Perceptions about Socio-Academic Trajectory of Students Enrolled in the Universidad de Concepción Propaedeutic Program

Percepciones sobre la trayectoria socio-académica de estudiantes participantes del Programa Propedéutico de la Universidad de Concepción

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Abstract

Different strategies have been searched in Chile in order to reduce the gap in the educational system between students who are in a better socio-economic situation and those who are more socially vulnerable, both in terms of access and in their eventual graduation. One of these strategies is to set up propaedeutic programs, which have been used by high-achieving students in vulnerable schools as a way to access University. In this sense, the current study analyzes the perception regarding social trajectory found in the discourse of students enrolled in the Universidad de Concepción (UdeC) Propaedeutic Program. Four units of analysis can be outlined in their discourse: a) tension between the social-familial trajectory and personal expectations, b) tension between personal trajectory and socio-familial expectations, c) tension between opposed social trajectory expectations; and d) tension between structural elements and trajectory expectations.

Keywords: career path expectations, access into higher education, inclusion in higher education

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Resumen

En Chile se han buscado diferentes estrategias para disminuir la brecha existente entre los estudiantes socioeconómicamente más aventajados y los alumnos más vulnerables del sistema educacional, tanto en el acceso como en el egreso de la educación superior. Una de estas estrategias es la conformación de programas propedéuticos, que se han ido instalando como una vía de acceso a la universidad para aquellos estudiantes de colegios vulnerables que tienen buen rendimiento. Considerando esto, el presente estudio analiza las percepciones respecto de las trayectorias sociales que emergen en el discurso de estudiantes regulares del Programa Propedéutico de la Universidad de Concepción (UdeC). Destacan, en dicho discurso, al menos cuatro elementos de análisis: a) la tensión entre la trayectoria socio-familiar y la expectativa personal, b) la tensión entre la trayectoria personal y la expectativa socio-familiar; c) la tensión entre expectativas de trayectoria social opuestas; y d) la tensión entre los elementos estructurales y las expectativas de trayectoria.

Palabras clave: expectativa de trayectoria social, acceso a la educación superior, inclusión en educación superior

The overall aim of Chile's propaedeutic programs is to include in higher education students who are from vulnerable contexts and have high academic achievement in their respective educational institutions, regardless of the results of the university selection test (Prueba de Selección Universitaria, PSU) (Román, 2013). In other words, the aim is to contribute to a more equitable university admission system, facilitating access to talented students who are excluded from the current admission system (Gil & del Canto, 2012).

Indeed, students from vulnerable sectors who want to study in higher education must face two key obstacles: entering into the university system and remaining in it.

With respect to access, the high levels of segregation in the Chilean education system (OCDE, 2009) have disadvantaged a large segment of the population, generating a phenomenon of social exclusion (Valenzuela, Bellei, & De los Ríos, 2010). This has the following consequences, among others: a) a significant restriction of the expression of academic talent (Muñoz & Redondo, 2013); b) in subjective terms, the development of a mindset associated with failure, which holds the vulnerable students themselves responsible for their exclusion rather than contextual elements (Mauna, 2013); and c) the development of educational practices that render vulnerable students invisible as subjects of learning, limiting their chances of cognitive development (Román, 2003).

Moreover, when observing the level of coverage that the university education system has recently achieved, one can see a new type of student body at the universities. These students are characterized as young people who are the first generation to go to college, with lower or different levels of capital (economic, social and cultural), on average, than their traditional generational peers (Díaz-Romero, 2010; Jiménez & Lagos, 2011).

This diversification of student population has had an unintended impact on education. Higher education institutions have been required to develop strategies to address the educational deficiencies reflected in the level of knowledge and discipline of students, primarily from the public school sector, in order to ensure that they remain in the system. This is exacerbated when it is seen from the perspective of cultural capital and study skills. When these elements are deficient there is an impact on student academic performance, especially during the first year (Acuña, 2012; Díaz-Romero, 2010; Dirección de Análisis Institucional y Planificación-PUC, 2012; González, 2005; Pey, Durán, & Jorquera, 2012).

As mention above, the objective of this research is to document the perceptions of students enrolled in the first year of the UdeC Propaedeutic Program, regarding their social trajectory.

