Recent school improvement trends in Chile: the case of SEP policy.

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Abstract

This study describes and examines changes within schools driven by improvement projects associated with the recent implementation of a financing and improvement policy for schools serving disadvantage population in Chile known as SEP. Ten case study reports that describe in-depth transformation in schools based on interviews of school staff and parents, generated by a government evaluation of the policy were used. Seven transformation trends were identified including: increase and/or renovation of education supplies, growth of school's professional teams, introduction of external technical assistance, focus on essentials along with holistic development effort, inefficacy assumptions being tinged by higher learning expectations and several changes with respect to teachers. It is argued that although schools may have improved important limitations in the transformation process can be identified.

Introduction

Educational policy in Chile has been striving for many years to improve overall results and equity. Although Chilean school system[1] has successfully increased average learning achievement in recent years, (OECD, 2010a) it has not reach a satisfactory performance and maintains unusually high levels of inequality (OECD, 2010b; Chang-Tai & Urquiola, 2006).

In order to address this lack of performance and equity problem, in 2008 the government began implementing a preferential subvention law[2] and a resulting financing and school improvement policy known as SEP for its acronym in Spanish[3]. SEP works by providing additional funding to schools where students from socially disadvantaged households

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[1] Chile's school systems stand out for its market like design, public funding through a voucher system, centrality parental choice, and important participation of private sector, a national curriculum and centrally run standardized test to assess performance.

[2] Law N°20.248.
[3] Subvención escolar preferencial.

attend; requiring those units to use the extra funding to design and carry out comprehensive improvement projects (IP) in the areas of leadership, curricular management, school climate and pupils support and resources management; while placing restrictions to student selection and exclusion based on scholastic potential or achievement and making schools administrators accountable for the use of those funds among other measures (Candia, Castillo, & Labra, 2011b).

As with a previous school improvement local policy (Carrasco, 2010) SEP relied strongly on the school effectiveness research paradigm, particularly a "best practice" approach that originally lead to the introduction of standardized actions, goals and priorities in school's improvement projects.

The SEP policy was implemented rather suddenly in the school system, with the inclusion 6.479 schools (77% of eligible schools) in year 2008, reaching 7.370 participant schools in year 2012 (83% of eligible schools), thus it plays an essential part of Chile's current school system.

The aim of this study is to describe changes within schools associated with SEP´s IP and to examine the educational relevance of those transformations.

Framework

This study is based on the notion of schools as complex organizations and draws on key concepts related to school improvement and change.

Schools' complexity

When studding schools, it is appropriate to bear in mind that as organizations they are far from trivial. A school can be regarded as complex specialized social systems. Its complexity is given first of all, by its organizational nature itself, that is, it involves aspects such as conditions for admission and continuance of membership, being a self-observing system, organizational culture and climate, leadership, etc. (Rodriguez, 1995; Van Houtte, 2005, Teddlie, 2008).

School's complexity also derives from its singularity as an organization, that is, its specialization in the provision of highly structured learning experiences through deliberately planned interactions that foster accelerated learning (HMIe, 2006), an activity that, in order to be successful, demands the collaborative work of highly skilled and experienced professionals from the field of pedagogy (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, Sahlberg, 2011). Besides the sophisticated process that is needed for learning to take place, a school brings together a diverse community in which each member faces a common educational challenge from a peculiar standpoint, with different expectations and needs, with a distinctive meaning of educational success (Candia, Castillo, & Labra, 2011a).

Another source of complexity for schools as organizations is the environment in which they operate. In a broad sense, schools face an unusually demanding societal setting. Schooling is strategic and the solving of any major social, economic, political or cultural problem will most likely create additional demands from schools at some point. In a restricted sense, a school's immediate context can have and intricate configuration in itself: a territory, a city, a community with a history, traditions and particular conditions, local authorities, related actors and organizations, etc. When that immediate context is a socially disadvantaged community --- as opposed to a more privileged one – it only adds up to school's environmental complexity due to socioeconomic deprivation and cultural constraints, as shown by an abundant research literature on challenged schools (Carrasco, 2010; Harris, 2006; González, Mizala, & Romaguera, 2002; Bellei et al., 2004).

School improvement

The concept of school improvement has been enriched by an intense research agenda and it possesses various sides and meanings; it is "immensely complicated" as Stoll (2009) remarks. Considering that schools provide comprehensive learning experiences, school improvement can be regarded as process of transformation that makes those experiences more appropriate, more meaningful, and more effective in terms of pupil's learning achievement.

