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Challenges of working in undervalued technical schools. A continuum between discourses of deficit and trust

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the perceptions of technical high school tutors in Mexico about students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in the context of global curriculum reforms and institutional hierarchies. Through two novel concepts in education, culture of poverty and cultural deficiency, the paper explores: (a) how structural constraints shape tutors' perceptions and practices with students, and (b) how tutors' perceptions contribute to reconceptualise discourses of deficit and the culture of poverty in a more comprehensive way. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine tutors working in Tijuana, Mexico City and Tuxtla Gutierrez, the main themes of analysis are: tutors' working conditions, their perceptions of and relationships with students, the quality of education on offer, curricular reforms, and behaviour management. Even if systemic factors contribute to tutors' perceptions of deficit amongst students, we found valuable experiences of empathy, trust, and encouragement amongst tutors that show both their agency and resilience.

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Introduction

According to Ozga and Lingard (2007) education has the simultaneous capability of being progressive and reproductive, of being a vehicle that either fulfils life opportunities or perpetuates inequality. School dropout is one facet of education inequality. Upper-secondary education in Mexico has high dropout and low graduation rates (citation omitted for anonymity B). Research evidence shows two related factors that help to explain school dropout at this level. One is the lack of school belonging (citation omitted for anonymity A), another one is poor quality of education (Vargas Valle and Valadez García 2016). Whilst trying to explain student dropout, research has highlighted students' personal, family, and socioeconomic circumstances (Díaz López and Osuna Lever 2017) whilst few studies have focused on tutors as crucial actors on enhancing students' school belonging (López Bonilla and Tinajero Villavicencio 2009). This paper focuses on tutors' perceptions of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in technical high schools, in the context of global curriculum reforms and institutional hierarchies. While technical high schools have been

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crucial in forming cadres for the labour market (Weiss and Bernal 1969), they have also been socially stigmatised and discriminated against. In Mexico, these schools are generally perceived as of lesser quality than general high schools that prepare students for Higher Education entrance. Technical schools usually have higher rates of tutors' absenteeism and student dropout (citation omitted for anonymity A). Whilst this is consistent with international experiences of vocational education (Ozer and Perc 2020), the Mexican case is worth of closer examination. As Vargas Valle and Valadez García (2016) show, it is necessary to formulate education policies that prioritise education of good quality in order to improve school dropout at this level. However, I argue that, alongside better policy formulation, we need to critically explore how tutors' working conditions influence their perceptions of students in socioeconomic disadvantaged schools. If research looking at education, poverty and attainment does not address how structural constraints shape tutors' perceptions and practices, we fail to challenge the reproductive side of education discussed above. Therefore, this paper aims to explore a) how structural constraints shape tutors' ambiguous perceptions and practices with students, and b) how tutors' ambiguous perceptions contribute to reconceptualise discourses of deficit and the culture of poverty in a more comprehensive way.

The next section examines discourses of deficit in education from a theoretical viewpoint. This is followed by the project's methodology and then by the contextual background of the technical education in Mexico. Afterwards, the study findings related to tutors' perceptions in technical high schools in three states in Mexico (Tijuana, Mexico City, and Tuxtla) are discussed followed by the conclusions.

Deficit discourses in education

According to Page (1987), participants within a school share implicit beliefs that are part of the school ethos and its organisational culture. Beliefs that shape how tutors look and understand students are deeply embedded regardless of whether they are a true representation of reality. Research has shown that educators' beliefs are often shaped by deficit discourses, which are difficult to challenge (Thompson, McNicholl, and Menter 2016; White and Murray 2016). Deficit discourses in education have been commonly applied against students with special educational needs (Terzi 2005), from ethnic minorities (Aikman et al. 2016) and lower socioeconomic backgrounds (García and Guerra 2004). This study focuses on the latter.

According to Gorski (2008: 32), the culture of poverty is the idea that 'poor people share consistent, monolithic and predictable beliefs, values and behaviours'. Bourgois (2001) explains that the culture of poverty debate originated as a response to Oscar Lewis' ethnographic work, which in the anti-communist U.S.A of the 60s, portrayed the poor as unworthy and dysfunctional. Goodall (2021) shows that the culture of poverty continuously ignores structural inequalities. Instead, teachers tend to focus on the supposedly lack of aspirations, moral and intellectual deficiencies both at the individual and or family levels of marginalised students (Gorski 2008; White and Murray 2016), constituting thus conscious or unconscious homogenous stereotypes against them. Gorski (2008) offers a good explanation of why this happens. According to him, when we do not know people outside of our inner circle, we tend to fill in the gaps with stereotypes. He explains that this also happens because teachers have economic privilege in relation to their students even when both might come from similar socioeconomic

backgrounds. Even if the culture of poverty has been disproved by research (Baroutsis and Woods 2018), it still holds true across many teaching practices, impeding education to be a great equaliser (Goodall 2021).

