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Organizational Gaps and Challenges in the Early Implementation of Chile's New Public Education

Brechas y desafíos organizacionales en la implementación temprana de la Nueva Educación Pública en Chile

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Abstract

The New Public Education Law (NEP) has determined a structural reform of the public school system in Chile, transferring municipally-run schools to State services under the authority of the Ministry of Education. This implies an unprecedented process of recentralization and increase in administrative scale. In this article, we analyze the implementation of a Local Public Education Service, which integrates three municipalities of Greater Santiago. We identified severe flaws in institutional design that generate labor suffering, overcomed by a heroic sense with which officials aspire to improve the future of children and public education. This situation is not sustainable over time and it is necessary to improve working conditions to guarantee the quality of education in this service. With this purpose, we highlight the necessity of urgent improvements in administrative functions of the NEP, in terms of financial management, human capacities and institutional learning.

Keywords: Educational reform; educational administration; organizational change; working conditions; local public education service

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Resumen

La ley de Nueva Educación Pública (NEP) ha determinado una reforma profunda del sistema escolar público en Chile, transfiriendo las escuelas administradas por municipios a servicios estatales dependientes del Ministerio de Educación. Esto implica un proceso de recentralización e incremento de la escala administrativa inédito en el mundo. En este artículo analizamos cualitativamente su implementación en un servicio local de educación pública que integra tres municipios del Gran Santiago. Identificamos severas falencias de diseño institucional que generan sufrimiento laboral, compensado por un sentido heroico con el que los funcionarios aspiran a mejorar el futuro de los niños y de la educación pública. Esta situación no es sostenible en el tiempo y es necesario mejorar las condiciones de trabajo para garantizar la calidad de la educación en este servicio. En este sentido, destacamos la necesidad de mejoras urgentes para el funcionamiento administrativo de la NEP en términos de gestión financiera, capacidades humanas y aprendizaje institucional.

Palabras clave: Reforma de la educación; gestión educacional; cambio organizacional; condiciones de trabajo; servicios locales de educación pública

Introduction

Chile began a profound and far-reaching restructuring of the school system in 2015, with successive laws that have mandated the end of profit-making and co-payment by families in subsidized schools, the transfer and administrative concentration of municipal schools to agencies under the authority of the Ministry of Education, and changes to teachers' working conditions.

Chile's New Public Education (NEP) Law 21,040, which has been implemented progressively since 2018 (Ley 21.040, 2017), has led to the gradual transfer of the administration of public schools, which until now have been run by municipalities, to Local Public Education Services (SLEP). The SLEPs are an intermediate level of educational administration, linked to the state through the Ministry of Education (Mineduc). The creation of this new institutional structure has led to two unprecedented characteristics in the area of educational reforms (Anderson & Cuglievan, 2018). First, this process has implied returning to the centralized administration of a public school system that was transferred to municipal control in the early 1980s (Bellei, 2018). Second, the creation of SLEPs has involved a considerable increase in the scale and complexity of administration of the Chilean public school system, entailing greater restructuring and more extensive changes of the administrative regime than have previously been seen in other countries (Anderson & Cuglievan, 2018).

In this paper we present a qualitative study that was carried out in one of the first two Local Public Education Services[1] within under the framework of the NEP. This service runs the public school system in three districts with high rates of social vulnerability. This research contributes to understanding the impact that this reorganization of the public school system has had on the people responsible for its administration, who provide a real-time view of the process considering the details of its day-to-day operations. At this level of organization, we identified gaps and shortcomings in the design of the law, which undermined its correct implementation. The impact of these problems at work is demonstrated in the analysis of the narratives of the people who are experiencing these changes, which provides elements of insight that would be difficult to obtain through a quantitative or normative analysis.

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1. The name of this SLEP will not be mentioned, in order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees.

This research contributes to the follow-up and analysis of the most significant structural reform of public education in Chile to take place in the last 40 years, which is important because the lessons learned from the initial analyses could contribute to better design of the forthcoming phases of implementation of the NEP (Uribe et al., 2019). At the international level, structural reforms to the intermediate levels of public education are not uncommon, but there is no clarity on what determines whether they are successful or the achievement of the objectives for which they are carried out (Anderson & Cuglievan, 2018). In light of the huge challenge of improving public education in Latin America, the Chilean experience could be of great interest in terms of potential learning from its institutional and managerial components.

Considering this, the objective of this study is to carry out an in-depth investigation of the working conditions for the professionals involved in one of the first SLEPs implemented in Chile. This research focuses on the hypothesis that labor distress (Dejours, 2016) can reveal early deficiencies in the organizational design of recently-created institutions. In this respect, the discourse of the actors and agents participating in the establishment of the SLEP is the central aim of this research, through the analysis of shared narratives that express collective knowledge accumulated in day-to-day work.

This hypothesis is approached by analyzing the conflicts, dilemmas, and challenges faced by managers and professionals responsible for implementing educational reforms in the organizational and social context in which they operate. With this perspective, we try to connect the micro-organizational study of the intermediate level with the impact that its operation may have on the educational system in the territory (Anderson, 2009), highlighting the importance of improving the institutional design in order to enhance the quality of education.

