

# How young teachers experience their professional work in Chile<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper presents results from a qualitative study of 15 neophyte teachers in Chile who were part of a survey of 242 teachers in two geographical regions of the country. They were studied on the basis of questionnaires, interviews, observations and focus groups, all of which served to examine their teaching contexts and working conditions, how they recalled beginning to teach and its problems, their views about their profession and their work at the time of the study. The findings show interesting variations to those themes identified in the literature such as building of professional identity, their socialisation into schools, the relative weights of initial teacher education and experience, and the lack of support as they begin to teach.

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## 1. Introduction

After more than a decade of educational reform in Chile concerns about inadequate student results in national and international assessments, is prompting a reconsideration of the role of teachers. One recent initiative has been the establishment of a system of teacher evaluation, together with actions to improve the quality of teacher education.

Between 1997 and 2002 the government funded a comprehensive set of projects designed to strengthen teacher education through a centrally directed programme known as *Fortalecimiento de la Forma-*

*ción Inicial Docente* (FFID). While it is too early to assess the effects of FFID on new teacher performance, there is the need to establish a comparative basis for different generations of teachers. Yet only a few studies in Chile have targeted young teachers. These are for the most part, studies by teacher training institutions that trace the perceptions of their own graduates (Fleming & Liñero, 2003; Morgan, Pino, Hidalgo, & Sandoval, 2002; Rodríguez, 1996). As 65 per cent of Chilean teachers are over 40 years of age (OECD, 2004), and will be gradually replaced by new recruits, learning about the younger generation of teachers and their potential to become better professionals in the future is vital.

The study on which this paper is based was designed to fulfil the above needs. Its objective was to explore the professional experiences of young

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teachers with three or less years of teaching, by examining their perceptions of their initial teaching experience and their current view of themselves. The study was structured as a survey of 242 teachers and a qualitative study of 15 of these teachers. The survey's sample was drawn from teachers located in schools of all levels (K-12) in urban and rural locations in the two of Chile's administrative Regions. It was undertaken over 2 years, 2003–2004.

This initial paper concentrates on the qualitative study of 15 teachers, with occasional references to background information provided by the survey study. It deals with the following issues:

- Entry into teaching—how does it occur and how was it experienced?
- How do teachers recall the process of “settling in” and the difficulties encountered? How did they deal with these problems?
- How do they describe their current working conditions? What does it mean to be working in different contexts/environments? How satisfactory or demanding is this situation?
- How do they judge the value of their teacher education and their professional experience as learning factors?
- In their current state (3 years along the road) what is their view of the future?

## 2. Conceptual notes

Several strands of research on teachers are relevant for this study. Perhaps the most comprehensive strand refers to professional socialisation and identity building; more concretely the processes by which new teachers come to feel less as strangers and more a part of the teaching and school community (Corley, 1998; Sabar, 2004 quoting the sociologist Alfred Schutz). This process is closely related to the kind of teaching community or teaching/school culture encountered by the new teacher (Hargreaves, 1993; Kardos, 2003); and by their experiences of professional cultures as they move from one environment to another. The “learning to teach” literature explores how teachers build on their more or less fragile conception of what teaching is about and how they use their “bag of tools” in their first teaching environments. This literature also examines how new teachers invent strategies to cope with new situations or problems (Hargreaves, 1993; Lacey, 1995; Zeichner & Gore,

1990) as well as the formal or informal support mechanisms that they find on the way. Also relevant are studies that address the nature of professional knowledge and how new teachers build their own (Eraut, 1994; Carter in Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001), and those dealing with induction (cf. Britton, Paine, Pimm, & Raizen, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, Schulle, Carver, & Yusko, 1999). Classic and more recent literature describes the stages through which beginning teachers travel before they reach some form of stability after 3–5 years of experience (Berliner, 1995; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Huberman, Gonauer, & Marti, 1993; Pigge & Marso, 1997). It should be noted that other studies challenge the concept of natural “growth” stages, considering the process to be more complex with changes or strategic adaptations occurring for different reasons. Amongst these are relations with students and their effect on breaking an internalised structure and causing identity changes (Conway & Clarke, 2003; Nias, 1985; Riseborough, 1985; Watzke, 2003).

## 3. The Chilean education context

Compulsory schooling in Chile comprises 8 years of Basic Education (ages 6–13) and 4 years of Middle or Secondary Education (ages 14–17) delivered in three types of institutions: public schools under municipal governance (51 per cent), privately owned but publicly subsidised schools (41 per cent) and wholly private schools (8 per cent). The system is clearly stratified as students who attend municipal schools in general belong to the low and middle low-income groups, while those in wholly private schools belong to the highest income group. The remaining middle and upper-middle group generally attends private subsidised schools. Pre-school education is not compulsory but around 7.9 per cent of the total school enrolment is found in diverse types of preschools (public or private). While there are still a number of schools (mostly municipal) that operate on a two-shift basis, the last 9 years has seen the gradual conversion of municipal schools to a whole-day scheme. This has meant lengthening the school day from six 45-min periods to 8 periods. Teachers may be contracted as full time (44 periods of 45 min per week), or for 30 or less actual weekly periods. There is a fixed salary scheme that applies to all municipal and private subsidised school teachers, but only municipal teachers may get agreed bonuses and other salary

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