You have suggested that the key to improve educational quality in Chile and Latin America is a deep transformation of instructional practice in classrooms and teachers. How feasible is such change, in your view?

Feasibility will depend on governments and civil society gaining awareness that this is THE critical factor to modify. Our school systems have made clear improvements with regard to access, following an unprecedented expansion of educational services, from preschool to higher education, for large sectors of the population who were previously excluded.

This massification has resulted from both factors attributable to educational systems and from improvements in the quality of life and increasing aspirations of the population. However, the issue of quality is still pending. The time students spend in school does not match what they actually learn - this is why some have talked, with some exaggeration, of "wasteful schooling." Facing the issue of classroom practice and teachers is imperative to improve, and it is clear that the State has to intervene through turnaround policies that move us out of the current state of de-professionalization. The unavoidable question is, then, how to attract, retain, and develop good teachers in all our schools. Governments and societies should put their best efforts to collectively develop an answer. There are no shortcuts when it comes to educational quality.

New and persistent policies should head in this direction. A crucial requirement is that they have to involve whole systems and include all related aspects, such as: the status of the teaching profession in society, which has to be strengthened to attract and retain the best candidates; teacher initial education, which should develop the knowledge and skills of teachers in disciplinary and pedagogical areas; teachers' professional career and working conditions, which should allow the full development of teachers at different stages in their career and the constant update of their professional life.

This is much easier said than done. Several titanic obstacles of
different kinds have to be surpassed, including: financial (large numbers of teachers makes any teacher policy costly), institutional capacity (organizations such as teacher education universities have to shift their way of doing things and their competences), cultural (prevailing values and beliefs, sometimes withheld by teachers themselves, impede full professionalization), and political (governments tend to privilege those investments with highest visibility and political returns, such as infrastructure or computers, over other actions with mid- to long-terms results). In our societies, we've had a political tendency to develop teacher policies that have been characterized by their volatility. This is why good political leadership on educational matters should translate, above anything else, in developing wide and strong coalitions that define changing classroom practice as their first priority and that develop, over the long run, teacher policies that are consistent with this goal.

Chile is the Latin American country with the largest improvements in the habitual indicators of educational quality – PISA, retention rates, access to post-secondary education, etc. At the same time, it has been the scenario of two large student movements in 2006 and 2011 that have expressed dissatisfaction with existing educational opportunities in the country. How do you make sense of this paradox?

This is a recurring question that we in Chile ask ourselves and for which it is not easy to find a satisfactory answer. There are diverse, and even incompatible, interpretations. One line appeals to a sort of growing spiral of expectation: advancements on educational access for new social groups would increase their aspirations in ways that the system has difficulty fulfilling. The case of high school completion is emblematic in this respect: youth coming from low income sectors who are now completing high-school in massive numbers are not "proud and satisfied" for being the first generation in their families to achieve this as much as they long for a postsecondary education - a technical or, even better, a university degree. In this sense, the relative success of the system would also be the cause of its questioning.

Another interpretation visualizes the dissatisfaction as an expression of the new middle classes, who have made huge efforts to improve their social and educational integration, taking distance from low income sectors, and would resent not accomplishing an equivalent return. In fact, the exponential growth of higher education. - which nowadays reaches half of the corresponding age group - has been produced mainly through the incorporation of these "new university students" to private institutions of low quality, for which they and their families make large sacrifices to cover the costs, either by stressing the family budget or through large debts for the future. From this perspective, this social group would be the main victim of the works of educational "quasi-markets." And their political mobilization, which finds strong support from their families, would be the social and political expression of the disappointment that comes from not being able to fully integrate and enjoy fully the standard of life they aspire to.. This dissatisfaction of the new middle classes would not be limited to education but also permeate areas such as health, consumption, and employment.

A third interpretation explains the dissatisfaction with a more radical and normative opposition to a market-based society. From this perspective, Chilean youth are less interested in integrating into the existing social structure or fulfill their expectations of social mobility and more in changing the current model of society – and education – into one that is more egalitarian and where the State undertakes responsibilities that are currently left to the market.

Personally, I think that the three explanations above show distinct aspects of a
general sense of “educational dissatisfaction” which reflect the situations and demands of different groups. The implication is that behind the mobilizations different kinds of dissatisfaction have come together, that is, that there are various protests on the streets simultaneously. But beyond any sociological interpretation, what is clear is that achievements in education in Chile have not translated into greater contentment among citizens. On the contrary, they have come hand in hand with a growing demand of more educational opportunities for all, with no exclusions.

From a political perspective, this general sense of dissatisfaction has become an important enabling force for educational change. The student movements just mentioned have brought important issues to the political arena, such as educational inequality and quality, which recent governments have had to include in their agendas.

As Deputy Minister of Education in Chile you led a process of negotiation with the teachers’ union that resulted in an important agreement that included topics often considered unapproachable, such as teacher evaluation and the creation of incentives for excellent teachers. What did you learn from such experience?

It is true that this negotiation in the year 2000 was a historical landmark with regards to mutual understanding between the government and the teachers’ union, which translated into the launching, with high social support, of education policies that require competition for teaching positions, initiatives that had been considered taboos until then. This negotiation was different from those undertaken in previous administrations in that it was framed as a dialogue among partners who supported educational quality, rather than a mere governmental response to demands from teachers, or the mere imposition of a technocratic agenda. The basic question we asked ourselves together with the union was: what can we change in teaching and in teachers' working conditions that would result in improvements of the quality of education our children receive? That is, any measures brought into the discussion had to start by demonstrating their potential impact. This guiding principle turned teacher evaluation, for example, into a fundamental action to know where teachers were at and develop supports for improvement for those with most difficulties as well as incentives for highly effective teachers to stay in classrooms and to support other teachers. Without individual evaluation, actions in favor of teacher professional development were blindfolded, as they targeted an "average teacher" that did not exist in reality.