For García and Guerra (2004), deficit thinking is not about a single dimension of diversity, e.g. culture or language but an intersection between race, culture, social class, and other markers of disadvantage. Their approach to deficit thinking recognises that even if most educators are well-intentioned, they are unaware of how cultural diversity influences their practices. García and Guerra (2004) claim that cultural awareness will not inevitably result in equity practices and propose avoiding seeing deficit thinking amongst educators as an isolated problem detached from its existence in wider society.

In the case of Latin America, Martinis (2006) explains that education reforms during the 90s positioned students as lacking and teachers, not as professionals, but as technicians who must be trained to work with lacking students. According to him, excluded students are made responsible of school failures, which are explained by their own lacking. Martinis (2006) calls it 'cultural deficiency syndrome', which is a constant association of poverty with educational underperformance, where students' social contexts are understood as obstacles for teachers' work. Under this vision, teachers face hurdles and fights, and in the words of García et al. (2015), whose research is based in Spain, teachers often employ warlike allegories to interpret their work with underprivileged families with expressions such as 'fighting together, who are we facing, educative fight', etc.

In Mexico, deficit discourses have been more prevalent when looking at multicultural education (Domínguez 2013; Vadillo and Tapia 2018), whilst the culture of poverty and cultural deficiency syndrome have been generally underexplored. However, research exploring student dropout at the upper-secondary level has implicitly shown clear examples of deficit discourses in their findings. De la Cruz Flores and Matus Ortega (2019) conducted focus groups amongst 58 technical students who returned to school after dropping out. Amongst the internal school factors, they found tutors' lack of empathy and interest towards students' learning, favouritism towards students who fit the role of 'good students' and an overall rigid academic climate where students' lack of progress is seen as a personal issue instead of as a lack of institutional support. This paper analyses internal school factors including the institutional hierarchies across technical high schools through the lenses of the culture of poverty and cultural deficiency.

Methodology

This paper is a subset of a larger multidisciplinary research project that explored experiences of school belonging amongst youngsters in disadvantaged high schools (both general and technical). High schools were located in three different states in Mexico with dissimilar economic and educational outcomes. In the north, two schools in Tijuana an important manufacturing hub. Representing the centre, one school in the capital, Mexico City, and another in its metropolitan area in the State of Mexico (Edomex). In the south, three schools in Tuxtla Gutiérrez one of the poorest states in Mexico. Gatekeepers' approval across high schools was sought first and then parents, tutors and students voluntarily signed consent forms after being fully informed of the purpose and methods of the study.

The subset, on which this paper is based, focuses on nine tutors (5 females and 4 males) working in three technical high schools. Two tutors were based in Tijuana, five in Mexico

City and two in Tuxtla. Tutors were selected because across their technical high schools, interesting patterns of ambiguous tutor-student relationships were found. Tutors within this subsample have a working experience ranging from four to 28 years and perform different school roles ranging from pastoral support to teaching, with one tutor having previously held two leadership roles. Seven tutors work in the morning school shift and two in the evening shift and their institutions impart a variety of technical careers that reflect the work available to students in the three locations. The high school in Tijuana specialises in Administration, Catering, Environmental Conservation and Informatic. The institution in Mexico City specialises in Nursing, Optometry and Respiratory Therapy. The one in Tuxtla specialises in Accounting, Construction, Informatics, Lab Technician and Digital Information. The following table illustrates the varied academic and professional backgrounds of tutors.

Tutor 1	Male	Studied Commerce and Administration. Joined the school in 2007 and started teaching Administration straight after graduating. His father was also teaching in the school. After two years, the school requested him to do a specialisation in Maths to be able to teach the subject.
Tutor 2	Female	Studied Human Development and has a master's degree. Joined the school in 2012 and provides pastoral support to students.
Tutor 3	Male	Studied Psychology with a specialisation in Education. Has worked as a preschool, elementary and secondary teacher before joining the school in 1993. Teaches Mental Health, Psychology and Logic.
Tutor 4	Female	Graduated from the same school as an Optometrist, then studied Medicine. Joined the school in 2000 to teach Anatomy and other subjects in Nursing.
Tutor 5	Female	Studied Medicine and joined the school in 1989. Teaches Optometry.
Tutor 6	Male	Studied Accounting. Joined the school in 2003. Works half-time as a certified public accountant in a federal government office. Teaches Accounting.
Tutor 7	Female	Studied Medium Education. Joined the school in 2002. Teaches in the evening shift and in the morning works in a private high school.
Tutor 8	Female	Studied Education at post-graduate level. Joined the school in 2016 after teaching two years elsewhere. Presented an entrance exam to work in this school. Teaches Philosophy, oral and written expression in the evening shift.
Tutor 9	Male	Studied Accounting. Joined the school in 1997. Teaches Administration and Accounting. Was Deputy Head for 7 years and then applied for a position as Head of School, where he spent 5 years.

