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# How School Actors Make Sense of School Improvement in the Context of External Support Policies in Place

# El sentido del mejoramiento escolar de los docentes en el contexto de políticas de apoyo externo

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## Abstract

From the experience of implementation of the policy of shared support of the Ministry of Education, this study explores the ways in which Chilean teachers have incorporated the policies of technical-pedagogical support provided by external agencies, and the way they affect and/or are integrated with the particular strategies of educational improvement within schools. We inquire about the idea that every school, seen as an organization, elaborates its own systemic answers (self-reflective) to face external demands for educational improvement, in which there is a reflection of the particular way in which teachers understand and take up their educational role. The study is based on a qualitative research design. It is an exploratory-descriptive type of research. Six group interviews were conducted and analyzed; the participants were teachers who work in the first levels of primary education (1st through 4th grade) and/or preschool level. The pedagogical autonomy appears as a condition for its required deployment and implementation. The study provides clues about the pertinence and need for instances of collaboration and strategic communication among the actors of a school, as the pressure for improvement resorts to institutional management, which cannot be undertaken by a teacher in isolation.

*Keywords:* improvement, politics, teaching, autonomy

## Resumen

A partir de la experiencia de implementación de una política de apoyo externo del Ministerio de Educación de Chile, el estudio explora las formas de apropiación que docentes chilenos tienen de las políticas de apoyo técnico-pedagógico provistas por agencias externas y cómo estas afectan y/o se integran a las propias estrategias de mejoramiento educativo de las escuelas. Se indaga sobre la idea de que todo establecimiento escolar, comprendido como una *organización*, elabora respuestas sistémicas (autorreflexivas) para responder a las demandas de mejoramiento educativo externas, en las cuales se ve reflejada su forma de entender y asumir su rol educativo. El estudio, de carácter exploratorio, se sostiene en un diseño cualitativo de investigación. Se recogieron y analizaron 6 entrevistas grupales con docentes que trabajan en los primeros niveles de educación básica (1° a 4° básico). La autonomía pedagógica aparece como una condición para el adecuado despliegue e implementación de estrategias de mejoramiento. El estudio entrega indicios sobre la pertinencia y necesidad de instancias de colaboración y comunicación estratégica entre los actores de una escuela, en la medida que el desafío del mejoramiento escolar apela a una gestión institucional que no puede ser abordada de manera aislada por el docente.

*Palabras clave:* mejoramiento, política, docentes, autonomía

"Understanding the local politics and social norms that permeate the walls of schools can lead to a better understanding of why educators act the way they do in the face of reform." (Well et al., 1995, as cited in Datnow, Hubbard ,& Mehan, 2002)

### Social changes and new demands in education

For almost half a century in modern Western societies, we have been witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm of development that promotes, among other things, a *knowledge society*, based on the proper use of information and knowledge as a primary source of a country's productivity and economic development and the restructuring of social relations arising from these changes.[1] This has had profound implications in defining and developing existing national school systems. They have been brought to the center of the debate, where they are called upon to respond to a new set of expectations and growing demands in educational outcomes and the development of skills seen as essential to normal human development in today's society (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 2010).

New developments in modern society have led to great changes within the operational and developmental frameworks of educational systems and schools, including: a growing interest in conducting and participating in increasingly complex and periodic educational achievement measurements (Aske, Connolly, & Corman, 2012; Harris, 2011), including participation in international assessments (namely: PISA-OCDE, TIMSS, and CIVICA-IEA, TERCE-Unesco); a demand for the development of new skills and cognitive and emotional abilities, mainly related to *knowledge management*, collaboration and self-regulation of learning, and the use of new information and communication technologies (*Enlaces*, Chilean Ministry of Education, 2008);[2] the emergence of paradigms regarding *lifelong learning* and *learning to learn*, established as the goal of all educational processes (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, & Lovett, 2010); the emphasis and consolidation of educational perspectives focused on learning, understood as socially mediated processes (Selwyn, 2011);[3] and, finally, a concern for enriching the environments where learning takes place, including the educational resources used, the prevailing climate or environment, and teacher competencies and skills, among other factors (Vegas & Umansky, 2005).

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[1] Broadly speaking, these transformations, dated from the seventies, are mainly linked to codependent processes of globalization of economic exchanges, the development of new information and communication technologies, the redefinition of the workplace, and the adoption of new cultural and identity parameters (Cohen, 2006).

[2] See, for example, the *New Millenium Learners* initiatives of the OECD.

[3] In educational (not just academic) discussion, the concept of *education*, particularly *formal* or institutional education, is associated more and more deeply with *learning* and, says Selwyn (2011), people and experts tend to understand and define education sciences more and more as 'learning sciences' that rigorously establish and structure the "[formal] conditions and arrangements where the learning takes place."