We, the government and the union, had similar realizations in many other issues such as the increase of release time for teachers, the legal acknowledgement of illness affecting the profession, and facilitating retirement for those who had completed their professional cycle. Once again, our method of negotiation made it easier to reach agreements. While the usual way to proceed was a meeting between the government and union leaders after teachers had been mobilizing with a specific demand, usually a salary increase, our approach was to engage systematically in dialogue with the union from day one of the new presidency. This way, we established a mutual agreement that we would move forward based on an open agenda, with no exclusions but with realism. Themes were studied and discussed one by one to see what could be done. I should say that this negotiation would not have been successful without two key conditions that are not always in place: strong political backing from government, more specifically from president Lagos, and a union leadership that was open to reach agreements. Our popular saying, "it takes two to dance tango", applied fully in this case.

Principal leadership is a recurrent theme in your
your recent work. While you use conceptual frameworks available in the specialized literature, you also question their usefulness for education systems like Chile and Latin America literature. Can you speak to this stance?

The shift toward strengthening the leadership of principals is very recent in Chile and the Latin America region. One or two decades ago, the principal had the main function of implementing policies mandated from higher levels of the system, as well as administering the everyday activities in school, ensuring compliance of existing norms. The principal was seen as a teacher who was transitorily taking on extra tasks, including developing relationships outside the school, with the Ministry of Education, municipal authorities, other public services, caregivers, and the surrounding community. Similarly, the principal was not perceived as someone who should get involved with what happened inside classrooms, which was seen as an exclusive and excluding duty for teachers.

But this definition of the role of the principal changed recently, and they are now being required to be pedagogical leaders, capable of getting involved on educational issues and responsible for what happens inside classrooms. We are in this transition today, with principals trying to take on a new role for which they were not trained for, which clashes against the conventional culture of teaching, and for which they often don’t have the attributions to make the required decisions.

These tensions, which we have euphemistically called "birthing labor pains" appear in full strength in the research we have conducted on school principals. While we have used conceptual frameworks form the specialized - mainly Anglo-Saxon - literature, we have also tried to show that there are dimensions that are particular to educational systems in Latin America that are not properly addressed by such frameworks. For example, our school principals often have a social and political function that is highly relevant. They are recognized as community leaders and need to know how to use such influence in favor of the school. They are also expected to activate the school as the cultural and social center of many communities where public spaces for gathering are scarce, and where the school becomes the space where different social policies (health, sports, culture, etc.) are coordinated.

In a similar fashion, the precarious situation of many families and many children make the day-to-day in schools full of emergencies and unforeseen events, which the principal has to find ways to deal with. As you will understand, the definitions in the specialized literature that seek to see principals exclusively as instructional leaders who dedicate most of their time and energy offering pedagogical support to teachers in their classrooms are not applicable - nor desirable - for this more complex and conflictive reality. A model of an orchestrating leader that is able to mobilize processes and teams to respond to the diverse dimensions of the educational endeavor, including of course pedagogy, seems much more fitting to the Latin American reality.

The evolution of education in Chile over the past decades has included a strong role of the private sector. Publicly funded private schools have become the majority, while private universities have also expanded significantly. What are key contributions and risks you see in the participation of private providers in education?

Chile was indeed a kind of laboratory country where Milton Friedman’s thesis on the supposed benefits of competition on education matters was tested. Under Pinochet,
there was a double movement that favored the expansion of private providers. First, public education was “balkanized” with schools being transferred from the national ministry of education to over 300 municipalities with extremely weak capacity. Secondly, very favorable conditions were created for the development of private provision with public resources (the funding system equalized the allocation for public and private providers, while the latter had much fewer restrictions for their operation). A similar movement took place in higher education: the great State-owned national universities were fragmented, creating diminished regional universities, while new private universities were offered very favorable conditions to enter the system.

Since the return to democracy in the 1990s, governments have strived to gradually increase the regulatory attributions of the State and have promoted initiatives in favor of public education, but without changing the existing model of mixed provision and without eliminating the logic of competition, which has strengthened the private sector. Indeed, enrollment rates show crudely the gradual decrease in public education and the steady increase in participation of the private sector. In particular, publicly funded private schools have become a preferred choice for the middle class, while municipal schools have become the spaces receiving students from low income families.

Broadly speaking, the greatest accomplishment of this system has been the generation of increased educational supply at all levels of schooling, which has contributed to the growing access and retention of children and youth in the educational system – even reaching the level of other OECD countries. The counterface is that competition has led to an acute social segmentation, with schools and universities that serve almost exclusively some groups according to their social status and their capacity to pay. Privatization and segmentation have gone hand in hand. One thing that our education today is not, is a space and an opportunity for social conviviality, where children and youth from different social origins know and share each other and grow together. This is damaging for our educational present, but also worrisome for our future as a society.

For these reasons a shift is required in the area of social inclusion, which involves a redefinition of the role of the State as guarantor of the right of all to quality education, as well as the strengthening of public education and an adequate regulation of the quality of education offered by all providers, both public and private. On the theme of privatization, as in many others, Chile will have to create its own path to continue its educational progress, taking ownership of the dark sides of its development but without losing sight of what has been accomplished. In the coming years, teachers and principals will have to be the key protagonists of education improvement in Chile.
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