

The Paradox of Education in Chile

By Ariel Fiszbein and Emiliana Vegas

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A strange feeling of surprise and confusion afflicts the world of education policy in Latin America. Chile, the country that for many years was perceived as the champion of educational progress is now undergoing a profound debate on the future of its education system. The intensity of the debate questions whether we have been wrong in our admiration and suddenly awakened to a more negative reality. Fortunately, the nightmare is not so. The Chilean education system has had important achievements, much higher than the rest of the systems in our continent. For example, today the majority of Chilean children can expect to finish at least 12 years of education, which is much more than the average in the rest of the region. In OECD's PISA Test 2012, Chilean students stood out among the students of the region, achieving higher scores than their peers from the other seven countries that participated. Furthermore, Chile's PISA results since 2000 have improved, especially until 2009.

But Chile wants to be a developed country and is not satisfied with only comparing results with its neighbors. Its role models are the most developed countries who are fellow members of the OECD group. In this group, the Chilean education system leaves much to be desired. In fact, among the 65 countries that participated in PISA 2012, Chile was ranked 51. In addition, years of a market education system where state subsidies are equally allocated to public and private providers have led to a huge socio-economic segregation. Today in Chile, there are some schools (both public and private) for the rich and some others for the poor. Few schools (public or private) combine students from both poor and rich families.

This mixture of results well above its neighbors, but well below the countries to which Chile aspires to resemble, is evident in the strong demands for substantial improvements in the quality and equity of educational opportunities. Chileans know that education is a powerful tool for individual and collective progress. And as they gain higher educational levels and skills, they become more dissatisfied with the gap between rich and poor, and between Chileans and citizens of countries that have already acquired developmental levels that allow all its citizens to live decent and productive lives.

At this time of strong demands for change, it is important to keep a cool head and review the international evidence regarding which policies have shown positive results on the quality and equity of education.

First, we must remember the importance of setting ambitious goals as a north for everyone, and use them to define the curriculum and teaching materials, as well as evaluation systems – not only in matters of accountability but, especially, to support all system stakeholders to seek ways of continuous

improvement to achieve better student learning outcomes. This requires an education management system very different from the one that has hitherto prevailed in Chile, where those who can manage better do so and others fall behind.

A second lesson from international experience is the importance of ensuring that all children enter the school system ready to learn. This requires expanding and strengthening early childhood development services, from daycare centers, nutrition programs, and early stimulation, to high-quality preschool for all children. While Chile has moved forward in this direction, it still has much to do.

Third, remember that teachers are the key to the educational process. In Chile, as in the rest of the region, the teaching profession has gradually become less and less attractive to the most talented. Simultaneously, the world has been changing at a rapid pace, and schools have been slow to innovate and adapt to the ways children interact and learn today. Supporting current teachers and attracting the most talented individuals to the educational system is the great challenge for Chile and for the rest of the region. This will require attractive working conditions, but especially professional growth opportunities that go hand-in-hand with the satisfaction of having an impact on what matters most: the lives of children and youth.

Fourth, there is no excellent education system that does not rely on the necessary investments to assure attractive educational environments so that the best professionals enter and remain in the teaching profession and children want to go to school on a daily basis. As technology has changed the daily experience of children and young adults around the world, Chile can take advantage of this opportunity to promote better skills relevant to the 21st century.

Finally, in order to materialize the potential of education as a tool for individual and collective development, closer ties between the school system and the productive world are necessary. This will ensure that what is learned in the school system is valuable in the professional world. Many Chileans who recently graduated from secondary and post-secondary institutions are finding that their opportunities in the job market are not what they imagined. Only when education results in better job opportunities – greater chance of employment, better wages and working conditions – does it also result in increased productivity, innovation, and socio-economic equality for an entire country.

In these and other areas, we know there are challenges that demanded change and innovation. Those of us who admire Chile's efforts to improve its education system over the past two decades will be closely watching this new phase of change and transformation.

Ariel Fiszbein is Director of Education at the Inter-American Dialogue and Emiliana Vegas is Head of the Education Division of the Inter-American Development Bank.