

Situating Norbert Elias' Power Differential in a Critical Exploration of Violence in Chilean Education

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ABSTRACT

Once hailed as a poster boy for neoliberalism, or what Milton Friedman called “The Miracle of Chile”, Chile has undergone a myriad of social and political changes that since 2011 have resulted in increased polarization and violent clashes between the opposing parties. The apex of this violence was reached in 2019, where civilians were blinded, public buses and subway stations burned and businesses vandalized in a series of violent acts that continued for weeks. Between October and November 2019, the country also experienced large peaceful demonstrations demanding greater equality towards women, sexual minorities and migrants (Chile has seen a surge in migration over the last 5 years, with 1.5 million people immigrating from Haiti, Venezuela and Colombia). It is against this background that I began my research to investigate to what degree this direct, structural and cultural violence had spilled over into classrooms. My doctoral research, titled “*Non-violence as a practice of equality: an exploration in Chilean higher education classrooms through participatory action research*” sought to co-develop non-violent strategies to tackle violence in the way of exclusion, discrimination and any other manifestation within classroom settings. This paper will explore the application of Elias' notion of power differentials in the perpetration of cultural violence and the experience of violence by Chilean minorities as documented in my own research. I am particularly inspired by Norbert Elias' work “*The established and the outsiders*”. Discussions with my research participants, all trainee teachers at Chilean universities, revealed that at the core of the instances of violence found lies a power imbalance and a view of those “outsiders” (migrants, lower income students, LGBTQI+) as less worthy and valuable and therefore victims to a wide range of violent acts resulting in exclusion and discrimination.

Key words: power differential, cultural violence, non-violence education, social justice, educational inequality.

INTRODUCTION

I will begin this paper by situating the reader first in the context of Chile and its current social and educational circumstances – which led to my doctoral research there - and later within the framework of non-violence education and the work of Norbert Elias, more specifically his 1965 book “*The Established and the Outsiders*”

The context of Chile

Higher education in Chile is in a state of transition (Oyarzun ,2017), a sort of impasse or what I would call a an ‘educational purgatory’ in which current educational policies have the potential to be more inclusive; these policies, however, continue to be debated rather than fully

implemented, as higher education institutions still navigate a model that mixes “market fundamentalism and ...authoritarianism inherited from the military government” (ibid, p.3). For example, that since Chile’s return to democracy, there have been a series of roundtables organized to foster greater dialogue and participation with the intent to modify some of the dynamics that reproduce inequalities. However, the dialogue is dictated “from above” (p.2) rather than being fully inclusive. Torres-Rojas (2016) made the same observation, with some added nuances: although there are more public universities and there have been changes to the way these are financed, there has also been an increase in shortened degrees, a proliferation of what he called “mid-level’ majors and a curricular model designed to develop competencies that are suitable for the work force. In other words, still fulfilling a utilitarian function that suits the market, and as Campos-Martinez (2020) indicates, with a very high level of economic segregation where students from more advantaged background attend more prestigious, better funded universities, and vocational-technical colleges remain geared primarily toward less advantaged individuals. Torres-Rojas (2016) further argues that whereas higher education used to fulfil a role preparing people for social participation in a context that was devoid of today’s global social and economic complexities, now that role has changed into what I earlier described as fulfilling a role within the market forces and preparing individuals to partake in them.

Galtung defines violence as ‘that which increases the difference between what could have been and what is’ (1969, p.168) and structural violence as one where there is not a single actor perpetrating it but rather as something that shows as unequal power relations that become evident through unequal chances in life. The scenario of *structural violence* which I described earlier, then, in which unequal power relations are perpetuated and, as I will detail in the following sections, educational resources are unevenly distributed, cultural and linguistic inequalities are preserved and existing socio-economic segregation persists, in turn have led to a series of demonstrations with quickly escalating levels of *direct violence*; many of these have spiraled out of control and led to brutal police repression, resulting in loss of life, damaged public infrastructure (including schools and universities) and a widening social and political divide (Larragaña et al., 2017; Olavarria and Campos-Martinez, 2020).