In this transformational setting, which came into being several decades ago and is increasingly intensifying, schools and their stakeholders have been compelled to rethink and restructure their organization, functioning, and working time frames (Brandt, 2010). Based on challenges to the adaptability, effectiveness, and operation of the school system (Datnow, 2000; Martinic, 2010), and particularly to the definition of disciplinary content, the role and responsibility of educational actors, the legitimacy of the *ad hoc* institutional framework, and other related aspects, there emerges the question of the role and autonomy of schools in the transformation of their practices. The school's capacity to innovate and grow becomes a basic quality for educational organization (Harris, 2002), located at the crossroads between the meaning of transformation and its connection with the school's performance context (Serge, 2002).

## Demands and policies for educational change and improvement in Chile

Like in many parts of the world, in the last decade the education system in Chile, at all levels, has been the subject of a vast, complex, and sometimes bitter public debate and discussion, both in the academic and institutional realm (Bellei, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2010; Consejo Asesor Presidencial de la Educación, 2006) and in the public realm (Bassi & Urzúa, 2010).[4] Chile has been the site of transformations of the principles, design, organization, and dynamics of the educational process, in particular in the early eighties (PIIE, 1984). Over the next decade, educational policies continued adapting and adjusting the system based on the implementation of education reform strategies to improve educational quality and equity (Avalos, 2010; Cox, 2003), in particular, those providing external technical and pedagogical support to establishments with continued poor performance, in a policy of positive or compensatory discrimination (Bellei, Osses, & Valenzuela, 2010).

Since 2000, in light of the weak impacts on learning improvements on the national standardized test, SIMCE,[5] particularly the 1999 SIMCE (Asesorías para el Desarrollo, 2011), a process focused on "bringing reform to the classroom" has been taking place. This involves increasing support for the educational task, in particular for the most vulnerable segment of the population, through the development of new pedagogic and didactic strategies (*Campaña LEM*, *Escuelas críticas*, etc.) and a curriculum update (2002) to guide the achievement of learning objectives based on a curriculum implementation that is more consistent with current educational practice (Martinic, 2010).

Moreover, since the demonstrations started in 2006, a broad public debate has broken out regarding the suitability of the institutional framework that governs the education system, and a relative consensus (Consejo Asesor Presidencial de la Educación, 2006) was reached on the need for more fundamental changes to the regulation and operation of the system. Changes to educational policy were reflected in the promotion of a set of legal initiatives, including a new education act (*Ley General de Educación - LGE*), which replaced the LOCE,[6] which, among other things, establishes the Quality Assurance in Education System (*Sistema de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación*).[7]

These changes were inspired and guided, at least in part, by an educational paradigm[8] that promotes so-called *standards-based reform* (Espínola, 2010) and has been emerging rapidly worldwide since the late eighties, particularly in developed, English-speaking countries (England, the United States, Scotland, and New Zealand, among others). Generally speaking, this paradigm is aimed at the creation of centralized assurance systems for achieving specific student learning in key, measurable subsectors (in general:

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[4]  Two important milestones in this public debate were the social and student demonstrations that took place in 2006 (called the *penguin revolution*, as its most prominent actors were schoolchildren, characterized by their dark blue uniforms and white shirts) and the demonstrations of 2011, in which university students emerged as the top leaders.

[5]  SIMCE: *Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación de Chile*. SIMCE tests evaluate curricular achievements in language, mathematics, and science, with a national measurement once a year for students in the 4th grade, and alternating years for students in 8th and 2nd grade. Véase www.simce.cl

[6]  Despite this, the current LGE keeps fundamental aspects of its predecessor LOCE: the structure of the educational system in three major administrative unit types (private, subsidized private, and municipal), the public funding of education through the payment of a subsidy to a *sostenedor*, or administrator, according to the monthly student attendance in the establishment.

[7]  The main institutional changes that took place in Chile to the standards-driven education policies are the enactment of the Preferential Subsidy Law (No. 20,248, 2008), General Education Law (No. 20,370, 2009) and the National Quality Assurance in Education System (Law No. 20,529, 2011).

[8]  In a more comprehensive analysis of these policies with the social and economic spheres, Gewirt (2002) refers to this new paradigm as "*post-welfarism policies for the management of schools.*"

language, mathematics, and science) and leads to a system with the following principles (Espinola, 2010; Fullan, 2010): definition of specific learning content and standards to be achieved by students (desired achievement levels); continued and systematic external evaluation (standardized) of student achievement; reporting and accountability of results to those directly linked to the school (administrators, principals, and teachers); implementation of external support devices (Datnow, 2000), usually associated with strategic planning (e.g. improving management) and teaching strategies; and transfer of responsibility for the implementation of changes to the schools and its actors (e.g. promoting local autonomy and leadership).