Framework

Segregation in the education system

There is a certain consensus that the Chilean educational system is the most segregated of the OECD countries, mainly because socioeconomic background explains, to a large extent, academic performance on the SIMCE tests (System of Measurement of the Education Quality). This is accentuated when comparing PSU performance (OCDE, 2009).

Segregation has been characterized as a concept with two substantive dimensions. The first one is the social dimension, understood as the absence of interaction between social groups. The second one is the geographical dimension, understood as the unequal distribution of groups in a given physical space (Rodríguez, 2001).

Meanwhile, segregation of the school population is primarily concerned with three essential elements. The first one is the quality of the student educational experience, mainly in civic and social integration aspects, the second one is equal opportunity in achieving academic goals and the last one is educational policy and the possibility of implementing successful improvement programs in institutional terms (Valenzuela et al., 2010). These elements are particularly evident in sectors with high concentrations of vulnerability, since the segregation of vulnerable subjects adds to their community vulnerability to their individual vulnerability. Thus risking the establishment of chronic phenomena of exclusion and disintegration (Valenzuela et al., 2010).

The same authors, in a previous study, state:

> The degree of school segregation is higher among private subsidized schools than among public schools, while among private non-subsidized schools it reaches extreme levels in the case of students from lower socioeconomic levels. This is coherent in a scenario where few students with this characteristic attend private non-subsidized schools (p. 217).

This is consistent with studies conducted in the socioeconomic stratification of educational institutions in the country (Treviño, Salazar, & Donoso, 2011). Municipal institutions have the highest levels of socioeconomic stratification. In contrast, private subsidized institutions collectively have higher levels of segregation of vulnerable students. Similarly, considering the Student Vulnerability Index (Índice de Vulnerabilidad Estudiantil - IVE), it can be seen that highly vulnerable students are overrepresented in public schools (Treviño et al., 2011).

This process of homogenization or overrepresentation of certain groups in each of the existing educational administrative units in the country is largely due to the powers that the market has given schools to compete to attract and select students who are easier and cheaper to educate. Instead of selection according to students' academic ability, covert selection mechanisms based on the parents' payment capacity have been established (Treviño et al., 2011).

This market logic, applied systematically in recent decades and crystallized in public policies designed in the nineties, has produced an educational system where groups are highly differentiated among institutions and highly identified within the institutions. The direct result of this is a system that is not very cohesive and has high levels of polarization (Villalobos & Valenzuela, 2012).

These structural elements of the education system have a negative impact in the classroom. Indeed, according to qualitative ethnographic studies conducted at a national level, teaching practices in vulnerable contexts that prevail in the country lead to the reproduction of content, or the development of abstract knowledge and memory stimulation. This does not produce the meaningful learning and higher level skills that the students require (Cardemil, 2001).

The first type of educational practice, reproduction of content, is characterized by an abstract and formal theoretical discourse, a lack of consideration for the context and reality of the students, single and convergent responses, receptive and passive learners and summative assessment focused on achieving objectives. Meanwhile, the second type of practice, involving the development of abstract content and stimulation of memory, is characterized by the use of theoretical models and general knowledge, a lack of

consideration for the context and reality of students, convergent and divergent responses, receptive and passive learners, lack of resource use and summative assessment focused on knowledge (Román, 2003).

These practices are based on certain social representations that teachers at vulnerable schools have concerning their students. These can be grouped into two dimensions: children's cognitive and expressive abilities and the structural and cultural characterizations of families. Both dimensions, observed through the set of conditions and characteristics of the social sector to which vulnerable children and their families belong, render the student invisible as a subject of learning and of social interactions that foster proper development. Consequently, the pedagogical relationship that teachers establish with their students does not offer the cognitive and social opportunities for students to overcome their shortcomings, given that teachers do not distinguish or value the different strengths and abilities of these children. Rather, they construct and treat the student body as a whole as deficient and homogeneous (Román, 2003).

Access into higher education: effects of the university selection test

Considering that the purpose of admission systems like the university selection test (PSU) is to certify a minimum performance to increase the possibility of retention (Román, 2013), it is of special importance to consider the effects that this instrument has on the country's capacity to retain the academic talents when these students are not assessed on an equal footing and when external factors determine student performance.