Before showing the empirical findings of the study, it is important to give a comprehensive contextual background about the technical education in Mexico obtained through document analysis.

Technical education in Mexico: a contextual background

Technical education at the upper-secondary level forms students typically aged 15 to 17. In Mexico, there are different providers of technical education. This paper focuses on two of the largest public providers. The National Technical Professional School, hereafter CONALEP, and the Industrial and Services Technological Baccalaureate Centre, hereafter CBTIS for their respective acronyms in Spanish. Both institutions originated in the late 70s

with the triple aim to cover the demand of skilled labour for national production, attend youths' aspirations for employment and insert graduates into the labour market (CONALEP 2017). CONALEP started as a decentralised institution although, currently, it has a federal status which allows direct control from the federal government in decision making on curriculum and staff recruitment (Bernal Reyes 2020). Their 313 campuses nationwide attend 79% of enrolment of technical students. CBTIS also depends on the federal government, more specifically the Ministry of Education through its General Direction of Industrial-Technical Education and has 271 campuses nationwide. Both institutions have a wide curricular offer in varied sectors such as industrial, commercial, electronics, informatics, health, business, and services. Currently, CONALEP offers 49 technical careers and CBTIS 33, although offer is continuously updated depending on demand, staff, and resource capacity at each school (Bernal Reyes 2020). Courses in both institutions last six semesters, although CONALEP curriculum consists of a total 3,780 h compared to 2,880 h at CBTIS (Bernal Reyes 2020). In the case of CONALEP, from the second semester onwards, students' load of work placements gradually increases (INEE, 2017).

In 1992, CONALEP adopted the model of competency-based education, which continues evolving to this day. According to CONALEP (2017), this model links the development of attitudes, technical and social skills allowing adaptability to new and changing technological realities. Competency-based education has been promoted (and sometimes funded) by international organisations such as UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank (Anderson-Levitt and Gardinier 2021). The adoption of this model sought to improve two of CONALEP most pressing issues: low graduation rates and not being the preferred option amongst upper-secondary applicants (CONALEP 2017). For example, in the academic year of 2015–2016 the institution's overall graduation rate was of 50% and in 2017–2018, 16.3% students dropped out from the institution. An internal survey amongst dropouts found that 35% of students left due to academic reasons such as failing marks and tutors' absenteeism (CONALEP 2019). CONALEP (2017) also acknowledges that the institution is not an option of preference for many lower-secondary graduates. For example, Tapia (2022) found that CONALEP was the first option for only 47% of its students. According to Ortega Hesles (2015), high-achievers do not list technical high schools such as CONALEP and CBTIS as their top-options unlike students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who tend to seek options that facilitate early transition into the job market and are likely to select low-demanded technical high schools as a safe-bet. However, applicants across the board know that both socially and academically the reputation of technical high schools is challenged (citation omitted for anonymity A). Technical training has also been questioned at international subsidiary companies taking part in the dual system (Wiemann and Fuchs 2018). Aikman et al. (2016) show how technical/vocational education globally has been framed under schemes of deficit by becoming a usual option for the future employability of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minorities.

CONALEP was the first technical institution adopting the model of competency-based education. Since then, this model has been gradually introduced across the overarching upper-secondary level including CBTIS. However, Moreno Olivos (2012) highlights several challenges associated to the competency-based model. First, it lacks a unifying theory underpinning it. Second, teachers lack experience on how to implement and evaluate this model. Third, even if it has been officially promoted by diverse Mexican governments in the last decades, its implementation has lacked consistency.