As far as this paper is concerned, critics have highlighted two major aspects of the implementation of these measures (Cassasus, 2009; Falabella, 2007; Gewirt, 2002; Hargreaves, 2010). On the one hand, at the system level, there is the potential inconsistency of a demand for change and improvement that takes its inspiration from an external pressure that could *disempower* and neglect the main local actors, in particular teachers, by not necessarily incorporating them into the process of policy definition and design (purpose, goals, objectives, and mechanisms). This discussion centers on the tension that could occur regarding autonomy and capacity for improvement, in a nationally or internationally stressed scenario (Kaufman, 2005; Vaillant, 2007). On the other hand, at the individual level (students), the education debate centers on the focus on disciplinary learning (measurable) and the curricular constraints this entails (Selwyn, 2011).

The Chilean standards-based reforms have led to the design, implementation, and evaluation of a set of strategies to improve education, which emerged both locally (mainly, the creation of educational improvement plans in each establishment, but also management of resources and locally-funded strategies) and nationally (the expansion of national assessments, orientations and promotion of educational management, classroom support strategies and redefining of ministerial supervision and support, among others).

## Definition of the study

In this paper we wish to explore the ways in which Chilean teachers have taken on the aforementioned education improvement challenge, specifically analyzing the implementation of a particular program, the Shared Support Plan (*Plan de Apoyo Compartido - PAC*),[9] a ministerial support strategy for the subsidized schools with the lowest academic results, which voluntarily participate. The aim is to generate autonomous improvement capabilities in each school (PAC-Mineduc, 2012). The central research question here addresses the schools' capacity to develop an educational improvement processes, in particular, by analyzing teacher ability to appropriate and/or adapt working models proposed by a third party (hereafter referred to as *external support strategy*), without denying that the school consists of other stakeholders (management team, *sostenedor* [funds administrator], assistants, etc.), but seeing the teaching staff as a key agent of educational change.

The goal is to understand the level and type of decisions made by teachers regarding the proposed innovation and change processes, their foundations and justifications, the determining factors of these decisions due to socio-educational context, and the concrete actions that may be taken to achieve better academic outcomes and more effective learning environments.

The data for the analysis was collected through the organization of focus groups with teachers from the first cycle of education who teach in the subsectors of language and/or mathematics in subsidized schools (municipal and private) participating in the PAC in the Metropolitan Region, randomly selected from the list provided by the program. Six meetings were held in the months of June (three) and October (three) of 2012, and brought together a total of 44 teachers from 17 schools. The information was systematized, for

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[9] The PAC is a national program focused on the learning subsectors of language and communication and mathematics in the early stages of school education (pre-kindergarten to 4th grade), which includes the strengthening of educational and institutional management through each participating school's access to specific, standardized educational resources for the aforementioned subjects. Educational resources provided in the PAC framework include an annual subject program, teaching guides for teachers, student workbooks, and material for assessing expected learning outcomes. The work areas are: effective implementation of the curriculum, optimization of academic time, monitoring of learning achievement, school climate and culture conducive to learning, and teacher professional development (see www.apoyocompartido.cl).

all cases considered in the investigation, in a horizontal manner that enabled significant research categories. The interview guidelines for the groups addressed the ways that teachers connect the externally defined improvement strategies in their schools to their own teaching and learning and educational improvement strategies, covering the following dimensions: characteristics and operation of the schools, in terms of their pedagogical management and teaching and learning/educational improvement strategies; internal organization for the implementation of externally defined strategies and action strategies; curriculum planning of the areas covered by the program; and the perception of the implemented strategy's impacts on and consequences for school operation. The information was systematized based on teacher perceptions, which enabled meaningful analysis categories to be created regarding teaching practice, which were validated in terms of thematic saturation.

It should be noted that this study is not meant to evaluate the PAC policy, but rather uses it as a context for understanding how teachers make sense of external support strategies. From this perspective, the investigation is based on what is *said* by teachers, trying to uncover the *unsaid*, without looking at action or practice in specific performance contexts. Hence the analysis shows the limitations of the approach based on the teachers' discourse, as it excludes the possibility of contrasting or deepening the strategies by looking at teaching *practice*, which would enrich the findings and conclusions. This makes room for future, more comprehensive research, to be discussed at the end of this study.