Indeed, the PSU has affected the chances of admission to the university based on students' socioeconomic background and the type of institution that they come from (Contreras, Corbalán, & Redondo, 2007; Kremerman, 2007; OCDE, 2009). The data indicates that of the 43% of students who score less than 450 points on the PSU, 62% come from municipal institutions and generally are excluded from higher education (Universidad de Chile, 2011). It is shown that if the income bracket is higher than the average student scores in language arts and mathematics, will also be higher on both SIMCE and PSU (Muñoz & Redondo, 2013). The evidence even indicates that two individuals from different socioeconomic levels — measured according to family income and the educational level of their parents— who achieve the same SIMCE score in eighth grade, show a gap of more than 70 points on average four years later when taking the PSU (Muñoz & Redondo, 2013). This is consistent with the results of other studies, which indicate that students who come from municipal institutions and who attend selective universities, score about 80 points higher than the average for their class. Whereas a private school student can score 25 points lower than the average for his or her class and still attend a selective institution (Torres & Zenteno, 2011).

This is partly explained by the fact that academic achievement becomes a less valuable resource as one moves up the social structure. This implies that, with respect to attending an academic program in a selective institution that enables the student to project a good economic future, an excellent academic performance is a necessary condition for the low-income social majority, but less so for young people from households headed by executives and professionals (Orellana, 2011). In this regard, Orellana (2011) states:

> While at the elitist level, economic and social capital are juxtaposed as the main assets of distinction, in the upper-middle area monetary income acquires a decisive role over other forms of capital, and in the middle and lower sectors, ultimately the most effective acquisition for families is cultural, since this type of capital has a greater ability to influence academic performance. This, in turn, is the main tool for incorporating those sectors into the advantaged vacancies in the system (p. 110).

Therefore, in Chile, apart from having a powerful impact on the level of student academic achievement, socioeconomic factors increasingly influence performance over time. This may be because individuals with better economic conditions are able to continue making a greater investment over time and, hence, a higher return (understood as a higher score) is expected. At the same time, a greater exposure to an unfavorable socioeconomic context implies a growing increase in the constraints one must face to obtain a good score on the PSU and thereby access higher education (Muñoz & Redondo, 2013). Thus, it can be said that the PSU is a segregating system that reproduces social inequalities: students with greater resources also access preparation systems in high-cost pre-university programs that the families of young people with lower income cannot afford, exacerbating the injustice (Acuña & Arévalo, 2009).

However, since it is not possible for all young people to enter into the higher education system, the selection means have created a sort of reproduction mechanism related to expectations that associate the responsibility for exclusion from the tertiary system to personal failure rather than due to structural conditions (Mauna, 2013). In other words, exclusion from the higher education system has permeated the subjects, who attribute the responsibility for their failure to themselves. Therefore, Mauna states (2013):

> It would not be enough to structurally generate the conditions for young students from disadvantaged sectors to enter into higher education; rather, it would be necessary to generate positive subjective expectations at the family and personal level, reconstructing a perspective on what is possible in terms of higher education which was above the belief of greater long-term gains (p. 47).

Talent and academic performance

All this implies a rather unique situation that negatively impacts the country's ability to strengthen and develop its academic talents. Considering that the gaps produced in the PSU scores based on student socioeconomic status are conditioned by factors exogenous to the student, the expression of academic talent in the productive sector has been greatly restricted (Muñoz & Redondo, 2013). Notwithstanding the fact that evidence indicates that the most vulnerable groups of the population, despite their comparatively lower scores on standardized tests, have a wide range of intelligence scores (Bachs & Martínez, 2010).

Similarly, it is important to note that students with good performance in secondary education, regardless of socioeconomic level, will succeed in any demanding context. This is because they have a history of effort, perseverance and recognition of being able to be among the best and because: a) cognitive capital is not immutable and b) cognitive capital changes with the education received (Rozas & Santa Cruz, 2013). Consequently, it is noted that high average scores correspond to a relative ability that is a valid predictor of academic success (Contreras, Gallegos, & Meneses, 2009; Gallegos & Meneses, 2007; Meneses & Toro, 2012).

Retention in higher education

Considering the abovementioned, it should be noted that access to higher education is only one of the obstacles that students of low socioeconomic status face, since once in the university, they face a number of new challenges that put their continuity at risk.

The new student body, according to its origins, not only brings diversity to the university classrooms but also creates challenges for the universities to successfully include it (Díaz-Romero, 2010). As noted by Unesco (2006, as cited in Díaz-Romero, 2010), «the educational success rates of university students vary significantly according to their scores on admission tests and the type of educational institution that they come from, variables which are directly related to their socioeconomic status» (p. 83).