I chose to do my doctoral research study in Chile, where, in addition to the aforementioned factors there are other elements that add to the need for greater social inclusion in education; the first is the fact that 12.5% of population that identifies as indigenous, which in Chile has deep implications of exclusion and racism; the second is socio-economic segmentation (Larragaña et al., 2017), a third is racial bias (Campos-Martinez, 2010) and finally, the lack of inclusive educational policies in regard to the migrant population which, as of 2018, is nearly 500,000 (MPI, 2018). To begin with, as Sandoval (2016) explains, the migratory law in Chile (Law 1094) dates from 1975, when Chile was under a military dictatorship; this law, which though modified has remained practically unchanged, conceived both migrants and immigration as a threat, a notion that was passed on for generations and which has shaped social attitudes in Chile towards non-white immigrants (Mora Olate, 2018). The eradication of this bias is not helped by the lack of oversight (or willingness) on the implementation of public policies that have been formulated specifically to address this issue; the Ministry of Education has called for greater diversity and the recognition of learning spaces as a meeting point for learners regardless of their nationality, gender, socio-economic background or religion (MINEDUC, 2016b). And yet, as Mora Olate (2018) highlights, the social and cultural hegemony

remains unchanged and hence the need for practices that bring these policies into action is still very much present, and with that, the third element of Galtung's pyramid: *cultural violence*.

Given the above, my research study aimed at first identifying instances of structural, direct and cultural violence present in Chilean classrooms, and then to collectively think about strategies to address this violence within a decolonial, non-violent framework. Consequently, the guiding research question was:

To what extent can the exploration of non-violent perspectives and practices support students' awareness of discrimination and exclusion and help them develop strategies for dealing with these?

Situating "The Established and the Outsiders"

In their 1965 book *"The established and the Outsiders"*, German sociologist Norbert Elias along with John Scotson describe how a group of newcomer experiences exclusion and discrimination at the hands of those already living in the community of Winston Parva. Not because they were poorer, less educated or lived in uglier houses, but because of an unspoken shared belief by those "established" in their superiority and their right to stigmatize those who did not belong. As a result of this belief, and of what Elias calls a "power differential", the "outsiders" find themselves the victims of wide array of violent acts.

Let us position this notion in the context of minorities in Chile, beginning with migrants. While establishing the imbalanced power relation that ensues between the resident and the incoming community, Elias poses the question: "What means do they use to impose belief in their own human superiority upon those who are less powerful?" (p.xvi). To answer this question, I will refer to the research participants' views, as these stem from their direct observation of classroom environments with migrant students. One points out:

"We see teachers trying to 'Chilenize' Colombian, Venezuelan and Haitian students, stripping them of their cultural identities" (P2)

Another one expands:

"Nowadays we have Haitian children in the classroom and there are no ways for them to keep being in contact with their culture and their language. In Chilean classrooms they need to speak Spanish and there isn't a space in which they can develop their language or reflect on their culture. This is structural violence and also cultural violence because we may think this is normal, like he or she is a foreign or an immigrant and they have to speak Spanish. There isn't a law or practice in the classroom that can help this situation" (P21)

Elias's study attributes the power differential existing in Winston Parva to the amount of time each community had lived there; importantly, he also reflects on the fact that this factor of time alone also resulted in greater communal cohesion on "the established"; it is this "collective cohesion" (p.xviii) – absent in "the outsiders" - that lends the former the power they need to establish superiority over the former. However, in Chile *othering* is not limited to cultural violence; a study by Rojas and Jimenez (2022) focused on three Haitian students who were embraced by their communities (teachers and classmates) but who were forced to return to Haiti due the structural impossibilities of pursuing their education in Chile: in spite of their

academic and personal merits and overcoming great financial difficulties, the structures in place make it impossible for anyone without a national ID number (RUT) to enroll in higher education. We see here the collective cohesion and communal control playing a pervasive role on access to opportunity and social mobility.

So far, I have focused on migrant students because their inclusion into the Chilean educational system has represented a more recent challenge that is recognized by the academic community as a whole, in a country that now has 1.5 million migrants, a number that increased by 1.5% in just 2 years (INE, 2022). However, classroom violence and othering is by no means limited to migrant students; when prompted to reflect on what specific instance of violence were present in their classrooms either as teachers or students, their responses showed great awareness of socio-economic segmentations, sexual discrimination and its implications. One participant notes:

"I believe that direct violence can be seen when students are bullying their classmates, and they create confrontations including physical fights or any type of situation that causes physical or psychological harm. Structural violence can also be seen when students whose parents are married or have a higher income, are treated differently in an unequal way compared to those students that have a different reality. Also, when students are discriminated because of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs. And finally, cultural violence can be seen when students or even teachers are biased or hold a prejudice about something, because of their own beliefs" (P28)

Another one observes:

"Usually in the classroom we have lots of students with different backgrounds. From the textbooks I have used and read, many of them have activities that are not even close to their reality, something that may cause different emotions depending on their context. As an example, activities of "draw your bedroom" - "draw your home" - "describe your family", or even stories or dialogues of people buying cars or going shopping with a credit card and going on vacation to another country to visit a friend, can produce different opinions and feelings to the students of low-income families. I have experienced this in my practicum and it is very sad when a student calls you and tells you that they are ashamed to show their reality to their classmates because "they are not like everybody else" or whatever other reason they have"(P19)

RESEARCH AND MAIN FINDINGS

Context and participants

This chapter will first provide an overview of the research site, the participants who took part in the study and the methodology used. It will then present some of the findings we arrived at, and link them with Norbert Elias's work, more specifically the ideas put forth in *"The Established and the Outsiders"*.