The first objective of this research is to examine the principal problems that have affected the operation of the SLEP studied during its first year. The second is to identify lessons of organizational design that have been learned during this reform, with the goal of helping to improve the processes of the SLEPs that have already begun to operate, as well as those that will be created between now and 2025. The third objective is to contribute to the early follow-up and analysis of an institutional reform of public education that is unprecedented in the international literature due to its great scale and complexity (Anderson & Cuglievan, 2018).

This paper is divided into the following sections. First, we discuss relevant background information in the field of educational reforms. Second, we provide an historical contextualization of the privatization of education and the current cycle of reforms in Chile. Third, we outline theoretical elements for the organizational analysis. The fourth section describes the methodology used for the qualitative analysis and the fifth entails a discussion of the main findings of this research work. The paper concludes by identifying the most important aspects that can contribute to strengthening public education in Chile.

Education system reforms: systemic coherence and international evidence

Reforms to the educational system are complex socio-political processes that involve administrative changes, and pedagogical objectives, values, and beliefs (Ball, 2016; Fullan, 2016). These processes involve a diverse range of actors: central and local government, school administrators, teachers, students, and educational communities, which have different focuses and objectives (Uribe et al., 2019). As a consequence, the coherence and consistency of policies at different levels of government is essential for the design of large-scale educational reforms, since any major administrative change also affects the technical-pedagogical management, practices, and experiences of the actors involved and vice versa (Raczynski & Salinas, 2008).

> [It is] the lack of consistency, along with accountability systems perceived by teachers and managers as punitive, which, according to Fullan and Quinn (2016), generate fatigue, intensification of work, perception of arbitrariness, confusion, mistrust, and low morale among teachers and professionals in the system (Uribe et al., 2019, p. 31).

We believe that this relationship between the coherence of the design of an educational reform and the subjective experience of the people who work in the sector underpins the analytical approach of this study.

Various authors have examined the coherence and success of educational reforms from a range of different perspectives. Fullan (2011) contends that a systemic mentality that connects the different components of an educational system is essential. Pesonen et al. (2015) point to the importance of feedback between the institutional context, the design of reforms, and their implementation. Lee et al (2012) argue that the drive of the central government has to be complemented with mechanisms to enable the participation and recognition of local experiences. In short, education systems are complex and are composed of heterogeneous actors—such as the central government, intermediate levels, and educational communities—who have diverse objectives. We believe that the coherence of these systems requires, on the one hand, a precise definition of the identity and roles of each of the actors that form them, and, on the other, the existence of procedures that allow them to cooperate in order to achieve shared objectives.

Complementing the categories proposed by different authors (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Raczynski & Salinas, 2008; Uribe et al., 2017), four relevant aspects can be identified to analyze the coherence of an educational system or its reforms: (1) the participation of actors with the capability of exercising educational leadership with significant impact at the level of schools and intermediate agencies, forming agreements towards clear and effective aims; (2) the availability of tools for efficient administration of financial, operational, and political aspects in a coordinated manner between different levels of the educational system; (3) transparency and accountability with regard to the educational objectives of the system and assessment of their achievement; and (4) the continuous development of new educational and administrative capabilities through organizational analysis and learning, based on experience of the system's operation.

Anderson (2009) warns that achieving all of these things requires a strong commitment from the state that provides the necessary social protection to the educational system in order to balance the growing impact of managerial educational policies, which tend to increase inequalities between schools. Similarly, Ball (2017) observes that educational reforms are affected by power disputes that can lead to contradictory designs, in which the principles of competitiveness with which they are assessed often overlap with the ideals of mobility that motivate them.

Specifically, these tensions are evident in intermediate level organizations, which have a decisive role in the success of educational reforms (Mourshed et al., 2010). These bodies play a supportive role for educational establishments, cooperating with networks of local actors and the local, regional, or central government agencies (Uribe et al., 2017). The intermediate level is essential to improve the operating conditions of the educational establishments, having significant effects on education quality, even though they do not directly influence teaching in schools (Fullan, 2016; Mourshed et al., 2010). On the other hand, intermediate organizations also face a series of challenges: to be agents of change, to bolster the coherence of the system, and to create conditions that allow the quality of education to be improved (Fullan, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2017). All of this requires basic conditions with respect to financing, human capacities, and organizational design (Fullan, 2016; Raczynski & Salinas, 2008; Uribe et al., 2017).

In the United States and Canada, there have been processes to consolidate the intermediate levels of administration of public education, although they have involved less complexity than the reforms carried out in Chile. They generally entail merging smaller districts into larger territorial entities (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005;

Anderson & Togneri, 2005; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). Systematized evidence in these countries demonstrates that the consolidation of district can produce positive results in terms of curricular improvements and the social, economic, and cultural integration of students (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005; Lee et al., 2012). This requires providing additional resources to facilitate the reorganization of services and offset the cost increases produced by the greater administrative scope (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010).