In 2004, a new curricular model for technical high schools promoting a constructivist teaching environment and aligned assessment methods was established, which created upheaval amongst tutors who felt unprepared to embrace the changes (Cruz and Egido 2014). Building on from this, in 2008 the federal government implemented an integral reform called RIEMS for its acronym in Spanish, which amongst other things, established a national upper-secondary system with a common curricular framework and specific competencies for students, tutors and head teachers. Looking specifically at tutors' competencies, Rodríguez- Gómez (2018) explains that in the academic year of 2007–2008 a programme of teacher formation at the upper-secondary level aimed to train tutors and head teachers in the methodological principles of the competency-based model in order to improve students' educational outcomes. However, ten years after its implementation, Razo (2018) found that the RIEMS has a long way to go before it can be reflected at the classroom level. Her study, which took place across 63 high schools across the country (including CONALEP and CBTIS), showed important shortcomings including limited opportunities to enhance students' analytical and creative skills, the need to link academic content to youngsters' daily lives, improve tutors' professional knowledge and better classroom interactions between tutors and students (Razo 2018). López Bonilla and Tinajero Villavicencio (2009), who explored the views of tutors in technical schools regarding the recent curricular reforms, also expressed concern about tutors' lack of resources to effectively apply curricular changes through the constructivist-teaching model that the reforms aimed for.

I would argue that what has been missing from recent reforms is the understanding that students educational outcomes and overall education experiences do not depend only on curricular changes. We must critically explore how students are positioned both within the discourse of the reforms and in tutors' perceptions and daily teaching practices. Under a scenario of low graduation, high dropout rates and a socially devalued technical offer, this paper aims to understand what happens inside technical high schools located in geographically disperse cities with different educational and economic outcomes catering to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and offer critical insights beyond the curricular improvements that different governments have recently undertaken. I concur with Razo (2018) in that we should first define what type of youngster the upper-secondary level, especially technical high schools, aim to educate and, more importantly, for what. The empirical findings below show a similar organisational culture (Page 1987) across the three participating technical high schools. In other words, similar experiences were observed across the three schools in relation to tutors' ambiguous perceptions and practices with students, as the following section will illustrate.

Resisting the power of authority: key findings from the interviews with tutors

Tutors' perceptions of students' social backgrounds

Tutors explained that many students live in precarious conditions. Many families are not homeowners, and some have faced evictions. Some students go to school without having breakfast or cannot afford daily school commutes. Many students have long commutes to school whilst others work or are young parents. Few students live alone and are fully independent. Many tutors also talked about students' difficult family circumstances and

described experiences of drug addiction, family disintegration, child abandonment, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Consequently, many tutors reported identity issues amongst students, feelings of abandonment, isolation, and low self-esteem, and some mentioned that many students long for attention and understanding. Tutors interpreted students' negativism towards school as a consequence of their hardship and said that many students have defiant and challenging attitudes:

Well, we have had experiences with very problematic students. One of them is graduating; he was like the diamond in the rough, right? He arrived as a coal stone and a diamond came out because we polished it. I mean, we polish many of those negative attitudes that arrived to us from secondary school [Tutor 6].

According to tutors, parents' precarious work conditions often impede them to monitor their children's education. Under these circumstances, some tutors show little empathy toward students and blame parents for not being responsible, for not attending school meetings or not requesting financial government support. Many tutors criticise students and parents' personal appearance and feel that they often have to educate habits that should be the responsibility of parents. However, there are tutors who are more empathetic and flexible with students' personal appearance and financial difficulties. They can accept coursework in recycled paper, handwritten assignments, extend deadlines or avoid requesting homework that involves Internet searches, as many students lack Internet at home and need to pay cybercafés. Some tutors believe that the public school system represents most of the population within the country and their need of education. These tutors see students in public schools as noble, respectful and 'down to earth individuals'. According to them, many families within their schools dream about seeing their children graduate as technical professionals.

Tutors' perceptions of students' academic abilities

Tutors' divided perceptions of students' social background were also evident in their perceptions of their academic abilities. Ambivalent attitudes were found even with the same tutor who might want to help students despite having a negative perception of their academic abilities, which shows the tensions within tutors who can have contradictory attitudes towards the same student. Many tutors complain about students' low academic level and believe that many lack knowledge and understanding and blame their poor educational trajectories. Other tutors claim that learning is not relevant to students, that education means nothing to them and that many lack a life project or that their goal in life is just to earn money. Tutors mentioned that students lack discipline, have a low attention span, and tend to put all the responsibility of their learning on tutors. There were also unfavourable comparisons between students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and broken households, and their counterparts, who allegedly have better study and reading habits, better writing skills and different life expectations. Many tutors believed in meritocracy and thought that success comes with students' hard work regardless of their social background or tutors' input. This was more nuanced with other tutors thinking that students from poorer backgrounds manage to get ahead and thrive. These tutors see disadvantaged students as mature and responsible individuals who want to do well in life and know that completing their education is their only way ahead.