These elements have also been fundamental in the discussion about the length of the undergraduate programs. Indeed, as established by Pey et al. (2012), one of the key elements in the discussion about the actual duration of undergraduate education is the weakness of students when they are admitted, since often the expected learning from previous levels has not been achieved. Similarly, if one adds the high segmentation of the student body —observing the distribution of income quintiles— to this element, each university would have different strategies to respond to the characteristics of students it receives. In this regard, should be considered that students in lower quintiles income are the ones who exhibit greater academic difficulties (Pey et al., 2012).

In a similar vein, Meneses, Rolando, Valenzuela and Vega (2010) state in a study about students entering into higher education —when considering the graduation experience of a cohort— that, of the total students from private non-subsidized schools admitted to the university between 2006 and 2009, about 82% remained in it. In contrast, less than 50% of the rest of the students, from private subsidized schools and municipal schools, remained in the university in 2009.

The concept of social «trajectory»

The notion of *trajectory* is a theoretical-methodological tool for comprehensively studying the biographical paths of individuals (Graffigna, 2005), by analyzing both structural constraints —associated with possibilities— and subjective factors —related to the capacity for decision-making (Mereñuk, 2010). Thus a trajectory is defined by the positions that the subjects occupy over time in the social structure. Therefore to study this it is important to define the structural positions and the subjective dispositions they produce (Dávila & Ghiardo, 2005), as well as the motivations and associated expectations (Bidart, 2006; Casal, 2002; Walther & Phol, 2005). According to Dávila, Ghiardo and Medrano (2005), trajectories are:

> The product or results of all actions taken by each subject, whose reasons, always practical reasons, are formed at the different points of intersection between structural and the subjective, position and *habitus*, and conditions of life and frameworks with which every individual, group and class interprets their condition and helps to maintain it (p. 99).

Hence, an important element that defines the study of trajectories is the social group of origin, the level of education attained, the type of educational institution, the degree and type of work accessed with it and the social and symbolic value of what has been obtained (Dávila & Ghiardo, 2005).

This process, which involves expectations and motivations, requires many decisions, which can obey a rationale series that place pressure on the structural and subjective constraints. For Mereñuk (2010) — who researches this process in students who have decided to return to high school to finish their secondary studies— there are three types of rationale: instrumental, affective and revenge. The first one is associated with the *means* of achieving particular purpose, i.e., as a mechanism of capitalization on certain goals. The second one is directly associated with socio-familial ties that allow recognition. And the third one is associated with the need to overcome economic and social determinism (Mereñuk, 2010).

Moreover, there is now consensus that the decline of institutions affects the fragmentation and disintegration of biographical paths, which means that the individuals themselves must take responsibility for their decisions, autonomously and reflexively taking control of their own biographies (Mereñuk, 2010). However, in the Latin American context, this process is not completely symmetrical, since in more disadvantaged scenarios with no institutional regulation, the margins of choice are reduced and the subjects' reflexive capacity is put under pressure (Robles, 2000).

Thus, according to Dávila and Ghiardo (2011), when somebody is young, society forces a definition of the future and pressures childhood dreams to become present problems, and these dreams are always sustained by social aspirations. While personal, projections are a consequence of what has happened to our family or our friends. This projection on the past creates a balance with what we want for the future, evaluating how able we are to achieve our goals (Dávila & Ghiardo, 2011).

The UdeC Propaedeutic Program

The purpose of the UdeC Propaedeutic Program is to contribute to the equity and educational quality of secondary and higher education. Its mission is to provide the school community in the Biobio Region with a tool that helps develop specific opportunities for improving learning for young people. While they are capable of professional excellence, are exposed to different situations that place them at disadvantages in both admission to and continuity in the university.

One of the main features of this program is its connection network, consisting of 29 institutions from 12 districts of the Biobio Region, whose vulnerability concentration exceeds 60%. Table 1 shows the number of institutions by administrative unit and participating commune:

Table 1
Number of participating institutions by municipality and administrative unit

Commune	No. of municipal institutions	No. of private subsidized institutions	Subtotal
Arauco	1		1
Chiguayante	2		2
Concepción	6		6
Coronel	1	1	2
Florida	2		2
Hualpén	3		3
Hualqui	1		1
Lota	1	1	2
Penco	2	1	3
San Pedro	1		1
Talcahuano	4		4
Tomé	2		2
	26	3	29

The structure of this connection network establishes a confluence of wills for the purpose of supporting students' educational trajectory and moving towards more equitable access to higher education. The program involves developing the following strategic lines of action with the institutions:

1. Strengthening work with counselors.
2. Strengthening the management and leadership of the institutions.
3. Strengthening teaching work in mathematics and language.