The consolidation of districts may result in a reduction of the number of schools, meaning that those with low enrollment and located in isolated areas can be closed in order to reduce financial deficits and improve the administration of the educational offer in the expanded territory. These policies consequently entail potential risks of relative deterioration of the representation of local communities in governance of the system, difficulties in access to more remote schools in the territory, loss of families and students' sense of belonging, and the exodus of students from the areas affected by school closures (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005).

Finally, Hopkins (2017) points to the importance of designing improvements in educational systems based on comparative experiences of reform, identifying strategies that have effectively improved education quality. Specifically, he states that, for educational improvement processes to be a success, it is essential to strengthen the local level with collaborative work between schools, supported by intermediate level agencies and guided by common objectives.

Privatization and recentralization of school education in Chile

Processes to reform education systems are carried out in specific and historically conditioned socio-political contexts (Anderson, 2009; Ball, 2017). In the case of Chile, the evolution of public school education over the last 40 years has been conditioned by two opposing processes of administrative transformation; first, by the process of transferring control of education to municipalities that began in 1981 and, second, by a process of recentralization and transfer of control to the state under the NEP Law (Ley 21.040, 2017). This historical perspective is essential to analyze the current state of this system, in which different values coexist while it undergoes a profound transformation from decentralized management practices to others that are conditioned by the institutional structure of the state.

As a consequence, a historical perspective is required in order to contextualize the current situation of the SLEP studied, the narratives of the people involved in its establishment, and the origin and scope of the various organizational gaps that must urgently be resolved to achieve the success of this reform. The following is a brief report on the past and present situation of public school education in two parts: an historical perspective of the transfer of public education to municipal control and the formulation of the NEP in response to recent social demands.

Municipalization and privatization of education in Chile

In 1981, a reform was carried out that introduced profound transformations to the educational system in Chile, decentralizing the administration of public school education and encouraging private competition in the system. The Mineduc ceded control of public schools—financial administration, management of teaching staff, the curricula, school ownership, and logistics—to more than 300 municipalities. This took place under a military dictatorship, with appointed local authorities and no possibility of debating the reform (Valenzuela & Montecinos, 2017). A voucher system, which was unprecedented at the time, was also introduced to distribute subsidies to both public and private schools based on student enrollment numbers, (Torche, 2005). At the same time, public spending was reduced, cutting the budget for the education sector from 4.9% to 2.5% of GDP, which led to chronic funding deficiencies (Cox & Lemaitre, 1999).

For the municipalization of school education, local governments opted for two forms of administration (Torche, 2005). Most municipalities created Municipal Administration Departments (DAEM) that allowed them to take over services provided by other public agencies. Other municipalities created Municipal Education Corporations (CME), which were private entities (Cox & Lemaitre, 1999).

Starting in 1989, a co-payment mechanism was implemented in approximately 2,000 subsidized private schools, with a partial charge made to families. This reduced the competitiveness of public schools, since families with better socioeconomic conditions preferred to send their children to schools with co-payment and selection mechanisms, creating entry barriers associated with social status (Valenzuela & Montecinos, 2017). This led to the progressive transfer of students from the public to the private sector, forming a system with high levels of segregation and inequality in education quality (Cox & Lemaitre, 1999; Torche, 2005).

Recent reforms for the recentralization and fortification of public education

The critical diagnosis of the quality and inequity of education in Chile (Cox & Lemaitre, 1999; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017, among others) sparked forceful student demonstrations in 2006 and particularly in 2011 (Grugel & Singh, 2015). The situation of public school education was critical, both regarding the sustained drop in enrollment—in 2016 a third of the country's students were educated in public schools—and because of its precarious academic and financial performance (Valenzuela & Montecinos, 2017). In response to the strong social pressure, the second government of Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018) approved profound educational reforms, enacting Law 20,845 on School Inclusion (Ley 20.845, 2015), Law 20,903 on Teaching Careers (Ley 20-903, 2016), and Law 21,040 on New Public Education (NEP) (Ley 21.040, 2017).

The NEP is aimed at providing free, inclusive, and quality public education, creating new intermediate services (SLEPs) linked to the Mineduc and technically supported by the Public Education Directorate (DEP) (Ley 21.040, 2017). The transfer of school establishments from municipal control will be progressive, creating 70 SLEPs that will manage the schools that were previously administered by 345 municipalities. The first four SLEPs started operating in 2018 and the transfer of the schools to their control will be completed by 2025 or 2030 at the latest (Ley 21.040, 2017).

The short period of time between the enactment of the NEP law and the establishment of the first four SLEPs made implementation difficult, specifically due to delays in the definitive appointment of key authorities and agencies for governance of the system (Uribe et al., 2019). The first authorities of the DEP and the SLEPs were appointed on an interim basis, since the definitive authorities were to be chosen by the Senior Public Management system (Ley 21.040, 2017). Their replacement during the first year of operation led to uncertainty, intensive turnover of professionals, and discontinuities in the implementation of the system (Uribe et al., 2019).

