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Quality Assurance in Chile's Municipal Schools: Facing the Challenge of Assuring and Improving Quality in Low Performing Schools

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1. Introduction

This chapter will focus on the issue of quality assurance and improvement in the Chilean school system, particularly on the challenges faced by public municipal schools in the context of recent educational reform. Building on previous studies on the implementation of a quality assurance system in our country, we outline two interdependent ways to approach this challenge: recognising the schools' current characteristics and improvement needs, and providing appropriate support to build internal capacities for improvement in these schools.

Following the research evidence described in this chapter, suggestions are advanced to influence education policy regarding quality assurance and improvement issues in Chile. We propose the need for closer collaboration and joint work among different levels of the school system (national, municipal and schools), as well as among school stakeholders (principals, students, teachers, parents) to develop internal and system capacity for assuring and improving educational quality. Consequently, to assist schools in building the necessary internal capacity and promote learning and innovation, we highlight the relevance of distributed leadership amongst school stakeholders and the development of a learning-oriented culture to facilitate processes of self-evaluation in schools, which in turn would promote a culture of continuous improvement.

2. Education reform and policy context in Chile

Since the 1980s a market-driven model has operated for the provision of educational services in Chile. The role of the government has been to subsidise demand as parents "choose" among three different types of schools. Municipal schools are administered by the country's 341 municipal governments and are totally financed through a per-pupil voucher system based on student attendance. Private subsidised schools are financed through the same voucher system and, in most cases, charging parents an additional fee. The third type

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of schools is private fee-paying schools, which are fully funded by parents. This funding formula has led to a highly stratified educational system (Donoso & Donoso, 2009). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) wrote that the educational system in Chile is "consciously class structured" (OECD, 2004). The report further states:

> "The rules of the game are different – and unjustly so – for municipal and private schools. Private schools can both select and expel. Municipal schools – with the exception of the few prestigious ones that are in high demand – are obliged to accept all students asking for access. Under these circumstances, results can be expected to differ in favour of private subsidised schools." (p. 255)

In the case of Chile, research shows that students' performance in national examinations is directly related to their socio-economical status (SES) and the type of school they attend (McEwan, 2001; Raczynski and Muñoz, 2007). This situation illustrates the inequities of the Chilean educational system (Mizala and Romaguera, 2000). A problem that has been hard to resolve through initiatives such as programmes of instructional support for underperforming schools, strengthening of teacher training and assessment, and school management support programmes (Raczynski & Muñoz, 2007). Therefore, demands for improving quality and equity in the school system have been in the front of the policy agenda for the last two decades, but with few positive results so far (Donoso & Donoso, 2009; Belleï, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2008; Weinstein & Muñoz, 2009).

In an effort to address this situation, the Chilean school system is currently undergoing a deep transformation, with the passing of several legal initiatives aiming to change its structure and functioning (Preferential School Subsidy Act, General Act of Education; National System for Quality Assurance in Education). Weinstein and Muñoz (2009) have noted that the introduction of these new legal frameworks represent a 'breaking point' because it purports to modify the structure of the school system in order to push changes that can redress the differences in achievement among municipal public schools, private subsidised schools and private fee-paying schools (Mizala & Romaguera, 2000). These legal frameworks constitute reform efforts aimed to ensure a high quality and equitable school system for all students.

These reforms have influenced primary and secondary education on issues such as finance, accountability and governance of schools and local administrators (Brunner & Peña, 2007), setting particular challenges to those low-performing municipal schools in vulnerable contexts (Sotomayor, 2006). However, these reforms have also safeguarded the government's role of control and assessment of curricular issues (Muñoz & Vanni, 2008). This is similar to what happens in the rest of the Latin American educational reforms (Ball, Fischman, & Gvirtz, 2003). According to Ball et al. (2003), education policies in Latin American countries have been the subject of many processes of centralised decentralisation, similar to the Chilean case. All of them have followed a similar trend of reform characterised by a 'local empowerment' style of governance (Glatter, 2002), which emphasises the locality of decision-making. These policies and strategies have been widely supported by international multilateral agencies promoting reforms alongside with neoliberal principles (Ball et al., 2003). Additionally, these policies have promoted quality assurance programmes as part of reform efforts in Latin American countries, like Chile (Carnoy, 1999).

One aspect to consider in any system of quality assurance is the relationship between quality and equity. Equity refers to fairness in access to educational opportunities so that resources are distributed in accordance to differential students´ needs and outcomes do not depend on students' social-cultural characteristics. That is, independent of their family backgrounds, in an equitable school system all students complete their education with comparable levels of skills and opportunities to succeed in life (Belfield & Levin, 2002). Quality without equity becomes a mere compliance with standards without consideration of the contextual and local aspects mentioned above.