The students who participate in the initiative are selected by the institutions themselves through an admission profile created collaboratively with the network. These students attend classes on the university for three semesters. During these three semesters, the students attend 192 hours of classes.

From a curricular standpoint, the program is focused on developing the skills of logical thinking, problem solving, oral and written communication, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. These skills are associated with the program's graduation profile, which is consistent with the needs of the university's undergraduate programs.

Both area coordinators and tutors support the teaching work. The coordinators are academics from the university with vast experience in teaching and research. Tutors, on the other hand, are students from the undergraduate programs in their fourth year or later. These tutors support the teachers in each session, taking on a disciplinary and transversal role, since they accompany the student throughouthis or her learning process in a comprehensive manner.

Finally, the program has a special admission system to the continuing undergraduate programs. This system operates through a system of quotas approved annually by the University's Academic Council.

Methodology and data

The research is qualitative and uses a mixed design, integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies into a single study to achieve a greater understanding of the subject matter (Creswell, 2008).

In order to identify the social trajectory expectations of propaedeutic students, a socioeconomic characterization of the 215 students participating in the program was conducted through an analysis of application forms. With this information a database was compiled in SPSS and a descriptive analysis was performed.

Then, to determine the social trajectory expectations of the students, a thematic narrative analysis (Escalante, 2009) was performed based on three group interviews.

This study used homogeneous samples. That is to say the units selected either have the same profile or characteristics or share similar traits. The purpose is to focus on the research topic, or to highlight situations, processes and events in a social group.

Description of results

Socio-demographic characterization

The descriptive statistical analysis found that there were a total of 215 students in the 2013 cohort of the propaedeutic program, who came from 29 different schools in the metropolitan area of Concepción and the Arauco commune. Of these, 43.7% were male and 56.3% female, and most came from families where the father was the head of household (57.8%). In 64.9% of the cases only one person in the family received any type of salary. The average income of the students' families was approximately 315,000 Chilean pesos.

With respect to educational indicators, only 6.2% of fathers and 3.3% of mothers of the students enrolled in and completed higher education, while 51% and 61% of fathers and mothers, respectively, completed their secondary education.

Trajectory analysis

During the group discussion analysis, four units of analysis emerged, showing the tensions experienced by students with respect to their trajectory expectations. While these tensions are often associated with negative elements, some of them have positive consequences, such as the reinforcement of certain objectives and goals through family and social support.

Tension between socio-familial and personal expectations. One of the most important elements that emerge from the group interview analysis is associated with university studies. Particularly, as a factor that changes the lives of the protagonists, mainly from their families of origin.

The central theme regarding the students' past is related to their immediate family. Their discourse is associated with their parents being «nothing» because they did not go to the university and only managed to attend secondary school:

> I'm the first child in my whole family who's going to go to the university, who plans to go to the university. My father studied at a technical high school and didn't study anything after that. Instead he started working right away. My mom just went to primary school and is a housewife (G1E3).

> My dad and my mom studied up to their second year of high school. My dad works as a pastry chef and my mother is just a housewife (G2E3).

Similarly, this element generates a tension with the trajectory expectation itself, which involves overt pressure associated with reversing the socio-familial trajectory: «There are plenty of ways to go to the university now, the only way which one can get ahead. Studying is the only thing you can do; without education you can't do anything» (G2E3). «These opportunities can't be wasted because they don't always come around. So that's why they chose the best averages from the school, and then I said, 'Okay, if they chose me, I have to take advantage of this opportunity'» (G3E4).

On the other hand, there are discourses that negatively identify the academic trajectory developed in their institutions and reflect the little value that the students attribute to this education:

> I always said that I wasn't going to do well in high school because it wasn't worth going to class, I was just wasting time, then when I got the information, when they told me [I was accepted into the program], I don't know, I got happy (G3E1).

Tension between personal trajectory and socio-familial expectations. The aforementioned tension, highlights the resistance between family trajectory and personal expectation. Also, it reflects the challenge and pressure that entering into the university means for these students. During their academic lives they have achieved a good performance, which is expected to contribute to admission to higher education.