In addition to the SLEPs, the NEP defines two collegiate bodies to ensure local participation (Figure 1; Ley 21.040, 2017). First, a Local Steering Committee, with representatives of mayors, parent centers, and the regional government, elected for six years. This committee should promote strategic development, contribute to the coherence of the system, and supervise accountability. It can provide support, guidance, and decision-making functions. Second, a Local Public Education Council of a consultative nature, with elected members representing educational communities.
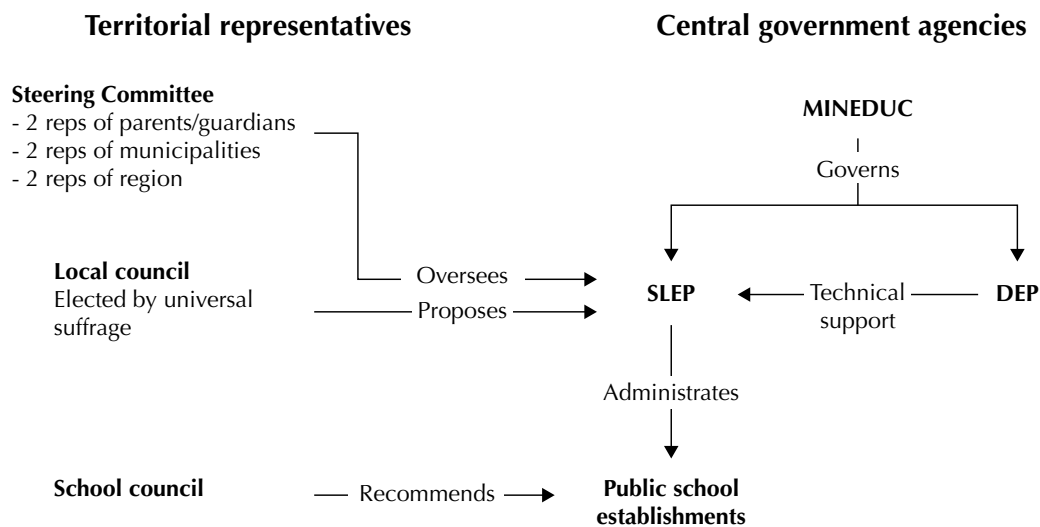
Territorial representatives   **Central government agencies**

Steering Committee
- 2 reps of parents/guardians
- 2 reps of municipalities
- 2 reps of region

MINEDUC

Governs

Local council
Elected by universal
suffrage

Oversees

Proposes

SLEP ← Technical ——— **DEP**
support

Administrates

School council   — Recommends →   **Public school
establishments**

Figure 1. *Governance of the public school system established in the NEP law*

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Law 21.040, 2017.

Finally, the NEP implies an increase in the scale of management and the recentralization of the public school system, creating greater complexity and administrative rigidity (Uribe et al., 2019). On the one hand, the CMEs require a far-reaching restructuring, moving from a private to a public regime, with expenditures regulated by the National Budget Law and a rigid system of purchases and contracts. On the other hand, the DAEM school establishments were transferred from municipal control to the SLEPs, adopting less flexible bureaucratic procedures that are typical of the central administration of the state and its various departments (Bellei, 2018).

The early analyses of the reform have been somewhat critical of what was achieved in the first phase of implementation (Raczynski et al., 2019; Uribe et al., 2019). From an institutional perspective, we consider that the design of the NEP contains contradictions similar to those observed by Ball (2017) in educational reforms carried out in complex contexts of disputed power. Specifically, we see incongruence between the political discourse and the results obtained in terms of strengthening the support of public education.

Organizational tensions in the educational system and labor distress

The profound transformations associated with the creation of the SLEPs in terms of institutional management, leadership, and lack of human and material resources have led to significant work-related tensions for the actors involved (Uribe et al., 2019). Although the NEP reform is aimed at improving public school education, transferring its administration to the state, in this research we observe that there are persistent elements of the managerial logic that generate labor distress. The deterioration of teachers' mental health has been observed previously in Chile (Cornejo, 2009) in contexts of precariousness employment, overload of working hours, and lack of materials.

The municipal public education model in Chile was based on decentralization, competition between educational establishments, and private entrepreneurship (Torche, 2005), with managerial leadership and a technical-instrumental rationale of standardization of processes in order to control and measure teaching outcomes, and with direct influence on the allocation of salaries and incentives (Anderson, 2009; Little & Bartlett, 2010; Sisto, 2011). In this vein, Soto et al. (2016) argue that the improvement in the effectiveness of the work of teachers was driven by the assessment of individual performance and competency, to the detriment of encouraging collective

practices for collaboration among peers. This individualized focus was developed in the context of a discourse that extols the social significance and inspirational nature of the teaching profession. Through exaltation of the vocation to teach, the frustration and adversity faced by teachers in their day-to-day activities is obscured, concealing the structural and material failures of the public education system (Soto et al., 2016).

This type of work-related tension is manifested intensely in public sector institutions, where high standards of management, technical efficiency, and provision of social justice are required, often without the technical and economic resources needed to achieve them (Obholzer, 2003). The organization of work in the public sector is thus a space of conflict in which all the contradictions, tensions, and unresolved dilemmas of values at the level of public policy design are experienced and suffered by the employees (Hoggett, 2006).

