit' for the system, but it's not that they don't want to. (Paola, Liceo Bicentenario)

In this regard, “healthy competition”—as an emotionally mediated way of sustaining academic demands—also shows its constraints. It functions as a cultural strategy of accommodation, enabling students to enjoy school and the process of learning together, but it can collapse when the imbalance becomes too disproportionate. The responsibility for the weakness in this form of collaboration does not lie in students' unwillingness. It lies in the conditions of a system that assigns value, recognition, and future prospects on the basis of individual performance.

Thus, school becomes a space of tension: deeply human and solidaristic in its everyday practices, yet permeated by a structural logic that pushes, separates, and hierarchizes. Students who fall behind are not always expelled, but they may remain silent at the margins of a narrative that, while grounded in mutual support, does not always sustain them collectively.

6. Discussion

The results presented reveal that students from schools focused on academic excellence in Chile, Brazil, and Peru undergo a complex journey as they redefine their academic and motivational identities. This process reflects deep tensions between traditional notions of merit, characterized by individualized selection and

academic performance, and emerging discourses on equity and inclusion that question the impact and inherent fairness of these practices.

First, the tension between fostering excellence and attracting excellence emerges strongly. As observed in the students' discourses, there is a strong identification with individual effort, discipline, and merit as the foundation of their school identity. This discourse aligns with the neoliberal meritocracy analyzed by Oliveira (2020) and Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000), which emphasizes individual merit as the main criterion for educational and social success. However, the implementation of reforms in Chile that restrict selection based on academic performance (Ley de Inclusión Escolar, 2015) raises explicit questions about this logic. Students express concern about "leveling down," indicating nostalgia for a selective model they clearly identified with excellence. At the same time, they criticize exam-based selection mechanisms. Instead, they propose criteria that acknowledge that educational trajectories are conditioned by structural inequalities, without radically questioning the underlying logic of merit. This highlights the processes of negotiation between traditional meritocratic ideals and new approaches centered on social justice and equity (Fraser, 2006; Young, 1990).

On the other hand, competition, traditionally associated with individualistic logics of performance, is also being redefined by students. Competition, now internalized as a personal imperative, shifts away from explicitly antagonistic forms toward emotionally mediated dynamics, such as the "healthy competition" described by Peruvian students. These mechanisms partially soften institutional demands, functioning as emotional survival strategies in highly demanding educational systems. Nevertheless, the results also show how this "inward" competition coexists in tension with institutional systems that reward and recognize only the top students through rankings, scholarships, and certificates, reaffirming the meritocratic structures of neoliberal basis (Ball & Youdell, 2007; Oliveira, 2018).

The coexistence of both forms of competition shows how student subjectivity is constructed in constant tension between the desire for self-improvement and the structural pressure to stand out.

Simultaneously, collaboration emerges as a key dimension that cushions the pressure of individual performance, generating socioemotional and ethical bonds among students. However, this collaboration, which on the surface seeks to counterbalance individualistic competition, seems to be conditioned by an ideal of the student receiving help as a hardworking classmate who strives to overcome difficulties—in other words, one must deserve it.

Araujo and Martuccelli (2015) argue that the alignment of educational systems with the precepts of neoliberalism laid new foundations for understanding social justice, which was therefore grounded primarily in the valorization of effort and personal work, and, above all, in rewards for merit.

Effort—conceived as willpower, dedication, and sacrifice—emerged in all focus groups as the most important quality for achieving success both in studies and in life. There were a few mentions of talent. This provides significant insights into the conception of meritocracy among the young people studied. While talent, an innate quality, is almost disregarded, effort, a quality that can be cultivated, is highly valued. This perspective could reflect the belief that, regardless of circumstances of birth, aptitudes, or privileges, success is attainable through hard work. However, as we have already discussed, this view often overlooks the structural inequalities that can limit opportunities for many.

These findings reflect how schools of excellence in Brazil, Chile, and Peru, although initially conceived as targeted policies aimed at fostering social mobility, reproduce and reinforce the inequalities they intend to combat, legitimizing mechanisms that transform educational differences into inequalities of opportunity and recognition. The tension between neoliberal meritocracy and emerging

demands for equity and social justice demonstrates that any genuine effort to democratize access to quality education requires a deep and critical review of the normative assumptions that guide educational policies and pedagogical practices. Finally, the results show the need to rethink educational merit using perspectives that integrate recognition and historical reparation, considering the multiple and intertwined dimensions of structural inequality (Young, 1990). The redefinition of merit should not be limited to integrating additional inclusion criteria, but should also profoundly question cognitive-cultural hierarchies and open spaces for alternative epistemologies and pedagogical practices capable of fostering excellence with social justice (Walsh, 2013; Mignolo, 2003). In this sense, it is essential to move from inclusion oriented exclusively by meritocracy toward a paradigm that values other merits and knowledges that the traditional system has historically excluded. This discussion is not only urgent but also crucial to address contemporary educational challenges from genuinely equitable and inclusive perspectives.

7. Conclusion

This article describes how students participating in high-performance school programs in Chile, Peru, and Brazil forge their trajectories and subjectivities within a complex web of tensions between merit, equity, collaboration, and demand. In their voices, traditional meritocratic logics—which associate excellence with individual performance and selective accreditation—do not disappear; rather, they are challenged by new sensibilities that call for more situated, contextually fair, and collective forms of excellence. Within this framework, the notion of excellence emerges as a debated category: while some students defend it as legitimate recognition of personal effort, others demand that the institutional responsibility lie

in forming it, not merely attracting it. This tension is not resolved linearly and remains embedded in school projects and students' subjectivities.

Competition, in turn, is not eradicated but redefined. It shifts from an explicit logic of rivalry to an internalized, emotionally mediated demand that finds in "healthy competition" a way to reconcile the desire for self-improvement with socioemotional bonds among peers. However, this definition shows its fragility when it is strained by institutional mechanisms—such as scholarships, rankings, or awards—that continue to hierarchize trajectories, reproduce inequalities, and limit the reach of a culture of care.

Ultimately, collaboration is established as a central value to navigate demanding institutions under high expectations. The students' accounts reflect a daily solidarity that reinforces the sense of school community. However, this collaboration has limits: it unfolds strongly in the face of specific or reversible obstacles but proves insufficient when confronted with deep structural inequalities. In contexts where public policy neglects its redistributive role, equity becomes a personal responsibility, precariously upheld by the goodwill of those who are themselves burdened with high expectations.

Notes

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