



School administrators' understandings and management of barriers for the school's involvement in the practicum component of initial teacher education in Chile



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ABSTRACT

Worldwide governments are seeking to transform initial teacher education by increasing the quality of practicum experiences in school settings. This paper analyzes the barriers school administrators from Chile identified for their schools' involvement in the practicum scheme. Data were produced through a survey ($N=172$) and in-depth interviews ($N=51$) with administrators in schools hosting teacher candidates. Few participants (4%) identified barriers implicating a sense of shared school–university responsibility for the success of the practicum. About a third of the barriers identified pertain to within school factors, such as teachers' and parents' reluctance to host candidates. From these administrator's perspectives, a distance with the host school is produced through a number of factors attributed to the universities' curricula and management. Administrators manage this distance to leverage better learning opportunities for their school's pupils, for prospective teachers, and for the school staff. Findings contribute to the discussion of policies and practices to strengthen school–university partnerships, highlighting the importance of including school administrators as key contributors.

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1. Introduction

Governments across the world are implementing policies to enhance teacher qualifications, a key factor for raising educational achievement (Musset, 2010). In the context of initial teacher education, policymakers and teacher educators advocate that teacher candidates spend more time learning to teach in schools and less time at the university campus (e.g., in the United States, see Darling-Hammond (2006); in Turkey, see Kavak and Baskan (2009); in South Africa, see Mutemeri and Chetty (2011); in England, see McNamara et al. (2014); in The Netherlands, see Stokking et al. (2003); in China, see Wang and Clarke (2014)). In Chile, the report of the Panel de Expertos para una Educación de Calidad (2010) convened by the government to make recommendations for improving initial teacher education suggested adding accreditation requirements to guarantee university–school partnerships for the practicum component of the curriculum. Provisions to develop policies that support such networks were

not recommended – an aspect deemed essential for successful partnerships (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), 2010).

In Chile initial teacher education (ITE) is located in institutions of higher education. Most programs use a concurrent model by which disciplinary subject matter, educational, and professional contents are studied throughout 8–10 semesters of coursework. The mandatory accreditation framework for teacher education programs requires a sequence of practicum experiences culminating in student teaching during the last semester. Each university develops its own scheme to place teacher candidates and decides on the number of days, hours, and tasks candidates must complete in the school.

Supervisors and cooperating teachers are all certified in the teaching credential the teacher candidate is pursuing. They may receive some preparation offered by each university, but there are no accreditation provisions requiring them to be formally trained. Whereas university practicum instructors are typically selected and hired by the programs, cooperating teachers most often volunteer or are assigned by a school administrator. In either case, teachers rarely receive payment for their work in the practicum. Each program, depending on the practicum course, defines the roles of university-based practicum supervisors and cooperating

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teachers. For example, for student teaching, university supervisors might visit the schools two to three times in the semester, but candidates in an initial field experience will not receive in-school supervision.

Over the last three years, we conducted a research program to understand schoolteachers' and administrators' perspectives on their involvement in the ITE practicum scheme. In the current paper, we draw from data obtained through a survey and in-depth interviews with administrators in Chilean schools hosting teacher candidates. More specifically, this paper examines the main barriers identified for their schools' involvement in the practicum and how administrators manage these barriers. As universities move more of the ITE curriculum to the schools, it is important to understand the extent to which school administrators are interested and committed to adding to their school's workload responsibilities for the practicum.

School administrators' practices have received wide attention in the school improvement literature as educational systems have become decentralized with increased centrally controlled accountability (Hall, 2013). Principals must be mindful of implementing personnel and resource allocation practices that can leverage instructional improvement (Hornig and Loeb, 2010). In the literature on the ITE practicum, however, very few studies have examined how principals manage their schools' involvement in the practicum (Le Cornu, 2012; Varrati et al., 2009). This is somewhat surprising considering that teacher candidates' presence in schools requires allocation of personnel and resources. Taking a close look at how school administrators understand and manage the participation of teacher candidates can provide universities with information to negotiate partnering schemes and feedback for program improvement. Understanding principals' visions for the participation of practicum candidates may inform the design of a practicum curriculum that meets schools' needs as school practitioners share responsibilities for initial teacher preparation.