The study was designed as per the tenets of participatory action research; as such it consisted of two iterations, each one carried out at a different regional Chilean university with students doing an English Teaching major (*Pedagogía en Inglés*). The first group of 14 participants were enrolled in a class titled "The Culture of English-speaking Nations", and the sessions (seven in

total) were embedded into that class. Participants were given a reading and self-reflection assignment within the overall theme of non-violence; more specifically, they were asked to think about instances of violence they had observed, perpetrated or being the victim of, either as teachers or students. They then met biweekly to discuss their reflections. These, in turn, served as a springboard to collectively think about strategies that might help address the issues previously identified which were discussed collectively through presentations. The second iteration saw the number of sessions expanded from seven to fourteen at the request of the university, and organized as a single course titled "Radical Pedagogies, Non-Violence and Change", which I both designed and taught using the same format as above.

Data analysis and link to Elias' work

Because of the level of critical reflection this project required on my and the co-participants' part, I chose to approach data analysis through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022). Such process consisted of six phases:

1. Familiarization with the data sets
 2. Coding the data collected
 3. Doing an initial generation of themes
 4. Developing and reviewing the themes
 5. Reflecting, defining and naming the themes
 6. Writing up the data
- (Braun and Clarke, *ibid*)

In further refining the approach to data analysis, I adopted an inductive perspective (Thomas, 2006). Unlike deductive analysis, which requires the researcher to corroborate if the data obtained is consistent with previously held assumptions, inductive analysis "refers to approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher" (*ibid*, p.2). This choice of an inductive approach is sustained in the participatory nature and structure of the workshops as well as the character and variety of the data sets.

Naturally, given the scope of my original study and the limitations of this paper, I will only present you with findings as they relate to the main issue at hand, which is the connection between violence and power and how this relationship links to Elias' work. In his article "*Violence, Peace and Peace Research*" (1969), Galtung defines violence as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is. Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes the decrease of this distance" (p.168). In other words, if we have the means and opportunity to create greater equality and we don't, we are perpetrating violence; he illustrates this with a patient with TB; were they to die today, after all the medical advances we have achieved, would be an act of violence. He further expands on the concept of violence from the direct (or physical), where there is an obvious perpetrator, to structural: "Resources are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy/education unevenly distributed, medical services existent in some districts and for some groups only, and so on" (p.171). In the context of this specific study, I argue that the existing educational model allows for these exact situations to exist to the detriment of historically marginalized groups: LGBTQI+, migrants and low-income students.

This is confirmed by the participants' own experiences, both as students and early-career teachers. One participant expounds:

"I believe one example of direct violence in the classroom can be bullying because this doesn't allow the students capacity to exercise their basic human rights. If we talk about structural violence, we can think of all the students that have limited access to education because they come from low socioeconomic status. Sadly, this is something very common in our country where people who have money have access to quality education. Finally, an example of cultural violence is when, at school, we see teachers trying to "Chilenizar" Colombian, Venezuelan, and Haitian students, stripping them from their cultural identities" (P1)

Another one affirms:

"Another example of violence I can think of is structural violence. I am not sure if it is correct or related to it, but I think that not having enough resources or materials to work with the students in the classroom is a type of violence as well. There are inequalities in the distribution of different resources, and many schools are forgotten most of the time. And the students from those schools will not have access to more dynamic or diversified education as well-off schools. Which I consider unfair and violent"(P3)

It is here that we can see the link to Elias' "power differential" (1965): these resources, materials and practices are dictated from top to bottom by those in a position of power against which those at the receiving end can do little to nothing to change, and in doing so inequality is created. Another participant remarks:

"The relationship between non-violence and equality has an important point to touch on, because if, for example, I am a teacher who is dedicated to ensuring that students understand a material in the same way as everyone else, and I do not use different methods of teaching, clearly taking into account that not everyone learns in the same way, I would be unfair to all those who cannot understand with a specific method because I would have a history that they would not be learning, but I would do nothing to change the situation, which would be both violent and unfair" (P20)