All participating schools have a morning and an evening shift. Tutors' negative perceptions were more profound against students enrolled in the evening shift. According to them, although more students apply for the morning shift, these students tend to have better family circumstances and school attainment. Although class size is higher in the morning shift (at least 55 students per classroom), compared to the evening shift (35 students approximately), tutors need to work harder and demand less from students in the latter. Given that most students in the evening shift have morning jobs from 8.00 to 2 pm, they are more tired and miss school more often. In tutors' opinion, there are also more drug and alcohol problems in the evening shift and some tutors complain that students' key objective is to get their technical-professional certificate in order to keep their jobs.

Quality of participating schools

Despite different attempts to improve the quality of the participating schools, these institutions are still socially stigmatised. Popular perception still holds that technical professionals from these schools cannot enrol in tertiary education. However, many tutors were proud of their institutions and mentioned several aspects of good quality. For example, many graduates decide to keep on studying and enrol into tertiary education, including the Army or the Navy. There have been prominent alumni graduating from the participating schools. Tutors were proud of their institutions longstanding tradition, some of which have over 30 years of service. Most tutors have a bachelor's degree, and many are studying a postgraduate course, many have professional jobs in the same subjects they teach at school. Some students are children of former graduates who were satisfied with their education and enrolled their children there. Although these schools are socially undervalued, they are still a point of reference in their communities.

However, participating schools have many shortfalls. Many are located at the fringes of cities and for the students enrolled in the evening shift, finishing school late put them at risk of robbery. The schools themselves have limited physical and ICT infrastructure. Due to the big cohorts enrolling during the first semesters, some schools have dismantled their language labs to accommodate more students. Overall, there are not enough computers per students enrolled, and in places with very hot summers like Tijuana and Tuxtla, schools do not have air conditioning. Tutors wish they could have smart boards and projectors in every classroom. However, whilst many of them conform to the resources available, others have opted to buy their own projectors and provide students with photocopies out of their own money. Other tutors have organised book donations to the school library and have decorated parts of the school themselves.

Recent curricular reforms

Tutors explained that before the reforms, students' technical training was excellent as they were specialists in their chosen careers and were able to find good employment opportunities after graduation. Students tended to choose technical careers out of their own interests and the curricula throughout the semesters focused on those specific careers. Few optional generic subjects could be learnt separately on Saturdays to those interested in accessing HE.

Students tended to be at least 18 and had a better idea of what they wanted in life. There was no entrance exam and graduates gained a leaving certificate of technicians that allowed direct entry into the job market but without the direct possibility of continuing into tertiary education.

Tutors explained that with the reforms, curricular programmes got shorter making place for more generic subjects that would prepare students to enter HE. The changes transformed the composition of the student body to younger cohorts between 15 to 17 years old. Nowadays, however, many students do not know what the institution can do for them, and tutors need to work very hard in helping them like and appreciate their courses. Many tutors even consider as part of their job convincing students of not dropping out. For those students who do complete, they finish with a bivalent baccalaureate, which means graduating with both a technical-professional leaving certificate (a professional licence that allows them to work in their technical career) plus the possibility to continue into HE. Again, tutors' views were divided regarding the transition into HE. For some, the flexibility graduates now have of continuing studying or entering the job market is a positive change. Other tutors, however, questioned the real possibilities that students from technical high schools have of continuing into tertiary education even if that is the preference of most students.

Tutors welcome the fact that now all secondary leavers must sit the National Upper Secondary Education Entrance Exam, which has put their institutions at par with the rest of the offer at this level. However, since the upper-secondary level was made compulsory in 2012, secondary school graduates cannot be left without education, which has increased the intake of upper-secondary education. Therefore, many applicants who do not get into their top listed institutions, associated to the two main public universities (UNAM and IPN), are allocated into technical high schools, which is where the student discontent often originates. Since the reforms, there might be more curricular similarities across the public high schools, however, the technical schools do not have the same infrastructure and social reputation that UNAM and IPN high schools have. Tutors explained that some companies where students do placements have shut their doors to participating technical schools, as some students are regarded as not well prepared. Other companies prefer graduates from IPN, which devalues the participating schools even further.