2. Persistent problems in school–university collaboration for initial teacher preparation

As schools and universities in Chile and elsewhere respond to policymakers' recommendations for the development of partnerships, it is important to consider the complexities such partnerships entail. Insufficient structures and resources to support partnerships, insufficient financial incentives for school-based teacher educators, unclear roles and preparation to enact those roles present important challenges (Bartholomew and Sandholtz, 2009; Brisard et al., 2006; Haciomeroglu, 2013; Mutemeri and Chetty, 2011; Robinson, 2014). Differences in the organizational culture of schools and universities and the types of expertise valued in each setting have fostered tensions between school-based and university-based teacher educators (Zeichner et al., 2012). Successful partnerships overcome these tensions by establishing relationships based on trust and shared goals (Leonard et al., 2004). In these partnerships, school and district level administrators support cooperating teachers' work with university faculty and candidates, coordinating initiatives that promote simultaneous improvement of schools and teacher education programs.

Placing teacher candidates in schools will not by itself create highly qualified teachers (Musset, 2010; Tigchelaar and Korthagen, 2004; Zeichner, 2006). Foster et al. (2010) provide an extensive review of the literature on the practicum, identifying five recurring weaknesses in how this curricular component has been designed and implemented: (a) lack of articulation between campus-based and practicum coursework, (b) wide range of practicum curriculum, with great diversity within universities and among universities, (c) persistent theory–practice gap between the university-

based coursework and the daily work of teachers, (d) inadequate communication and collaboration structures among the various participants, and (e) lack of a clear and coherent supervisory model to guide the mentorship process. These weaknesses have been shown to have detrimental effects on prospective teachers' learning (Akyeampong et al., 2013; Anderson and Stillman, 2013; Chambers and Armour, 2011; LaBoskey and Richert, 2002; Mutemeri and Chetty, 2011; Wang and Clarke, 2014).

From our review of the international literature, we identified an additional recurring problem related to the selection of schools serving as practicum sites. This seems particularly salient in countries that have yet to develop a structure and culture of collaboration to support the joint work of preparing new teachers (Mukeredzi, 2014; Wang and Clarke, 2014). The challenge of finding suitable placements is compounded in countries with an educational system evidencing inequitable access to pedagogical and social opportunities. Robinson (2014) discusses this challenge in the South African context, as candidates felt insecure in unfamiliar locations and resisted placement in schools experiencing challenges associated with pupils' social exclusion. Teacher educators expressed concern with placing student teachers in under performing schools when adequate support was not feasible but recognized that teacher candidates needed to be prepared to work in all contexts.

In Chile there are four types of schools, according to their administrative dependency: public schools administered by municipal governments, private schools receiving an attendance-based per pupil subsidy from the state, private schools fully funded by parents, and public schools administered by corporations also financed with a state subsidy. All schools must follow a national curriculum and must participate on the national assessment system. Only public schools are legally forbidden to select students and to charge tuition.

In the 2000 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Chile showed one of the largest opportunity gaps as a function of pupils' social class (cited in Valencia and Taut, 2011) – a trend confirmed in subsequent PISA findings. This gap is associated with a school system segregated by social class. In 2006, 39% of students in public schools were growing up in social vulnerability, compared with only 9% of students in private subsidized schools (70% of which charged additional tuition) and none in private non-subsidized schools (García-Huidobro, 2007). By 2009, 80% of students in public schools were from low-income or middle-low socioeconomic backgrounds, with this percentage reaching 20% in private subsidized schools and 0% in schools fully funded by parents (García-Huidobro, 2010).

Finding appropriate school partners is also challenging in countries that have yet to develop a homogeneous, high quality teaching force across all schools. In Chile the expectation has been that supply and demand market forces will regulate the quality of ITE; however, the evidence shows important quality disparities among universities (Cox et al., 2010; Labra and Fuentealba, 2012). Moreover, teachers coming from low quality teacher preparation programs end up teaching in schools serving low socioeconomic communities (Ortúzar et al., 2009). Low quality teacher preparation programs present a challenge for schools hosting the practicum. Under prepared candidates will more likely be perceived as a burden and as potential risks to the school's achievement on national standardized testing systems (Wang and Clarke, 2014).

2.1. School administrators' responses to the practicum

The school improvement literature has highlighted school principals and other senior level administrators as instructional leaders who ensure conditions for high quality instruction and

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