

Equity in education in Chile: The tensions between policy and practice

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Abstract

The article examines education policy in Chile after the return to democracy in 1990 from an equity perspective. Since then, policies have aimed for continuity, coherence and complementarity with the aim of furthering national development, promoting social mobility, and equitable access to quality education at all levels. However, Chile faces the challenge of implementing equity-oriented policies within the legal confines of an education system constructed under the neoliberal model which was introduced by the military government (1973–1990). This has resulted in tensions between policy and practice, which have constrained the role of the state in a highly marketised system in its efforts to distribute quality education more equitably.

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Keywords: Equity; Comparative education; Educational policy; Private education; Public education

1. Introduction

Since the return to democracy in Chile in 1990, education has occupied a prominent place in political debate; it has been the focus of policy initiatives relating to national development; and public investment in resources and infrastructure has steadily increased at all levels of the education system. This has been made possible through a series of incremental reforms co-financed by the Chilean government and the World Bank, which were implemented between 1990 and 2003, with the aim of improving the quality of education as a prerequisite for economic growth and social cohesion. Over the three successive governments of the centre-left coalition, the Concertación, considerable

importance has been attached to ensuring equality of opportunity at all levels of education. In particular, government policies have specifically identified the promotion of equity as a key aim to be achieved by improving the quality of provision, and increasing retention and progression through the education system. In the context of this article, equity in education is understood as referring to fairness and it is furthered through active interventions through public policy in order to end discrimination and other forms of disadvantage.¹ An equity-oriented approach requires that the needs

¹Educational disadvantages in Chile are linked to household vulnerability and poverty, race and ethnicity, disability or special educational needs, and geographical location resulting in limited access to good schools. While recognising that all forms of disadvantage are inequitable, this article will focus solely on the socioeconomic aspects as reflected in the type of school attended and the income levels of the students' households.

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and circumstances of particular groups be taken into account when planning initiatives and compensatory mechanisms in order to level the playing field. Furthermore, such an approach requires the state to assume a steering role for meeting the basic learning needs of all students, including the most socially deprived children. This involves the provision of additional resources, changes in the allocation of existing resources, and the generation of innovative policies to promote change. Finally, an equity-oriented approach recognises that socio-economic and cultural inequalities beyond the school environment cause disadvantage to children (Samoff, 1996; Schiefelbein, 1998; Espinosa, 2002). Depending on the policies implemented and the level of political will for change, these disadvantages can be reduced or reinforced by the education system itself.

Chile began its reforms with several notable advantages over many Latin American countries. Universal primary education was achieved by the mid-1960s and, by the end of the 20th century, participation at secondary level had reached 87%, and pre-school coverage stood at 30.3% (Delannoy, 2000). Under the Concertación governments, there have been some notable successes in terms of access and participation particularly among the poorest pupils, with formal education extended to 12 years of compulsory study since 2003 (8 at primary and 4 at secondary level) and over one-third of the eligible age group continuing on to higher education. However, as this article demonstrates, a high-quality education remains an elusive aspiration for the majority of children and the educational “good” which is distributed is far from standard in Chile. Even more vexing is the fact that despite increased and sustained investment in education, the achievement gap between income groups and between the different school types is widening. It is widely accepted that the causes of inequity in education are multiple, complex and deep-rooted and that solutions cannot be simplistic or one-dimensional. Some factors are endogenous and relate to deficiencies within the education system, such as inappropriate and outdated teaching methods, an irrelevant curriculum, over-crowding and high student–teacher ratios; others are exogenous and relate to the low levels of cultural capital in the home environment, poverty, and low aspirations. Many of these factors are relevant in the Chilean case, but this article proposes a further issue for consideration. It is the tension inherent in implementing policies

which aim to promote equity within a market-oriented education system, which is supported by a legislative framework that constrains policy changes that might depart from a neoliberal model. These tensions are manifested in two related areas which form the basis of analysis in this article.

First of these is the blurring of boundaries between the public and private sectors in terms of the provision and financing of education. Despite the overall increases in public expenditure on education since 1990, private investment has grown as a proportion of the total spending. This has arisen as a result of the introduction of funding mechanisms which allow parental contributions to municipal and private schools in receipt of state subsidy, and also from the shift in student numbers from state to privately run schools. Today, the numbers enrolled in privately run schools continue to grow at the expense of the municipal sector so that in 2005, half of all children in Chile were educated in privately run schools. The second area of tension is found in the growing stratification of the education system by social class and the stark variations in the quality of education received depending on socio-economic background and the type of school attended. This situation is clearly inequitable and discriminatory because student achievement does not reflect academic ability but family economics. This situation adversely impacts on the preparedness of low-income students in the state-funded schools for entry into the labour market and progression through to higher education. In the medium and long term, this has stark implications for the government’s stated goals of promoting social mobility and overcoming poverty through education.

2. Methods and data

The primary source materials and data used in this study were drawn mainly from official sources which compile statistical information on the education sector as a whole and on individual schools. The data are collected on an annual basis by the Department of Research and Development,² which is located within the Planning and Budgets Division³ of the Ministry of Education. Hard data on institutional funding levels, teaching staff, student numbers and enrolment rates are collated and a

²Departamento de Estudios y Desarrollo.

³División de Planificación y Presupuesto.

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