Tutors were generally very critical of the top-down implementation of the reforms. They would prefer the curricula to be less ambitious and to guarantee the acquisition of basic knowledge. Tutors complain that the reforms were approved behind the desks of politicians who follow international trends without consulting tutors' feedback and without considering the regional disparities within the country. However, tutors' criticisms transcended the recent curricular reforms. During the interviews, many spoke about their stagnated working conditions in terms of salaries, benefits, and contracts, which creates demotivation and anger amongst tutors.

Competence-based education

A key characteristic of the reforms was the introduction of competence-based education at the upper-secondary level. According to tutors, the competence-based system is demanding, as it requires from students not just knowledge acquisition but more importantly knowledge

application. Since students come from a very traditional education system at the primary and secondary levels, many struggle to understand how the competence-based system works and how it is evaluated. Another challenge is that the semesters in technical schools are usually divided into two parts, the first half is classroom-based whilst the second half takes place in work placements, which reduces tutors' teaching time to roughly two months only. In this short time, career subjects take precedent over complementary subjects. For example, tutors of career subjects tend to overload students with excessive homework and the short teaching time does not allow assimilation and clear understanding of knowledge amongst students.

Tutors also explained that they are required to keep evaluating students until they get a pass mark to avoid as much fails as possible. Consequently, some students in fifth and sixth semesters realise that they have many opportunities to pass, which often results in truancy, underperformance or even pressure towards tutors to get a pass mark. Tutors mentioned that they should comply with this if they do not want to face consequences, which creates tension amongst tutors, students, and school authorities:

That part of 'you have to pass me because I already demonstrated something' creates a rivalry between the teacher and the student. Students bring their parents in and as the institution tells us that parents must be treated well because they are right, even if their children aren't ... that is the worst thing you can do to tutors [Tutor 2].

Tutors believe that this leads to simulation, gaining a graduation certificate without acquiring the basic knowledge. In other instances, fails could also lead to bribery and ill-intentioned exams. If students must pass without deserving it, in the view of some tutors, students should pay to pass. Tutors explained that in the past, technical schools had high expectations of students, for example, those with failed marks could not reenrol. Nowadays there are more graduates but not all are academically strong. Sometimes tutors apply easier evaluations or avoid teaching complex content such as algebra. Tutors mentioned that in some instances, authorities have even altered tutors' marks:

There has even been... well... I'm going to say it, there have been situations in which the authority changes the marks. For example, suddenly you find a student and you say: 'hey, but how come you passed my subject, I never passed you!', then you realize it's because someone changed their grade. That has happened, and if you talk to other tutors, they will say that it is the truth [Tutor 1].

This is frustrating for tutors as they feel they cannot fight the system. According to them, disallowing failed marks has to do with budget constraints, as fewer enrolments in further semesters would result in less government funding for their institutions, affecting further tutors' already precarious employment opportunities and salaries.

School discipline

Tutors believe that students' learning goes beyond the acquisition of mere curricular content. Consequently, tutors put great emphasis on students' behaviour and personal appearance. Throughout the duration of high school, tutors seek to transform students, who originally struggle to conform to these rules, into well-behaved and presentable individuals. The use of school uniform and students' personal appearance are firmly enforced in the participating schools. Tutors justified the severity of the rules as necessary, given the profile of the

technical careers on offer and students' further placements in hospitals and clinics for example. Although neatness was important to all tutors, there was disagreement as to why it is important. For some tutors, students' dishevelled appearance represents further discredit to their institutions whereas for others, it has more to do with rankings of technical students in the workplace:

A hospital porter does not have a medical degree, but he arrives at the hospital, and they tell him: 'put on your uniform'; domestic assistants do not even have primary school finished but they must wear a uniform because they serve others [Tutor 3].

There were many tutors claiming they should be even stricter as, in their view, there was a lot of indiscipline. Whilst discussing discipline, tutors often employed warlike allegories. For example, having to continuously 'battle' with staff in charge of the school gate to filter harsher students with improper uniform or hairstyle. Unpunctuality and cursing amongst students were also highly disapproved. Tutors were aware of the power they used to impose discipline, but they saw this enforcement as necessary in order to make students' learning real and help them to succeed outside school both in their placements and after graduation.

Tutor-student relationships

Tutors reflected about their own working practices in ambivalent ways. They showed the capacity of reflection about their teaching and their working conditions although their reflections did not always enact positive changes either in students' learning or their own relationships with students. Tutors' reflective capacity tended to be shaped by their perception of students' socioeconomic backgrounds. For many tutors students' challenging circumstances were the origin of indiscipline and underachievement, withdrawing themselves of any responsibility towards students' learning. Some tutors believed that they could not do much at school when parents do not educate their students at home. Some were impatient and condescending towards students. Even though all tutors were aware of students' difficult socioeconomic circumstances, some thought it was disrespectful if students were absent, tired, or sleepy in class. Some believed that the only way to obtain good results with students was to be strict and even rude with them. In these cases, tutors could make use of their power and authority in relation to disciplining or assessing students.