The original orientation of school effectiveness research (SER) was that of describing characteristics of effective schools, thus within this paradigm, school improvement stands as the acquisition of those characteristics. According to Murillo (2003) research literature agrees in describing effective schools as units oriented towards learning with shared achievement goals, high expectations and professional leadership; where the curricula are implemented through planned and structured teaching and strategic classroom management; students' learning achievements are monitored by testing; the school environment favors learning that includes involved parents; and where professional development of the staff combines with better equipment and didactical resources. However, this line of research has not been as informative on how schools change actually occurs or the dynamic aspect of schools as organizations (Harris, 2001). School improvement research (SIR) in contrast, has focused on the process of transformation itself, defining school improvement as the educational change strategy that improves student's achievements and empowers school's capacity for self-renovation (Hopkins, 1996).

In the analysis of schools' improvement process some specific key concepts stand out in the research literature. The concept of leverage identifies strategies that maximize results with minimum effort; in effective schools that mobilize intellectual and social capital to achieve desired education outcomes, improving schools successfully learn to use higher leverage strategies (Hargreaves, 2001).

Another rich and suggestive concept on school improvement is that of *professional learning communities* (PLC), referring to reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented practices in schools (Stoll, et al., 2006) where individuals collectively reflect and renew their practice (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) have recently argued that PLC comprises three aspects: communities (steady groups and relationships, collectively responsible for a common educational purpose), learning (commitment to improve students' learning, well-being and achievement) and professionalism (improvement is informed by evidence and guided by experienced collective judgment).

Despite the level of internal collaboration, is not desirable for improvement when schools operate in isolation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Correspondingly, school improvement relates to school to school learning networks that "enlarge individual schools' repertoire of choices, moving ideas and good practice around the system" (Stoll & Temperley, 2009) and connects schools with other sources of knowledge, experience, goods or services (Carnoy, Gove, & Marshall, 2007).The concept of leadership is inherent to the analysis of school effectiveness and improvement. Particular attention has been given in research literature to distributed leadership. According to Harris (2012) engaging many individuals within school in leadership practice as opposed to relying on few people at the top, is more about the interaction of many leaders rather than actions of an individual leader, it can be promoted, not mandated. This particular form of leadership has been regarded as critical to secure sustainable improvement in schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Data and methods

This study uses information gathered in the 2011 school year by an evaluation study of the initial implementation of SEP (Irarrázaval   et al. 2012) that Chilean Finance Ministry commissioned to Centro de Políticas Públicas at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

The aim of this evaluation was provide an in-depth analysis of SEP's results within schools, specifically seeking to report installation, intermediate, final and unexpected results while describing related processes within schools. The study combined three data gathering strategies: the application of a closed questionnaire to a representative sample of 322 schools, the analysis of administrative data available at Education Ministry and the carrying out a case studies in ten establishments, which produced the information that was analyzed here.

Each case study consisted of the application of various qualitative data gathering techniques, specifically, semi structured interviews of the school administrator and a member of the leadership staff respectively while two group interviews were conducted, one with teacher and one with parents. Interview guidelines included several questions

about SEP's installation in the school addressing aspects such SEP obligations to schools, IP, improvements actions and processes (what was done and how), and involved actor's attitudes and roles. The instruments were developed by the research team and validated by experts and were conducted by experienced interviewers. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for text coding analysis, based on predetermined and emergent categories (Irarrázaval et al. p. 12).

The universe for this case's study was restricted to schools that had been carrying out an IP for at least a year. This condition normally applied to schools that joined the policy by year 2008 up until early 2009. The selection of these 10 cases studies used criteria that ensured the observation of different types units in the SEP population of schools, that is, schools that operate in different conditions. These conditions include the type of administration (municipal and private subsidized), historic performance in student's achievement standardized testing (high and low performance) and social vulnerability (proportion of enrolled students from poor households). Observations took place in Metropolitana and Biobío regions, with the highest concentration of Chilean of schools and each case came from a different municipality. A case report was prepared for each school and used as input to the present study[4].

Preliminary results

A systematic analysis of case reports, lead to the identification of seven common transformations among schools associated with the implementation of SEP IP described next.

1) Increase and or renovation of education supplies

A common transformation is the introduction of several types of educational materials, either replacing dysfunctional old ones or as additions to the school's means. These include: classrooms equipment (slides projector, interactive whiteboard, furniture, heating systems); gadgets (photocopier, personal computers, screens, audio equipment); didactical material (textbooks, books collections); office supplies (paper, ink); and even school uniforms for students.

This material renovation is highly valued by school staff. It is seen by teachers as a relief and normally there follows a high degree of satisfaction within the whole school community. A shared assumption is that new education supplies improve the quality of teaching, for instance making classes more dynamic and stimulating. Moreover, some teachers perceive previous lack of those means as a fundamental problem with their teaching or the most serious limitation the school had.