Thus, a clear socio-familial expectation that pursues for the admission of students to the university, which to a large extent reflects the perception of academic performance as the instrument of greatest value for changing social status. This shows that the selection of a degree program, is not autonomous and responds to a family decision.

> I think my parents expect us to graduate from the university with some sort of degree, maybe not a university degree but a technical degree, something to support myself in life. So then maybe it's not so much pressure, but, but one still makes a big effort to be able to achieve it (G1E6).

> In my case, it was my dad who insisted me to apply for this, because my vocation is law. So, my dad, when he was a child they're young [sic], he always wanted to study history pedagogy, and besides, for me history is easy and everything, it was like he instilled it in me to study that. So I was between the two, but my mom wanted law, and then they were like on opposite poles, but then they realized that it was still a good option to go to the university, and to see what I could do with my life (G2E3).

However, the role of socio-familial expectation as a support element that nurtures the purposes of attending the university also appear in the students' discourse:

> In my family, they saw it as an achievement and a huge step, the step from high school education to university, because the high school took my effort, my performance into consideration, so they could see that I would do well in a higher education environment (G1E3).

> In my high school, it's the support of the principal more than anything because, well my mom already knows, they told her, but they didn't have a meeting, it was like a class meeting and they said that some students had won a propaedeutic scholarship. But most of all the support because, at least for me, on Thursdays I miss classes because I leave at five, and then I always have to talk to the principal and he says, «No, just go». So that's why I try, the last class, I always try to do the tests beforehand, or the projects, for the same reason, so I'm not behind with grades. And that's it, more than anything (G1E2).

Tension between opposed social trajectory expectations. On the other hand, when contrasting the levels of analysis, it is evident that due to their incorporation into the program, many students have placed pressure on their own trajectory expectations. This is done either by extending the term of their academic period —postponing their transition into the labor force— changing their professional qualifications, dismissing military careers or professional institutes. Even doubling their higher education projections, turning the propaedeutic program into one option among many.

> I'm leaning towards the navy, I like those kinds of things more, but when they told me about the propaedeutic program I said, «Okay, well, engineering isn't so bad» [...]. If the propaedeutic course doesn't work out, I think I'll have to take my first choices. Because anyway, I'm not good with math and stuff, so it's like I was missing a little bit, and, yeah (G2E2).

> I took it [the propaedeutic course] because it coincided with one of the undergraduate programs that I liked, law has always been my vocation [...], so next year I'll take pre-university, or *pre-u*, to try to get the score to enter into a law program, which is my main goal [sic]. But if I don't do well, I'll choose... I took it as a second option, you could say, to go to university and be left with nothing. Since my high school is humanistic, I'm left without any career, while some technical high schools give you a backup, this one no, I was left like this, without anything (G3E6).

Tensions between structural elements and trajectory expectations. A final element that emerges from the analysis is the structural elements that students identified as major hindrances to the achievement of their trajectory expectations. These elements include the university selection test and the university itself, since being admitted to and remaining in the university means a significant qualitative change both from the individual effort and financial capacity.

> I think, like my classmates who were with me here in the propaedeutic program, they, well not all of them, virtually none of the undergraduate programs in the propaedeutic program were the degree courses that they wanted to study. But I don't know, they stay here for the same reasons, to get a good PSU score, to be admitted here later and to have more chances of staying (G3E2).

> Since everyone says the first year of university is very difficult, because the switch from high school to university is so drastic, then you think that being here in the program is like being at the university. So when you go to university, it will make it easier (G3E4).

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I mean, last year I was afraid to face the world of the university and everything, but now that I'm seeing all this, it's like you get used to it and know what you're going to face in a few years (G2E3).

However, despite this tension, students value and demonstrate pride in their own academic performance, highlighting their skills and efforts they made to reach that level. This feeling maximized once they have been accepted into the propaedeutic program: «I think I imagined myself in the university a lot, because, I don't know, I think, according to me, that I have the skills to be admitted, or I don't know, I think I have those skills» (G2E5).

In my house my whole family congratulated me. My aunts and uncles were very happy for what they had given me, because it's like they were appreciating my effort and the fact that things had gone well for me at school my whole life (G3E2).