Next, this study attempts to delve into the way schoolteachers, as active members of an organization, *manage the way they operate* regarding educational improvement. Choosing areas addressed by the "micropolitics of education" perspective (Ball, 1989; Blase & Björk, 2010; Datnow, 2000), regarding the way schools develop and change within a dynamic and interactive social context, it analyzes how the school, through its teachers, *looks and thinks*, what could determine to some extent the possibilities of change and its improvement guidelines. In this vein, elements are collected from a mediational approach as proposed by Datnow (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002), who says teachers co-build educational reform processes, instead of simply reacting to reform. The questions that arise concerning the conceptions of externally promoted "policy implementation" and their variability (Honing, 2006; Portales, 2013) invite exploration of the real capacities of the actors to carry these policies out in a complex environment. This study seeks, in an exploratory manner, to shed light on this process in teachers, on the basis of the aforementioned concepts and authors, which constitute our main theoretical framework for our analysis.

### Teachers in the context of educational improvement: some evidence of their interpretations

To approach the understanding that teachers have of their teaching practice in the context of a ministerial education program, considered as an external support strategy, a systematic presentation is given of the perceptions and statements of the subjects at two levels: the state of their teaching practice in a context of demand for educational improvement, and the interpretation of appropriation strategies for improvement practices, based on a model of teaching practice interpretation. Based on this analysis, the study will provide a discussion of the findings and draw conclusions with respect to the initial goals.

### The educational improvement context and the role of teachers

The general context of the relationship between improvement practices and the teaching role is a *vulnerable* social environment in which:

• teachers perceive that students are in an environment that is not very conducive to learning:

We are in a place where there is a huge amount of uh ... drug trafficking (Focus 4, Prof.).
They are used to seeing shootings near their homes, fighting, and come with a very different mindset than that of a normal child (Focus 3, Prof.).
I think that 80% of my class comes to school because they have to go, so that the *pacos* [police] do not go to their house, to tell [the parents] that they have to send their children to school (Focus 2, Prof.).

- teachers do not perceive that there is real and significant support from parents and the community associated with the school:

> We have tried to get the family involved … it's like 'you are the nannies, take care of our kids now, we have to do our own thing,' and this has made it really difficult to get them involved (Focus 4, Prof.).

- teachers relate the social instability they perceive with an educational instability in students, usually linked, in the discourse, to learning problems (whether medically diagnosed or not):

> There is an issue with not respecting certain orders, there is a degree of chaos with the children. (Focus 1, Prof.)

> I wish we had better outcomes, but we unfortunately, whether we like it or not, we find cognitive barriers … and when there are no cognitive barriers we run into these socio-cultural, emotional issues (Focus 4, Prof.).

> In our classes, we have fairly heterogeneous groups of children. Mostly we have to work with integration projects and with an educational psychologist due to the multiple educational needs of the children (Focus 6, Prof.).

This association, informed by the international literature (Figlio & Loeb, 2011), allows teachers to connect the social vulnerability of students with additional educational requirements, causing an excess burden in their work.

In this sense, the teacher perceives him or herself as on a "mission," alone ("[the] teacher in his or her room alone, grinning and bearing it" Focus 1, Prof.), and oriented towards comprehensive attention to the student ("we, the teachers, are basically the ones who do everything," Focus 2, Prof.; "we have to play the role of father, of mother, and give the children affection so they don't have to return to their reality," Focus 1, Prof.).

In fulfilling this role, understood as part of a teaching practice, the teacher perceives a certain level of autonomy in his or her teaching practice, that is, the management of a set of knowledge, skills, and strategies that are articulated in terms of pedagogical judgment, since "the school does not have much comprehensive criteria with respect to what can be done when faced with this kind of situation; each teacher is basically responsible for his or her children and their performance" (Focus 1, Prof.).

In this work setting, the teacher creates certain principles of individual performance that, on certain occasions, are come under pressure from the school's external requirements ("we have to respond to the policies and to what the government asks us," Focus 5, Prof.) and the appropriation strategies that these requirements imply, which is perceived as a challenge to their autonomy, refuting the professionalism of the teaching staff. The teachers identify all of this as part of a formal logic of compliance: "If you work at a school and the school works with this plan, we have to implement the structure and what is required of us. If the school works with it, we work with it" (Focus 1, Prof.).

Thus, in a context of growing demands with respect to the role of the school in achieving student learning, teachers must find a (meaningful) solution for their professional task, with respect to the type, depth, and characteristics of the teaching practice that this tension (autonomy/appropriation) will set in place, establishing the conditions and possibilities for improvement-oriented change.

With respect to external requirements, teachers perceive the search for results as exaggerated ("we have the sword of Damocles over our heads to increase performance in the different measurement instruments," Focus 6, Prof.) and see the growing development of a culture of competencies and performance standards ("yes, I am teaching, because I'm teaching what the objective dictates," Focus 6, Prof.), all of which, from their point of view, forces them both personally and organizationally to redefine and make sense of improvement based on external benchmarks.