Seldom do teachers express doubts about the pertinence of the school material gains with SEP; rather the common trend is to passively accept education supplies purchases as appropriate per se, perhaps overrating their potential contribution.

2) *Growth of school´s professional teams*

A common observable transformation associated with SEP involves at least three kinds of staffing. First, the enlargement of teaching force through the hiring of assistant professors or class aids. Secondly, the hiring of education specialists from disciplines such as special education, psycopedagogy, language education, curricular implementation or for specific functions such as pedagogical advice, workshop monitoring or maintaining an appropriate school climate. Thirdly, there is the hiring of specialist from non-educational backgrounds such as psychology, social work, and language therapy.

Additions to school staff are typically highly valued for school members, and unanimously seen as improvement, either because schools receive sufficient personnel in order to function properly or because schools acquire previously unavailable specialized aid.

The addition of non-education professionals to the school workforce typically takes the form of the individual specialist working with students experiencing difficulty with school work. This implies that the lack of school achievement arises exclusively from the conditions of students that fall outside the realm of teaching. The underlying assumption seems to be "there is someone out there that knows; they can come in and fix it."

The integration of specialized teachers can take the interventionist form of assigning this professional to a pedagogic leadership role and the teacher formerly in charge of a class becomes and assistant.

3) *Introduction of external technical assistance*

The reviewed cases show the introduction of external technical assistance on scholastic matters as a common trend in the implementation of a school's IP. External technical support is normally provided by an organization (or person) - locally known as ATE for its acronym in Spanish - that claims expertise in one or several internal processes.

ATEs have been assigned diverse tasks including: supporting school staff in the elaboration a school's diagnosis over which IP were formulated; assessing students' learning achievements; assisting the implementation of the school's reading project;

teacher training; provision of pedagogical advice, even assuming a technical leadership position.

There are conflicting views on the performance and contribution to school improvement of ATEs among schools' professional teams. For some, external technical assistance has been unsuitable, because of lack of experience, unspecific and irrelevant work, ambiguous advice, or not meeting the expectations about their intervention. For others, external technical assistance has allowed them to become more aware of their professional practice.

The available evidence suggests that this sort of service is being hired directly by the school's administrators and then introduced into schools.

4) Focus on essentials along with holistic development effort

Case reports document a somewhat contradictory trend in SEP schools in terms educational experiences the students are offered; focus on basic competences coexists with activities that considered the child as a whole.

On the one hand, following best practices suggested in IP forms originally used by schools, the implementation of "reading projects" was designed to enhance acquisition of this basic skill of children. Reading projects involve a set of coordinated actions between teachers within schools, including daily reading time and the monitoring of pupil's reading progress. There is also evidence that shows schools taking part in a municipality-wide reading project and an active role of external technical support (ATE) directly assessing reading progress.

Also in relation to the development of basic curricular competencies, some of the evidence suggests that SEP schools have been introducing – with the aid of their larger staff - remedial actions for students experimenting difficulty such as remedial workshops and customized individual plans.

On the other hand, SEP schools, as part of their IPs, have adopted as common practice carrying out workshops addressing a variety of personal interests. These workshops involve sports and arts, particularly soccer and music, and even cooking, foreign language or information technology, and seem to have strong material provisions. In one case, the idea for art and sport workshop arose from listening to the needs of children while designing IPs. Some schools have developed a strategic use for workshops to relate to parents by having them taking part in sports workshop, for instance, or placing participation of student as an award for proper school behavior.

This sort of workshop, typically referred to as "extracurricular," are highly valued by teacher as they claim to improve student's behavior and motivation, the overall school climate, and even unearth children's potential. Along with workshops, recreation

activities such as celebrations, breakfast (sometime with the parents) or trips have been introduced, also used as incentives and claimed to improve school climate.

With respect to the strategic use of extracurricular resources, case reports show that some schools are even implementing individual incentive policies for performance in standardized testing evaluation and/or attendance. These awards may include incentives such as gifts or trips. The logic behind these incentives policies is to foster student academic performance and behaviors through desire (or fear of losing) something "outside" of school.

In sum, SEP schools have become more active both in developing basic curriculum and cultivating integral personal development, sometimes finding a strategic link between these curricular and extracurricular areas.

5) Teachers facing detailed curriculum planning, training and collaborative work

Case reports show that SEP IP have introduced or strengthened three incipient habits affecting what teachers do in schools:

First of all, we observe a unanimous introduction of detailed curriculum planning including scheduling of classes for the whole school year and designing individual classes. This followed the best practice suggested to schools for their IP forms. Unusually, designs of learning experience include field trips previously inaccessible because of its cost.