There have been some groups where sometimes, when I finish, I would like to take an aspirin for the headache, right? One has to start applying a little more rudeness with them, right? Like taking them out of class, calling their parents, suspending them, or sitting them by their number in the register... more complex activities. And yes, it has to be done, but once we start to be a little ruder, we start to have an answer [Tutor 6].

A usual way to solve problems was to remove the students considered problematic before they can influence the rest. Tutor 6 explained that school progression is like processes of natural selection implying that some students are naturally more apt to survive in the school environment than others are. He believed that the problem was not the tutors, as he was not the only one 'battling' with the students, as most tutors were in the same situation.

Paradoxically, there were several instances where tutors showed more empathy. This was evident in relation to the devalued place that technical schools have in society and the

asymmetries between public and private schools. Some tutors believed that if they were rude towards students, they cannot expect students to respect and value them in return. These tutors acknowledged that it was understandable if students ignored tutors, as for example, some tutors do not even greet students. Many tutors reflected upon their own faults in relation to the difficult circumstances students face:

Sometimes we make big mistakes, students do their best, but at the door, they find their reality... Students need to battle many fights, the fight inside their houses, the fight on their way to school and a third one, inside the school [Tutor 9].

Another tutor added a fourth fight for students, that of the generalised devaluation of their institutions in society. Some tutors recognised that there was no bonding between tutors and students whilst others were willing to give students a second chance. Although, paradoxically, a forgiving tutor could simultaneously think that if students do not do well is due to laziness and not necessarily difficult personal circumstances, structural inequalities, or the school climate, which shows, again, an ambivalent empathy. Even strict tutors reflected upon their own teaching in order get rid of what they considered 'vicious teaching practices' like the overuse of dictation. In other instances, tutors said they treat students as if they were their own children. Therefore, findings were characterised by contrasts and complex realities: there seems to be uniformity on tutors' perceptions about the impact of students' socioeconomic backgrounds on their academic abilities, the quality of their schools and the outcomes of the recent curricular reforms. However, there seems to be more inconsistency in relation to tutors' perceptions of school discipline and their attitudes of empathy, trust, and encouragement towards students.

Tutors' empathy, trust, and encouragement

Even if tutors' reflective ability was complex and inconsistent, there were many examples of tutors' empathy, trust, and encouragement towards students. Some identified themselves with students who were discredited by other tutors. Others mentioned that they were committed to their work in order to give something back to society. Levelling students up was for many a personal purpose and during the interviews, they used different synonyms such as braking barriers, reform, rescue, give back, share, etc. These tutors were eager to listen to students' problems, lend books to them, create reading groups in Facebook, bring ties for those whose families have no such accessories or show projections of places around the world, as students had limited travel opportunities. Tutors would often work on students' language by either helping them with complex vocabulary or disapproving cursing. Other tutors would make the effort to learn all their students' names in classrooms with over 50 students. The following quotes provide good examples of tutors' allusion of 'rescuing' students:

I had a boy a long time ago who didn't submit coursework, but he was smart... and one day I told him: 'Let's see, come here'. We both went to sit down: 'I want you to tell me, what's wrong with you? Why don't you submit work?' He said: 'Teacher, I don't want to study... I don't want to work either.' 'No son, excuse me... in this life you either study or work... I mean, no NEETs. If you don't want to work or study, what are you going to do?...' 'I'm going to be a drug dealer.' So, we have a tremendous fight, a difficult fight, right? [Tutor 7].

I do believe we can rescue. I have had students who have left and take five years to finish but do come back. I have a boy who just finished. He went the long way, but I always told him ‘You will do it, but when you want’, and he just finished [Tutor 5].

Many tutors believed that their role was to open the door to students because ‘positive feedback can have a lasting legacy’ and ‘students will not forget tutors who gave them a second chance’. They worked hard to raise high the name of their institutions and instil that pride amongst their students. Tutors believe that one way to achieve this is through improving students’ personal appearance as already explained, whilst others would commission and distribute school badges and embroidered lab coats amongst students. Tutors mentioned that all these efforts contributed towards school belongingness and bonding amongst students, helping them to be committed, enthusiastic and proud of their schools. Tutors would also work hard on building students’ career identity because it is through education that ‘they will eventually earn their living’.