> You have to consider that on a monthly basis a person comes from the Ministry of Education who mainly looks at our team's results and gives us strategies to follow in the upcoming months. I think that's the point: that somehow the Ministry and everyone around it see things as short-term, the results *now* (Focus 1, Prof.).

In this scenario, teachers identify and redefine the tension between the possibilities of improvement in their students' performance and the aforementioned structures and/or conditions in which their

work takes place; i.e., they are aware of the importance of maintaining expectations concerning student learning achievement without ignoring their social and economic context, which, from their perspective, complicates educational improvement.

> I think the concept of improvement and what we are doing in class and what we want to teach and what we want our students to learn - right? - is determined somewhat, maybe to a greater or lesser extent, by the requirements of the education system and the requirements, of course, of educational policy and each municipality. (Focus 6, Prof.).

In this context, teachers employ a kind of internalization of the external demand, interpreting it from their own sense of teaching practice (i.e., the practice that makes sense for every actor), according to the reality they face. This means *adjusting, adapting,* and *self-pacing*, not without a certain conflict or tension, the actions, goals, and objectives that are prescribed and that they take on, despite criticism:

> We always struggle with technical supervisors, we're always fighting ... we said we were going to do it at our pace because teachers had to adapt (Focus 1, Prof.).

> It is also an opportunity to take the exercises that are there, which are pretty good; what one *can* adjust, as everyone says, one adapts to the diversity of the child, the child's ability. You adjust it (Focus 2, Prof.).

In part of the teacher discourse, there is evidence that the internalization of educational policy is a kind of "weak" and uncertain solution in terms of teaching practice, since the inclusion of external reform does not create a conflict or dissonance in what teachers "do," but rather teachers maintain, at the same time, their implicit theories about teaching practice. Then, more than encouraging an alternative operating proposal, the process of change involves a certain *adaptation*, but not a radical change in the professional task, a phenomenon of appropriation that teachers themselves refer to as a sort of "domestication" of external demands.[10] In this sense, teachers develop auxiliary hypotheses that protect their own conceptions, which are conditioned by the multiplicity of factors that they must combine and manage within their particular performance context (i.e., the situation of individual students, the specific working conditions in their establishment, etc.): the objectives of teaching and learning, curriculum flexibility, student characteristics, working conditions of teachers, and the school's administrative management, among others.

> What I feel sometimes is that it is not made for a reality, maybe my school, which is a municipal school, you know, not made for that reality, maybe if you bring this to a different place, to another school, it works great, but not here (Focus 1, Prof.).

This creates tension concerning the public and social ideals that education policy presents as being "the teacher's" (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005), a tension that Ball (2003) identifies as an aspect of an era of "post-professionalism," proper to school systems in which teachers feel validated for their work exclusively based on external parameters.

A teacher strategy to resolve this tension is to increase the degree of involvement or commitment to teaching practice, in order to influence the performance of their students, spending more time on curricular and extracurricular activities to remedy the difficulties of their work (based on the type of student, working conditions, the performance context, etc.). Thus, pedagogical work becomes a highly demanding activity that teachers perceive as exhausting, but also rewarding, as they identify the fact that with higher levels of involvement (commitment), they see bigger and better results in student learning.

**Process of improvement strategy appropriation: interpreting the meaning of teaching work**

The information gathered in meetings with teachers leads to an understanding of school improvement where the central axis is identifying the proper role of the teacher in the educational process and his or her relationship with the practices of appropriation of educational strategies favored by actors outside the school. This relationship, the focus of the analysis presented below, will be described.

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[10] The concept of *domestication* was introduced in one of the focus groups, and had a high acceptance among the interviewees, as a construct that refers to the internalization process of the policy; domestication understood as a process of appropriation that pursues certain benefits from a prolonged interaction.

The discursive context for this identification is the positive valuation that teachers general have of the support that comes from external strategy implementation. They bring up elements such as the provision of teaching materials (textbooks and exercise guides), support in class structure models (curriculum implementation guidance), and collaboration of external professionals who advise on teaching, among other inputs of the external support strategy:

[The external support strategy] provides very good materials, excellent materials. The children engage with it, reading has increased, because it is a different model from what the children see. The text the Ministry sends is good (Focus 1, Prof.).

[The external support strategy] provides a lot of really good concrete material, fractions, numbering, really good stuff, and comes with a booklet, which helps you, in that regard you would have to really thick-headed to say 'no, this thing didn't help at all;' it one hundred percent helps (Focus 3, Prof.).

Teachers identify this type of resource as tools or a means to support the educational work they do, both at the institutional level (school) and the classroom level (teaching and learning), positively impacting teaching effectiveness and the consequent improvement in learning achievement:

So from that point of view, it's good because [the external support strategy] is there at the beginning, through the development, and at the end ... it develops a structure and there is a goal (Focus 4, Prof.).