Secondly, case reports inform about teacher training efforts in areas such as curriculum and information technology, which takes the form of a systematic effort, lead by external technical assistance. In general, school professional teams are distrustful of teacher training efforts and sometimes regard them as either ineffective or insufficient.

Thirdly, despite the fact some teachers feel excluded from improvement planning, case reports show how learning improvement challenges have demanded teachers to work collaboratively in teams to form agreements, share resources and experiences, make collective decisions about educational matters and monitor and coordinate improvement efforts.

6) Inefficacy assumptions being tinged by higher learning expectations

While strong assumptions about the inefficacy of educating children from socially disadvantaged areas persist in some school communities, case reports show that the experience of putting into practice IPs leads to traces of a culture where school improvement and greater student learning achievement are perceived as plausible and

where schools do have a crucial part in educational failure or success. This even leads some to raise educational challenge expectations faced by students, as one case report informs. It is not uncommon among schools professional teams to identify learning expectations with specific goals or score thresholds in the national standardized test SIMCE.

7) Intensified work and pressure as key drivers of change

Case reports suggest the intensification of labor as a common feature in the process of school improvement. Teachers and leadership staff typically have seen the formulation of IP as a burdensome process; its implementation have lead to additional functions, even non-educational bureaucratic tasks leading to considerable work overload in some cases. Additionally, professional teams at SEP schools share feelings of intense pressure for measureable increased learning results, in the form of either externally introduced or self-imposed achievement goals. The feeling of pressure accompanies fear of their school being unfairly labeled as underperforming. The former suggests school communities may be exaggerating the benefits of harder work and pressure in order to improve education performance, or that they are interpreting education improvement mainly as a request to work harder.

In fact, the heavy reliance on hard work and pressure as drivers of transformation in SEP schools is a matter of concern because school team members reveal to be suffering from stress and exhaustion, which limits results.

The analysis of IP case reports provides a few hints of why this may be the case. Some SEP school communities undertake their improvement effort in an environment of mistrust among school administrators, leadership staff, teachers and parents. Others implement their IPs with a school administrator marginally involved with the school's professional teams and educational process; this distance leads them select and impose external educational improvement solutions, alien to their members.

Discussion

In general, there exist gains for SEP schools in carrying out their IPs: they have become better equipped organizations materially and professionally, have acquired effective school attributes and have enhanced their capacity for self-renovation. However, important limitations can be pointed out in the transformations trends identified by this study.

While higher learning expectations are introduced during the IP process, strong assumptions about the inefficacy of education for disadvantaged students hold in school communities, even among school leaders.

The increase and or renovation of education supplies is a necessary but not sufficient condition; school educations do need didactical resources and they may also perform an important symbolic function for the school community. However, material supplies can distract attention from more fundamental transformations of the quality of professional practice, so they are a rather superficial transformation.

Growth of schools´ professional teams can be regarded as improvement. All organizations need sufficient staff, and specialized organizations need specialized staff. Besides, increased individual professional capacities can allow for better adaptation in a challenging environment. But, the inorganic integration of professional teams, with the specialist working in isolation with trouble kids, fails to change key school processes.

The introduction of external technical assistants has potential to change key school process; however, its introduction to the school as a decontextualized, unsteady and inexperienced alien program emanating from the unilateral decision of a distant school administrator jeopardizes its potential to redefine the operation of a school as a professional learning community.

The use of rigorous curriculum planning is a key element of effective schools. But, if it is performed as individual bureaucratic compliance, curriculum planning has limited potential to redefined relevant learning experiences for students. Introducing or reinforcing collective work of the schools professionals that allows reflection and renovation of practices will improve schools, if sustained. However, this is a rather incipient and perhaps unused course of action.

SEP IPs should focus on essentials along with holistic development effort; while it is essential that students read, human potential goes well beyond basic curricular competences. Nevertheless, considering the whole child doesn't necessarily aid the improvement of professional judgment of school teams.

Finally, overrating the virtue of harder work and pressure for its own sake not only jeopardizes improvement achievements but threatens to deteriorate the functioning of the school community.

In sum, SEP school improvement efforts are characterized as an attempt by schools to walk the easiest path, with school authorities hoping to find quick fixes then choosing of courses of action that produce visible results but do not challenge key school professional processes. Other possible courses of action such as cooperation between schools are conspicuously absent.

As a final word, the transformation trends that have been identified here should be regarded as preliminary, as they need to be confirmed by farther research efforts on SEP. Nevertheless, these preliminary finding do have strong implications for the conduction of national improvement policy.

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