‘Don’t aspire to be Tupperware sellers; you must be engineers, architects’. Right now, nothing seems to be happening, but I feel that later all this will help them [Tutor 8].

‘You introduce yourself as the optometrist, bring your lab coat and say: “I’m the optometrist” ...” I can’t” ...” Yes, you can! You’re the optometrist’ [Tutor 5].

In these quotes it is evident the effect of tutors’ gender and work experience on their relationships with students as positive experiences were mostly shared by female tutors with at least 15 years of professional experience. This concurs with (citation omitted for anonymity C) who found that female teachers’ interactions with staff, students and parents is shaped by their adoption of a mothering role at the workplace. The findings also show that under challenging working conditions, tutors’ perceptions of students and their teaching practices tend to be ambivalent and inconsistent. Tutors showed the twofold capacity of reinforcing stereotypes of deficit in a reproductive way and challenging stereotypes commonly assigned to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in a progressive way. Therefore, although similar experiences were observed across the three schools in relation to tutors’ ambiguous perceptions and practices with students, tensions were present within individual tutors who could either adopt deficit-based models in different aspects of their teaching whilst showing empathy to students especially in relation to their socioeconomic conditions and future expectations.

Agency and resilience: final remarks

This paper explored tutors’ perceptions of students in socioeconomic disadvantaged technical high schools in Tijuana, Mexico City and Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Through an exploration of deficit discourses in practice, this study showed unequal power relations between tutors and students, which shows the control that tutors can exert upon students. Nonetheless, the complexities and contrasts found also show the control that educational authorities exert upon tutors, which results in different ways of accepting and resisting the power of authority. This is important because it requires a reconceptualization of the discourses of deficit in the literature that do not consider whether institutional hierarchies and challenging working conditions influence the deficit discourses that individuals with positions of authority (tutors) can have towards less powerful individuals (students). Another aspect

that the literature on deficit and the culture of poverty can reconsider, is that deficit discourses and labels towards vulnerable students are neither homogenous nor permanent. As the findings of this study show, tutors' perceptions of students and their teaching practices in disadvantaged schools reveal contrasts, ambiguities, and contradictions. Tutors who work under very challenging conditions, with tight control from the top, demanding administrative tasks (Bernal Reyes 2020), poor salary packages and limited teaching infrastructure could also be regarded as subjects of deficit discourses from their own educational authorities. At the classroom level, the current assessment requirements are not conducive of favourable relations between tutors and students and represent a detriment of both students' learning and tutors' professional knowledge. Through a critical discussion of the curricular reforms from different governments, this paper also demonstrated that prioritising curricula has occurred at the expense of pedagogy and school belonging. I would argue that deficit discourses in education could improve when within the school culture we learn to value and incorporate students' cultural inheritances (Neri et al. 2021). Not only tutors but educational authorities too need to assume their share of responsibility towards student learning and belonging, about their own deficit discourses and avoid adopting attitudes of complacency and/or resignation (García and Guerra 2004) towards poor school belongingness.

Tutors and educational authorities' awareness of their own deficit bias will not remediate by its own the structural social inequalities, but consistent awareness of our own deficit models and the adoption of more empathy towards students could help develop a stronger formation of student agency (Raffo 2011), and gradually empower students to aim high as some experiences in this paper show. Challenging tutors' deficit discourses towards socially disadvantaged students should be a priority of technical schools if educational reforms are expected to succeed.

The study findings do not show a generalised culture of poverty across all technical high schools but indicate its existence and sway. The prevalent picture that this research portrays is one of numerous challenges and complexities but also valuable experiences of empathy, trust and encouragement amongst many committed tutors which shows their agency and resilience whilst working under very challenging conditions. One key message is that before considering curricular improvements, educational authorities and tutors need to define the type of student they want to form at technical high schools and then align their teaching, assessment and teacher-training practices into that direction. However, it is also important to recognise and ideally ameliorate the structural constraints tutors face in relation to salaries and top-down decision-making. If these structural constraints are attended, tutors will be better equipped to reflect upon their teaching practices in progressive ways. A key aim could be to focus on gradually improving tutor-student relationships in order to support students accomplishing their own future desires. Instead of expecting tutors to just deliver the prescribed curricular reforms they must be at the centre of the decision making since they are the ones putting the reforms in practice (Edwards and Thomas 2010). Following López Bonilla and Tinajero Villavicencio (2009) and Razo (2018), this study explored internal school factors across technical high schools that explain the low graduation and high dropout rates across schools that are still socially devalued despite the continuous curricular changes implemented.

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