This connection between violence, inequality and power is confirmed by a study by Magill and Rodriguez (2022), who dissected in painstaking detail the level of violence experienced by minoritized groups in the American school system; while they acknowledge that the perpetration of violence on the part of teachers is often unwitting, they also lay bare the fact that this violence is allowed to exist because this power differential I mentioned as well as its manifestations are deeply embedded in the structures and relationships themselves. Thus, violence continues to be reproduced. This is one participant's insight on this very issue:

"I can see that we are using a violent language most of the time. As I was reading about this topic, I was thinking about the times in which I could have said things in a tone that might not be the best one to communicate with others. I feel like we are so used to blame other for everything, that we tend to refer to them violently without noticing. One example can be when teachers refer to students as "lazy or noisy". I think this is violent language because they are just putting their students down while judging their behaviour. Another example can be telling students

something like "how can you not understand? All your classmates got it, how can you not understand?" and similar phrases. I have heard teachers speak like that, and for me it sounds very rude. What if this person needs more help? We, as teachers, should not see them as the ones that are doing something wrong, instead, we should be helping them" (P2)

This awareness is also linked to the teachers' own experiences as students, who further sense that these manifestations of unequal relations, often by forcing ideas upon them that perpetuate stereotyping, directly impact student development by:

"For example, my classmates were sometimes hit by the teacher because they didn't do the homework, they didn't act the way the teacher want them to act. They weren't quiet, they were making a lot of noise and because of those reasons the teacher yell at them or hit them with a rap in the head and this is way of expressing violence over the others in the educational context. This is the most common way of impose violence, but in other aspects I could observe that some teachers made us believe that those studying technical degrees would not be able to achieve as much as those studying humanistic ones, so this is a way of violence as they are not promoting our development and they were preventing us from making choices according to our own paths.. And this is a common way of violence too, not a physical violence but psychological violence. I also think it's very common for teachers to impose their beliefs over others, for example in political aspects, emotional aspects" (P4)

This brings me a final reflection put forth by the participants, which is where, I argue, we should focus as educators; when asked to reflect upon the challenges they might face in bringing their ideas and strategies into their classroom, once again the notion of power structures loomed; the established, the older, well-positioned academic elite dictating the curricular and behavioural norms that the new, up-and-coming teachers feel they need to challenge but do not how:

"Sometimes some practices are hard to implement in the classroom since the authorities of schools prefer for teachers to have neutral stances in terms of "political" matters and I think what should be done in these cases is to just try and go for it, for the sake of the students" (P16)

For Elias and others thereafter – see Butler and her 2020 work *"The Force of Non-Violence: an Ethico - Political Bind"* - a power differential always results in oppression, tension and conflict. Evidence in this study points to how existing cultural attitudes and structures succeed in perpetuating these conditions, but also that the new cohort of teachers sees avenues worth pursuing, rooted in the belief that these power imbalances must be broken. They are not exempt of scepticism and recognize the challenges ahead, and yet remain hopeful:

"This week's information really got me thinking about how society is built by really hard bricks that we all have some pieces left to throw. And also, how it's the best time to teach people how to do it, we are in constant progress and the new generations are getting conscious about the impact of violence" (P25)

CONCLUSION

My concluding comments will address two dimensions that connect the participants' responses and are evident though not necessarily explicit; one is how the instances of violence described, be them cultural, direct or structural, speak in fact of *systemic* violence that permeates the different components of the educational model: from classroom hierarchies that allow for teachers to impose beliefs and behaviours on students to wider political structures, such as preventing capable foreign students to access higher education, that perpetuate and reproduce it. In other words, as Ruggiero (2019) explains, what exists are "structures and institutions sustaining and reproducing violence" (p.1). The limitations placed upon students, supported by deeply ingrained cultural ideologies, hamper in fact their ability to gain a sense of sustained achievement.

This brings me to the second dimension, which is that of *totality*. These forms of violence and discrimination are not isolated from one another; they speak of a political totality that connects these manifestations and creates a web of interwoven violent expressions furthering injustice through lack of resources, reinforcement of class differences and perpetual economic segregation that remains unaddressed. And this is what requires a paradigmatic shift; whereas the neoliberal discourse continues to promote the notion of injecting more resources to solve structural problems of those more disadvantaged, Zizek (2008) argues that "properly humanitarian considerations as a rule play a less important role here than cultural, ideologico-political and economic considerations" (p.8). I argue that what is needed is both: we need a profound cultural and ideological shift, but we also need our humanity to drive us in undoing and reshaping the structures and symbols that reproduce violence in our classrooms

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