Final discussion

The units of analysis that emerge from exploring the social trajectory expectations of the students participating in the propaedeutic program at the Universidad de Concepción, indicate a set of tensions dealing with personal, socio-familial and structural issues. All of them reveal what a critical issue is for these students to move from secondary to higher education, as this is part of their personal, and even family, dreams. This dream faces a series of fears, related primarily to the access to and the stay in the university.

The first stated tension between social-familial trajectory and personal expectations coincides with the results obtained in a similar study (Román, 2013), which looks at the discourse of students who have undertaken propaedeutic studies. This research exposes a code of opposition built around two discourses. The first one associates «being professional» with a positive identity, in which higher education has an important role. And the second one «being a worker», a negative discourse associated with a subject without university education (Román, 2013).

A similar discourse emerges from students in the UdeC Propaedeutic Program when identifying their parents as workers or housewives. A trajectory they want to avoid.

For these students, family plays a fundamental role as a mechanism of pressure and support that catalyzes the expression of expectations associated with university studies. To large extent, the decision of students to pursue a university program is highly mediated by their parents, for whom their children's studies could sometimes accomplish their own unfinished dreams. Similarly, in terms of support, the family unit plays an important role in the group of students analyzed by optimizing the development of strategies to fulfill trajectory expectations (Dávila & Ghiardo, 2011), greatly valuing academic achievement at the secondary level.

Furthermore, the discourse that students express about their families, which gives significant positive value to the academic performance in high school, is associated with findings by Orellana (2011), for whom academic performance is the main tool for incorporating vulnerable sectors into advantaged vacancies in the system.

In this vein, it is noticeable that there is a certain symmetry with respect to the results of the research done by Mereñuk (2010). At least two underlying types of rationale that determine decisions can clearly be observed in the trajectory expectations of students: an instrumental logic and affective logic. Regarding instrumental rationale, the first tension described, between socio-familial trajectory and personal expectations, demonstrates the need for the propaedeutic program as a mechanism to negotiate the structural conditions. In other words, it promotes the intention *to be*, which opposes the initial, inherited condition of *nothing*. Similarly, this is evident when analyzing the tensions between opposing social trajectory expectations, as the propaedeutic program becomes a secondary tool that serves the purpose of improving social trajectory. Meanwhile, affective rationale is observed in the second tension between personal trajectory and socio-familial expectations. For students, entering into the propaedeutic program means recognition, especially in their immediate family.

Moreover, it is worth noting that although students, due to their sociodemographic characteristics, belong to a social group that is highly vulnerable, highly polarized and segregated, this does not become part of their discourse. Instead, they attribute their success or failure in access to university education to a personal phenomenon rather than a structural one. This is in line with the results of Mauna (2013), for whom exclusion from the higher education system has permeated the subjects and become naturalized as a perspective of self-attribution in terms of liability for failure.

In this regard, the tension between structural elements and trajectory expectations reflects to a large extent the students' fear of the PSU. Because of the institution in which they study, their average score will likely be insufficient to apply for a selective university (Contreras et al., 2007; Kremerman, 2007; OCDE, 2009). However, the students recognize that they have demonstrated an academic trajectory that results in certain aptitudes that make them worthy of admission to higher education, and even more, to a selective university. This perception, associated with merit and based on their good performance, is a sign of optimism. This relates positively to what the literature indicates with regard to academic performance

as a relative skill that becomes a valid predictor of academic success in university contexts (Contreras et al., 2009; Gallegos & Meneses, 2007; Meneses & Toro, 2012).

On the other hand, the tension between personal expectations and the structural elements associated with remaining in higher education reflect an initial pessimism —related to fear— due to ignorance of the university culture and imminent failure. This negative perception, however, decreases upon entry to the propaedeutic program, since the program becomes a tool for facing this culture. In this regard, there is no evidence of a greater university failure because of their status as vulnerable students, although it has been shown that groups of students from municipal and private subsidized schools have a high abandonment rate (Meneses et al., 2010). Likewise, the groups that have greater academic difficulties in the university are those from the lower quintiles (Pey et al., 2012).

Finally, this study should be complemented by a monitoring of the students who have participated to effectively determine the trajectory that they each follow. The purpose is to evaluate the fulfillment of their expectations and the strategies undertaken to achieve them. Similarly, the door is left open to see what happens with students who abandon the Propaedeutic Program and to determine whether the program fulfills its premise of changing the students' social trajectory.

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