These tensions are added to the demands imposed on SLEPs, in which the lack of essential resources to meet the objectives of the NEP (Uribe et al., 2019) is offset by a heroic view of the mission to improve education quality, which is expressed in the interviews carried out in this research.

In organizations subject to this type of stress, inevitable failings at work tend to be attributed to people's lack of capabilities, often ignoring their precarious working conditions. Organizations thus sustain their production at the cost of the labor distress (Dejours, 2016) that they impose on their workers, who compensate by idealizing their role and magnifying their capabilities with notions of superiority and heroism, instead of facing their tasks with realism. This can lead to a deterioration of individual and group effectiveness in achieving the essential mission of the organization (Roberts, 2003).

Considering that the role of the SLEPs, as administrative support, is essential for the proper functioning of public schools, it is important to analyze the organizational tensions they experience, with the aim of identifying possible improvements in the course of the implementation of the NEP. This analysis has been carried out using the methodology described below.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative evidence obtained from an in-depth investigation of the major milestones, conflicts, achievements, and challenges of the first two years of implementation of the SLEP under study. An interpretative qualitative approach has been used, analyzing the subjective experience of the interviewees by studying the narratives in their accounts. The narratives are the means by which subjective experience acquires meaning and is reflexively reconstituted and communicated (Brown et al., 2008).

The narratives were analyzed following the guidelines of grounded theory, a holistic methodology specifically designed to extract and reveal the main aspects in the narratives of the subjects interviewed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A process of continuous triangulation between the narratives collected throughout the data analysis enabled us to check for biases and increase the validity of the findings. Two research assistants analyzed all of the interviews, and their findings were recurrently reviewed and discussed by two experienced researchers until analytical consistency in the results was achieved (O'Reilly et al., 2012).

In the first phase of this study, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews with SLEP professionals between September and November 2018, including both authorities and employees equally. To do this, a semi-structured guideline was used that addressed the cultural, local, and institutional challenges involved in the process of change. The interviewees were selected using progressive sampling until a level of theoretical saturation was reached that was sufficient to complete the data analysis (Stern et al., 2017). All of the individuals involved signed an informed consent that authorized us to record and use the interviews.

In a second stage we interviewed all members of the Local Steering Committee, comprised of six people. This was done in June and July 2019 after completing the analysis of the first stage, adding a time perspective and going more deeply into the findings obtained previously. The longitudinal understanding of the reform process was enhanced by the Committee members' extensive experience in this area. Similarly, we were able to contrast the previous analysis with the perspective of actors outside the SLEP.

The analysis began with open coding of the data, which enabled us to obtain first-order concepts representing the main themes described by the informants. Using axial coding, we subsequently contrasted the similarities and differences between the themes and phenomena that emerged from the analysis. This process allowed us to develop second-order categories that connect the findings of the previous level based on a higher level of abstraction of the concepts (Gioia et al., 2013).

Organizational dilemmas and tensions in the implementation of the SLEP

The main findings obtained from the interviews with members of the SLEP and the Steering Committee allow us to shed light on the main dilemmas, challenges, and learning from the implementation of the NEP law in this area. From the analysis of the interviews, it is clear that establishment of the SLEP under study was particularly complex, as it was one of two services that started operating in January 2018, followed by two others that began in July 2018. In addition to the experimental nature that this implied, the SLEP received limited support from the DEP, the agency in charge of guiding, supporting, and sharing best management practices between local services, as it first had to start its own administrative operations, select officials, and prioritize functions.

The SLEP analyzed covers the area of three low-income municipalities with high levels of socially vulnerability. This service has more than 100 employees to manage 54 schools and 23 kindergartens, in which more than 3,600 teachers and staff work, and which receive more than 23,000 kindergarten, elementary, secondary, and adult students. These figures give an idea of the great administrative complexity with which this service has to deal.

The process of establishing the SLEP under study was hindered by repeated changes in the leadership of the organization. After the inauguration of the new government in March 2018, its executive leadership was replaced and assumed on a rotating basis by five deputy directors until the current permanent director was eventually appointed in April 2019. On the other hand, the lack of internal organization of the service caused difficulties in defining the roles of all the professionals and formalizing its procedures. It should be noted that the three municipalities integrated in this SLEP previously operated under a private entity (CME), so the transfer to the public system generated significant problems in terms of budgetary spending.

Faced by these challenges, the perspectives of the interviewees at the SLEP and the Steering Committee are complementary. Both groups share a heroic view of the contribution they make to children and the country as motivations that allow them to overcome the precariousness of the deficient institutional design (Soto et al., 2016). Similarly, they are consistent in identifying critical problems that undermine the operation of the new system and the necessary learning to improve the quality of public education.

In the analysis of the narratives of the SLEP officials, we defined four second-order categories, connected between the individual or organizational and the positive or negative assessment that the interviewees give to their experiences. These categories were entitled construction of the SLEP, contradictions of the NEP, meaning of work, and labor distress (Table 1). From the analysis of the Steering Committee narratives, we formed categories with sharper temporal distinctions, which are as follows. In the past, the memory of processes and relationships; in the present, the role of the Steering Committee and institutional gaps, and looking towards the future, uncertainty in the face of the changes (Table 1).