For example, in the reports: where we are at each month, where we have improved, what we have done so that children achieve these goals and skills, and that's pretty good (Focus 2, Prof.).

This valuation of the resources and assistance provided, already documented by national evaluations of other support programs (Centro de Estudios de Política y Prácticas en Educación-PUC, 2010; Centro de Políticas Públicas-PUC, 2011), is complemented by a deeper and more ambiguous reflection on the implications they have on teaching work. The interaction between prior teaching practice and the new external support is the result of an assimilation process that results in, following Martínez's model (2004), at least four outputs or representations of teaching practice in response to educational improvement: fusion, compartmentalization, enrichment, and restructuring.[11] Among the teachers interviewed in this study, there were interpretations of practice that follow the fusion logic, and, to a lesser extent, compartmentalization.

**Fusion.** For the first case, with fusion phenomena, educational improvement appears in the activities of teachers as a new concept that cannot be fully integrated, and thus the previous activity coexists with the new ideas, continuing to manifest in particular contexts. Fusion occurs whenever the teacher does not accept a new improvement proposal as plausible, viable, and functional for their work in the school. What occurs in fusion is the emergence of a new integrated and coherent manner of thought and action, which boils down to one thing with two different aspects (the new and the old):

[The external programs] are a tool, or, I don't know ... it is something that came to the schools, but we have our own plans in terms of content and all that stuff, like my colleague here said... then we add plans, we structure ... because we got something new and we have to implement it and whatnot… (Focus 5, Prof.).

I look for the strategy of how to teach what [the external program] tells me without skipping it, but without damaging it, because I know my students' reality, I know that in this way and with this strategy they won't learn it. I focus on the activity, on *how* I do it, but they still get to the activity that [the external program] is requiring (Focus 2, Prof.).

Faced with the demands of improvement targets, teachers adjust, accommodate, and limit the definition of achievement, reinterpreting success according to the possibilities of impact they have based on the conditions they face, in particular the type of student who is taught:

For me the SIMCE is subjective... for us it is an achievement that a child came in not knowing how to read can now read, reads sentences, short texts ... that some make progress in study habits, that they are organized in terms of their material, this is an achievement that you can see. (Focus 2, Prof.).

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[11] Enrichment implies the adoption of new concepts, outlooks, and structures, among others, and therefore results in a gain for the school; restructuring, while implying enrichment, also implies a modification of the previous structures, and accordingly, the benefit for teaching practice is greater.

Then there are things where you really have to be in the classroom and then you can see the progress of the children; those who aren't there, can't. (Focus 5, Prof.).

In this context, teachers define a good practice as one that considers issues beyond learning achievement, linked to the students' intellectual and moral well being, without neglecting the achievement of curricular and academic goals:

Yes, there is concern, not only that children have their class and then we're done, but also in seeing the improvement process of each one. The concept of improvement is that the child goes to school, receives an education, learns to read and write, acquires basic knowledge, and in reality that they feel happy at school (Focus 2, Prof.).

As some researchers have suggested (Cassasus, 2009), the potential disruption in school due to the inclusion of a standardized strategy could result in a dissonance between what the school is and how it acts; in the words of the interviewees, the orientation of teaching to respond to external measurements would reduce learning to what "is on the test" (Figlio, 2011), which would affect teaching practice both in terms of the amount of content considered and in terms of depth:

Improving that the student meets the minimum of the minimum learning achievements, because the content they have right now is the minimum. For me this is already a pretty big achievement, for the simple reason that now I have the child caught up with the grade he or she is in (Focus 1, Prof.).

Beyond the positive impact the provision of conditions and resources has on results (Murillo & Román, 2011), Campos and others (2008) describe how this type of strategy has a number of weaknesses with respect to the teacher's role: it does not encourage reflection and autonomy, it creates dependence on the standard to structure teaching practice, and ultimately marginalizes teachers from the ethical, political, and moral issues of teaching. In short, it promotes the establishment of the teaching role as an education "technician:" "I want to comment ... that's good, the dichotomy between a good 'applier' or a good teacher. I think we're moving more towards a good 'applier'" (Focus 5, Prof.).

In investigating the possibilities of school improvement from a perspective that recognizes the existence of teachers' personal constructions, developed from their perceptions and general and everyday experiences, they respond with preconceptions and/or intuitive theories of many different forms. These range from understanding the improvement as the necessary *standardization* on which to build greater learning, to the duty of the school to provide the necessary minimal curricular coverage. Between the two poles there are conceptions that challenge educational improvement and that detract from the observation of learning achievement through standardized tests, to the extent that it disregards the reality of heterogeneous classrooms:

If we only talk about numbers, if you *tell* me ok, I have to improve, I don't know, five points by next year, the children with special educational needs are going to be left back (Focus 6, Prof.).