Table 1
First- and second-order categories in narratives of interviewees

Steering Committee	*Past*	
Memory of processes and relationships (1) - Communities and Territory - Preparation of demunicipalization - Errors of implementation	SLEP - *Present*	
	Organizational Level	*Individual Level*
Institutional gaps (2) - Unpracticed laws - Inadequate resources - Territorial disparity - Weak links - Forgetting about learning	**Contradictions of the NEP (2)** - Unpracticed laws - Inadequate resources - Territorial disparity - Public or private regime - Lack of procedures - Lack of definition of roles	**Labor distress (3)** - Work pressure - Institutional abandonment - Postponed requirements - Disorientation *(-)*
Role of Steering Committee (5) - Mission and motivations - Learning and memory - Functions and coordination - Relationships and governance	**Building the SLEP (5)** - Territorial identity - Organization and roles - Creating procedures - Institutional links - Social links	**Meaning of work (4)** - Interest in the children - Vocation of service *(+)* - Pedagogical contribution - Vision and progress
Uncertainty in the face of change (6) - New institutions - Citizen participation - Outcomes in education - Opposition to change	*Future*	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In order to connect different narrative elements, we present the second-order categories chronologically in accordance with the time to which they refer. Due to the high consistency of the opinions between the members of the SLEP and Steering Committee, the categories in the present and at the organizational level are discussed together, according to the negative (institutional gaps and contradictions of the NEP) or positive (role of the Steering Committee and construction of the SLEP) opinions they express. The second-order categories identified at the individual level are interspersed with those at the organizational level, considering that the negative conditions of the organization generate labor distress, which is combatted by a sense of work, which acquires a heroic nature and allows the conditions of the organization to be improved.

To summarize, the second-order categories are shown below with the logic: past of the educational system → present organizational crisis → individual distress → individual motivation → present organizational improvement → expectations.

Memory of processes and relationships (1)

The category of memory of processes and relationships narrated by the members of the Steering Committee sheds light on the tension between the pre-existing and current conditions of the public school system in the territory. Going back to the municipalization of schools in the 1980s, the Committee members describe the contribution of municipalities and communities in the territory to support the schools in spite the scarcity of resources due to the low subsidies and the approval of laws that affected municipal education because of insufficient public funding, such as the teachers' statute. This series of actions meant that around 10% of the annual financing of public education was paid for with direct contributions from the municipalities themselves, with even higher percentages among small and rural districts (Valenzuela, 2007).

The interviewees also highlight the importance of schools in the effective delivery of municipal services to families in the areas of health, sports, and community activities. In addition to this, they warn of the risk of losing these important spaces for community engagement when the system is moved away from municipal control.

The municipal representatives on the committee emphasize the work carried out to implement the municipalization in an orderly manner, despite the weak institutional design of the NEP. In this process, they underline the contribution of the coordination work carried out between municipalities 1 and 2 prior to the establishment of the SLEP. They also identify local organization problems caused by the late integration of municipality 3, which did not participate in the preparatory stage.

> With [district 2] we worked for a full year previously, the teams got to know each other, the directors went through a process called anticipation ... I think that this is a particularly sensitive period for a successful transition (municipal representative).

The members of the Steering Committee share a critical view of the transition, mostly because the extremely high complexity and magnitude of the SLEP under study was not foreseen, nor the high organizational cost of managing a larger number of establishments. This complexity stems from the great heterogeneity of the districts and the number of enrollments managed by the institution. The interviewees also criticize the lack of anticipation of the greater bureaucratic complexity that transferring a school system administered by three private CMEs to a public agency that is part of Mineduc would involve.

> That's where the private and public is more noticeable, because schools and principals feel that they used to be able to solve lots of problems quickly and now, on the other hand, there's a lot of bureaucracy, because, of course, they were private corporations and had much more freedom to manage their resources (regional representative).

Institutional gaps and contradictions of the NEP (2)

The critical opinions of the implementation of the NEP in the SLEP studied are shared by the officials and the members of the Steering Committee. Both groups of interviewees identify gaps in the system and the inadequacy of the NEP's legal framework to meet the day-to-day needs of the administration of the school system. This is evident in the absence of procedures for carrying out the basic duties of the service and the lack of definition of roles, which leads to confusion in the work, dependence on the leadership, and little capacity for delegation.

> We have staffing that is absolutely insufficient for the needs of the service. There are areas where there isn't a single person assigned by the organizational chart (SLEP authority).

> A hundred or so people arrived here and this place had no capacity. We had no desks, no chairs, no computer. The conditions were not in place to work (SLEP official).

> I would say that [the most serious problems are], first, the issue of resources. Two, the issue of staffing and distribution of the staff (regional representative).

These shortcomings are aggravated by the lack of financial resources and equipment to carry out the work. This situation is made worse still by the pre-existing precariousness in one of the districts. Improving the educational system in this district has required focused investment that has reduced the resources available to maintain the establishments in the other two.