It's pressure, for example, I teach fourth grade and it's pressure because if things don't go well on the SIMCE, then you're the bad one; that's why I look at it subjectively, because there is a diverse reality in the classroom (Focus 2, Prof.).

In this scenario, the externally-driven policies and guidelines of the school's administrator or management team, according to the perspective of the teachers, redefine the role of the teacher performance, in particular through the prescription of a particular *teacher task* that configures and builds a particular *role* as a professional:

I think that teacher autonomy was lost long ago. I have to be quite honest, because one has autonomy in quotes, one leads the class in some aspects, but in general one has to be led by the things that management imposes according to the plans and programs (Focus 1, Prof.).

The inclusion of an external element calls into question the concept of *professionalism*, to the extent that this it is produced within a particular institutional framework, which in a broad sense is the result of a *teacher task* that is "made routine" in various and recurrent actions, which must be typified by experience and academic knowledge and mediated by emotional states. Such practices, which define professionalism, are characterized by being self-referential, self-organizing, and autopoietic (García & Pintos, 2003, p.

11). This is expressed in the pursuit of creativity and originality in each teaching practice: "Look, I'll give my opinion on ... Why do they have to take away my creativity with this thing? They're giving me a prepackaged plan; I can't imagine things, I can't be creative" (Focus 5, Prof.).

In this vein, based on the interviews, there is a clear need for teachers to be understood as subjects who build knowledge not only from the critical appropriation of that *built by others*, but also from individual/collective reflection about their teaching (Noguera, Fuentealba, Osandón, Portales, & Quiroga, 2002), highlighting the need to implement peer work routines that transform the classroom into a public space, thus breaking the traditional and hitherto unalterable space under the autonomous control of the teacher: "Being all alone in the classroom is something that has been left behind. Before it was basically just what I considered appropriate: I did it, but if not, no one was supervising me. Now things are different" (Focus 2, Prof.).

**Compartmentalization.** This practice refers to a mechanistic and segmented (by compartments) adoption of new representations of what improvement means for the school, that is, a routine adoption, without reflection (Gomez et al., 2012; Pozo, 2007). This practice implies teaching strategies that arbitrarily divide areas of improvement that should go together, hindering an integrated and organic change or modification. From this perspective, the adoption of change is limited to specific areas of pedagogical practice, without fully permeating the practice, and leaving areas of the teaching task unmodified and coexisting with change and improvement areas. From this perspective the teacher —and through the teacher, the school—maintains a strategy and concept of school improvement, introducing isolated changes based on external or proposed reforms, without changing the entire practice.

> And the truth is that these days I stray a bit from the PAC protocol and sometimes I look at the strategy ... 'you know what, I'm not going to teach that, I'm going to teach it this way,' and so on .... And maybe I don't have enough ELE team loyalty by not doing the scheduled activity, not the activity but the strategy to learn the activity, I am not going to do the strategy and well, they're not going to achieve it, I am going to teach them this, they're going to reach the same goal and do the same activities, but it was very hard for me to overstep the PAC, to leave it. (Focus 5, Prof.).

> I worked with another system before, my methodology was somewhat more personal, now I work with mine and also I have to add the PAC to my planning (Focus 3, Prof.).

The dissonance between what is expected to improve, what is possible to improve, and what actually improves is resolved by the teachers in different ways. As stated at the beginning, the characterization that teachers make of their performance contexts, on the one hand, concerns the *weaknesses of the students* and the responsibility is externalized to families, who are expected to take on a subsidiary role in the pedagogical task, given this difficult learning context:

> Our students' parents do not place a priority on the education of their children. For them that's not important right now; what is important are the practical and day-to-day things (Focus 4, Prof.).

> They *throw* them in school and the mom doesn't worry until when she arrives in the afternoon, and no more than that. (Focus 1, Prof.).

In short, the discussions with the teachers show a scenario in which educational improvement is strained by educational strategies that locally reinterpret and combine the concepts and horizons that the support policies and quality assurance regulations provide, adjusting the goals to an enduring reality of problems in learning dynamics. Nevertheless, teachers recognize and value what they see as an external contribution to and support of their work, taking on challenges from a practical autonomous space that subjects them to tensions and dilemmas that they resolve individually.

## Discussion and conclusions

This study has collected evidence of teachers' perceptions of the notions and ideas of educational improvement, in a setting that urges the achievement of learning objectives. The discussion with teachers addressed issues related to their teaching practice, aimed at educational improvement, and how they address the challenges of working with a generally vulnerable (in socioeconomic terms) student population to achieve the set goals. Also discussed was how schools created spaces for support and coordination among teachers in order to improve student outcomes, and the role that was assigned to and expected of parents.

The results of the group interview analysis show a reality of adjustment and mediation practices that teachers must apply to respond to external educational effectiveness strategies. In particular, there is evidence of an appropriation process, or, as the teachers relate in interviews, "domestication" of the programs and policies aimed at achieving standards, in which the concept of improvement takes on a new meaning, generated mainly through the processes of assimilation to the reality of the school and its students. Thus teachers show signs of the persistence of old practices, from before the adoption of these assurance policies, maintaining the school's traditional *task*, which is not eliminated, abandoned, or discarded. On the contrary, the school's way of thinking and defining is expanded based on two courses of action: compartmentalization and fusion of educational strategies.

Within this framework, and in line with the international literature (Figlio & Loeb, 2011), there is evidence that teachers complement these practices with strategies intrinsic to the accountability systems (*accountability*) based on standardized tests: reclassification and reinterpretation of the social vulnerability (SEL) of students as a special educational need (*integrated students*) and adjustment of the curriculum to the requirements of standardized testing (*teaching to the test*).[12]

Although present in the analysis model, no consistent record was found among the teachers regarding the presence of the other two practices considered in models of educational change, restructuring and enrichment, which allow change/innovation processes that lead to greater openness and orientation to improvement, as they represent a substantial (structural) change of the school's task.

Despite this, the practices mentioned in the teacher discourse involve the development or refining of specific skills and complex curricular and pedagogical management (adjusted learning planning, organization of teaching sequences based on heterogeneous student needs, classroom management of students with different requirements and conditions) as a systemic response to an external context that complicates their demands (more and better teaching/learning). In this sense, teacher autonomy appears not as a result of an improvement strategy, but as a condition for its proper implementation.

As for institutional context, the study provides evidence of the excessive demands on, and personal and professional effort of, teachers who do not have the necessary support in their organizational context (resources, guidance, and assistance) to meet the achievement requirements that are imposed. According to Figlio and Loeb (2011), in this situation there is a risk of causing teachers to focus on short-term results (achievement on tests), without incorporating strategies and policies that require more time to adopt and which enable thinking and projecting the public policy to the long-term in education. Therefore, the analysis highlights the importance of strategic communication and collaboration among the school stakeholders, with the pressure for improvement (practice guidelines) involving institutional management. This would overcome the exclusive attention on the teacher, who already suffers consequences on a personal level (perception of exhaustion, feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety, among others).

Among the teachers, it is seen that much of the success in the "assimilate and accommodate" game that the school must play in light of external prescriptions occurs through the active involvement and commitment of teachers. This is consistent with the international literature (Blase & Björk, 2010; Datnow, 2000; Park, 2008) on the interrelation and negotiation process of the actors of externally promoted

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12  Following Figlio and Loeb (2011), the reclassification refers to: "[To exclude a vulnerable] student on the basis of classification [that] provides schools with less incentive to support these students as well as an incentive to selectively reclassify or move [this] students in order to look better against performance metrics. The evidence is quite clear that schools have responded to accountability pressures by reclassifying low-performing students as students with disabilities" (p. 394).

educational change policies. As the teachers themselves have said, in the building of educational policy, they have been incorporated in order to obtain their support, promote learning of new concepts or contents, and test renovated strategies aimed at achieving better results, which does not necessarily imply a process of participatory construction by educational decision makers that uses and values the expertise, commitment, and wisdom of teachers (Kaufman, 2005; Muijs, 2010). The teachers' concern, meanwhile, is to balance the accountability model, accepted to the extent that it creates pressure, guides discipline in educational work, and leads to elements of equity and effectiveness in schools, with the strategic and, from their perspective, little recognized/known role of the teacher and the school in the viability and sustainability of the implementation of school system policies and regulations. This is the essential function of mediation (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002) that the teacher uses when approaching improvement processes and increased educational goals, the most obvious expression of which is in measured academic outcomes.

Thus, the professional identity of the teacher and its construction, maintenance, and manifestation should be a priority matter for the design of educational policy (Galaz, Noguera, & Urrutia, 2008), insofar as public policy creates a particular role for the teacher, which may inherently conflict both with the teacher's previous conceptions as well as the identity that the schools promote. Therein lies the question of how to articulate policy proposals that bring external prescriptions and requirements into harmony with the necessary exercise of autonomy that validates teaching work, in terms of professionalism and desired social status.

Finally, this exploratory work on the teaching task in contexts of improvement raises a number of questions about other school dynamics related to improvement policies, concerning the conditions of educational leadership and management that are possible in vulnerable contexts and how the school's institutional arrangements (from administrative management to curriculum management) respond to external organizational and performance requirements (improvement plans, institutional education projects, etc.).

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