In the SLEP, it has been difficult to reconcile the work cultures between public sector employees and those from the private sector in terms of purchasing systems, salary payments, and pedagogical focuses. There is also tension between the territorial identities of the three districts, which is manifested by divergent practices and procedures.

> There's a problem here that's related to the issue of public service, of understanding that you are in public service, you're not in a corporation. And that leads to tension between the teams and culture clashes (SLEP authority).

With regard to the governance of the school system, the committee members note the weakness and informality of the links between agencies in the new system (Figure 1). The lack of internal SLEP procedures is symmetrical to the lack of protocols for coordination with other actors in the territory, which were previously organized around the municipalities. There are also no efficient protocols for coordination with Mineduc or technical support from the DEP.

Labor distress (3)

At the individual level, these shortcomings in the organizational design and implementation of the SLEP have produced high levels of labor distress (Dejours, 2016). According to the interviewees, precarious working conditions, high work pressure, and lack of clarity regarding roles have obliged the staff to work harder and have also created great emotional exhaustion, much disorientation, and lack of support from authorities.

> We're in a state of emergency ... and that [occurs] when there is no mold, there are no parameters, it's double, triple the effort, perhaps quadruple (SLEP authority).

> I found out on February 28 [2018] that I was going to work in accounting. My hair almost fell out, because I'm an English teacher ... I arrived at an accounting meeting, they were talking about accruals, payments, I don't know what, and I looked at myself and said what am I doing here? (SLEP employee).

The interviewees also report continuous experiences of institutional abandonment both internally—caused by the rotation of the leadership—and externally, due to gaps in communication with other ministerial agencies. In addition, they report that there is a lack of engagement with other entities in the territory. This lack of organization leads people to postpone personal needs in order to respond to the shortcomings experienced by schools and the children educated there, increasing the fatigue, frustration, distress of the teams (Cornejo, 2009; Dejours, 2016).

Meaning of work (4)

In order to cope with work-related distress, SLEP professionals emphasize the meaning they give to their day-to-day work. They consider that the vocation of service becomes a central factor to excel in their work, through the positive impact they can generate in the school communities. For the SLEP authorities, it is essential to strengthen the public education system.

> That's what motivates me to be here every day ... public education from any point [at] which you're working, whatever you're doing there can have repercussions, so that's why I continue (SLEP employee).

The interviewees show great concern for the children, who are represented as deprived and innocent subjects. This image gives their daily work a sense of importance that motivates them to make additional efforts. They also express an interest in contributing to the pedagogical development of school communities and to the progress of the country.

> I think that we [the SLEP] were created to make the system truly mixed again, and for it to be mixed again we have to take out the children who are in poor, deficient schools, and for them to trust our schools again, which will start to be good, clean schools, with good infrastructure and good educational quality (SLEP authority).

On the other hand, being unable to meet these ideals due to the situations faced by the service becomes a source of frustration in these people's work.

Building the SLEP and role of the Steering Committee (5)

At the organizational level, SLEP members develop a narrative of building the SLEP as the articulator of a new institutional framework to address the challenges of the NEP. This narrative is complementary to the view that Steering Committee members have of their role in achieving this reform.

The interviewees express the need to organize a cohesive service based on a new local identity, which has to be generated on two levels. Internally, it is essential to reconcile the different visions and practices of the three districts, and define roles and procedures for coordination among professionals. Externally, the SLEP must be recognized by other actors in the territory and the Mineduc as an intermediate agency capable of improving public education.

> [We have to] build a new culture, which is the culture of the public sphere, of commitment, of public responsibility, and of overcoming all the difficulties of a territory such as the one in which we work (SLEP authority).

The members of the Steering Committee state that they have extended their predefined roles in order to fill gaps in the NEP law, helping to create procedures and relationships necessary to coordinate the system. The narrative of being a pioneering service is thus connected with the need to consolidate learning in order to make structural improvements to the NEP.

> [The Steering Committee] is also a decision-making body, because it has the power, for example, to approve the local strategic plan, to make shortlists for the position of the executive committee, and can even approve the removal of an executive director, so it's not just a consultative body (regional representative).

The narratives of building an unprecedented system converge among both groups of interviewees. They describe the creation of a complex system of roles, of links between communities and local entities, of their procedures for coordination through an emerging and co-constructed governance.

However, the ambition of building a New Public Education clashes with the failure to define essential administrative and financial aspects for the administration of the education system, such as budget management, financial sustainability, and efficient coordination procedures between agencies.

Uncertainty in the face of change (6)

After the difficulties in establishing the SLEP, the interviewees expressed great uncertainty about the change with regard to the future implementation of the NEP. There are doubts about the capacity of new institutions to assume their roles and there is no certainty that they will have sufficient financial resources to support public education in the territory.

> One of [the SLEP director's] big jobs is going to be precisely this issue ... the deficits, on which he, as we know, is taking steps; he's trying to find more resources, more income, he has shown us some formulas that should be implemented (representative of parents and guardians).

With respect to the Mineduc, the interviewees feel that the DEP lacks sufficient capacity to provide the necessary technical support and that it is not prepared for the start of operations of new SLEPs. They also warn of a risk of co-optation of the Steering Committee's role of oversight over the SLEP, considering the weakness of the statute and the low remuneration of the directors. This means there is a risk of the regulator being co-opted in areas that are remote or less subject to public scrutiny.

In short, it is feared that the shortcomings in the NEP's organizational design may prevent it from meeting its fundamental purpose, which is to improve the quality of public education. On the one hand, there is no certainty that a more efficient and equitable administrative system is being built. On the other, there is concern that the possible deterioration of public education will accentuate the shift in enrollment towards private schools.

> We are included in a concept of a New Public Education that is being talked about, but it's not very clear what's new and to what extent we're going to be able to effectively provide higher quality and more equitable education than we did when we were a municipality (regional representative).

Finally, there is concern that poor performance on the part of the first four SLEPs could lead to opposition to the implementation of the NEP in new territories from communities, teachers, or political representatives.

> It has not been possible to the [teachers'] union be an actor that pushes this process, but they are actors that are demanding the recognition of benefits that they feel they have lost (regional representative).

> When [the schools] were under the municipality's control, there were the same problems, so now I see parliamentarians delivering letters [in opposition to the NEP], I believe that there is a very strong political issue (representative of parents and guardians).

In contrast to these concerns, there is broad agreement in the interviews in terms of the main challenges that need to be resolved in order to improve the operation of the SLEP. First, it requires greater resources and optimization of financial management, which has become more rigid due to the transition to a bureaucratic state regime, in line with the flexibility necessary for the functioning of the school system. Second, a more specific definition of the identity and functions of each of the actors involved is also required, as well as the development of procedures that promote horizontal cooperation and collaboration between the different levels of the system. Third, the capacity for organizational learning in the public school system must be strengthened, systematically recording and assessing errors and successes in the implementation of the NEP, and creating the corresponding institutional innovations.

Conclusion

The NEP Law is an ambitious reform that is aimed at improving the quality of public school education in Chile, which has created great challenges in terms of cultural and administrative transformation in this educational system. However, multiple flaws in the institutional design have been evident in the early stage of implementation, producing significant gaps that could affect the success of the reform (Ball, 2017). In this respect, the interviewees' opinions clearly identify financial, organizational, and institutional learning challenges. This diagnosis, made from their day-to-day experience is consistent with the conclusions of recent research on this reform in Chile (Dirección de Educación Pública, 2019; Raczynski et al., 2019; Uribe et al., 2019) and with comparative studies of educational reforms in other countries (Fullan, 2016; Mourshed et al., 2010, among others).

During the course of this research, we found that the aforementioned shortcomings have produced intense labor distress in the SLEP studied, which underlines the relationship that exists between the quality of the design of the educational reform and the subjective experience of the people who work in the system. On the other hand, we highlight the extraordinary motivation of these professionals and the exceptional dedication of the Steering Committee. Both groups show a heroic willingness to overcome any difficulty in order to provide better education to children and revive public education in Chile, which is an indispensable contribution to improve education. However, we believe that the success of a reform of this magnitude cannot rely on extraordinary individual performances and should be sustained by a more solid and coherent institutional design.

With regard to the objectives of this study, the identification of problems and learning, and analysis of the narratives in the SLEP and the Steering Committee make it possible to identify critical elements of the NEP's organization that must be bettered in order to improve the quality of public education in Chile. It should be noted that the interviewees, in addition to identifying these critical problems, demonstrated the ability to devise specific solutions to them.

First, the interviewees express fear about the failure of the reform, due to the precariousness of the financial, human, and administrative resources. This could lead to a drop in the quality of public education, intensification of the exodus of students to the private system, and growing political opposition to the creation of new SLEPs. On the other hand, they manage to mobilize collective resources and maintain pre-existing support links with municipalities and educational communities. Similarly, the motivation for the children and for the future of the country is a significant symbolic resource, being a shared objective that drives the cooperation of heterogeneous actors (Hopkins, 2017).

Second, the lack of coherence in the institutional design of the NEP is demonstrated by the confusion in the roles and functions at work, the lack of definition of management procedures, and the inefficiency of mechanisms for coordination between administrative levels. This has been partially offset by the creative capabilities of professionals and managers, who have made progress with the adequate definition of roles and a complex system of links between communities and territorial entities.

Third, as one of the first services created, this SLEP was affected by improvisation during its establishment, which was aggravated by the late inclusion of a third district. The record of experiences in this and other pioneering services is being systematized, the preparatory stage for the establishment of new SLEPs has been strengthened, and their organizational design is expected to be improved (DEP, 2019).

In conclusion, the existence of embodied knowledge (Ignatow, 2007) in the organization is a valuable resource to improve the educational reform driven by the NEP. The findings made at this level enable us to contribute to the improvement of education quality from an organizational perspective. In this respect, we confirm the hypothesis that the observation of labor distress (Dejours, 2016) allows us to make an early diagnosis of failings

in the institutional design. On the other hand, the collective knowledge accumulated by the teams participating in the process helps to identify relevant lessons learned for the improvement of educational reforms that are as ambitious and complex as the NEP Law in Chile.

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