3. Research evidence from the implementation of a quality assurance system in Chile's municipal schools

Education policy demands the various stakeholders at the national level to take for not only monitoring commitment with established goals and the use of resources, but also to promote the coordination of necessary networks to enable each school to decide and systematically develop efforts to improve and deliver a quality service (MINEDUC, 2005). As new quality assurance systems will be required for Chilean schools, it may be useful to examine lessons learned from a prior quality assurance policy.

The System for Quality Assurance of School Management (SACGE) was implemented between 2003 and 2007 and consisted of an integrated model of four key areas of processes and one area of results. The system promoted a cycle of continuous improvement based on four phases: institutional self-evaluation, external review, school improvement plan and public account (MINEDUC, 2005).

Our research group conducted a study between 2006 and 2008 in order to analyse the influence of SACGE in schools' and their leadership teams' performance. Through a mix-methods approach data collected in six schools, showed that, although all schools evidenced important changes in their practices, not all schools managed to assure quality and develop a culture of continuous improvement (Ahumada, Galdames, González, & Herrera, 2009). The results also revealed several difficulties in the implementation of SACGE (i.e. inadequate training; contradictory information; inconsistent support from local administrators), which in turn hindered the possibility for schools and their school leaders to engage and commit to a process of improvement.

The quality model underpinning SACGE as an assurance system is not prescriptive. It recognizes, values and promotes diversity of schools and it assumes that the implementation of each phase ought to consider the context, particularly the school's culture and history (MINEDUC, 2005). Planning for improvement is one of the most important aspects that SACGE promotes, giving schools the autonomy to identify and define the appropriate management practices for their context and needs. School leaders (principal and management team) are responsible for giving viability to the planned actions. Moreover, SACGE aims to promote continuous improvement in schools, specifically, it seeks to improve the quality of management processes, students' learning (scores on national achievement tests) and the satisfaction of the community. Thus, SACGE invites schools and school stakeholders to take responsibility for the results that the proposed improvement plan aims for and is capable of achieving.

In short, SACGE aims to promote responsibility in principals and their management teams to conduct a systematic review and ongoing development of management processes and outcomes, developing a learning-oriented culture of continuous improvement which involves various school stakeholders. The community the school serves should be part of the decision-making processes as schools and districts define how educational quality will be attained and measured.

4. SACGE's four phases for quality assurance

As described above, SACGE considers four phases for quality assurance in schools: institutional self-evaluation, external review, school improvement plan and public accountability. The institutional self-evaluation phase aims to produce base-line information about the school's management process and results to determine the quality of its daily educational practices and identify those areas that could be improved (MINEDUC, 2005).

Research on institutional self-evaluation (Navarro & Jiménez, 2005; Soto, 2006), indicates that the process of self-evaluation facilitates the awareness of the prevailing leadership style in the organization, the characteristics of the organizational culture and the degree of satisfaction of teachers and school leaders. Navarro and Jimenez (2005) note that to maximize the positive effects of the self-evaluation, it requires prior development of teamwork skills, with strong emphasis on participative management. Soto (2006), however, points out that many principals have an individual conception of the self-evaluation process, which contrasts with the theoretical foundations that foster collaborative work. In this sense, research evidence highlights the need for the principal and his team to assume accountability for the evaluation of educational processes and outcomes (Westhuizen van der, Mosoge, Swanepoel, & Coetsee, 2005), which would facilitate the implementation of a quality-oriented school culture (Cano, 2003; Casanova, 2004).

In a study about the functioning of schools' management team during the implementation of SACGE in ten primary and secondary public municipal schools conducted by our research team, we evidenced four factors that accounted for a good teamwork: trust, sense-making, efficiency and effectiveness, and ineffectiveness (Ahumada, Montecinos & Sisto, 2008). Trust appears to be the key factor in determining a well-functioning team. In schools with a higher level of trust, people felt very comfortable working together, supported each other strongly and had great appreciation for the work they did. Furthermore, they were willing to share and to listen to other members' ideas freely and there was a strong identification with the team and the school.

Management teams, whose functioning was of higher quality, were able to initiate the self-evaluation phase with a clear idea of the workload involved and how it should be managed. In the case of teams whose functioning was of lower or poor quality, they exhibited problems organising and delegating tasks, such as collecting data, interpreting evidence and managing small groups of teachers. It is worth noting that in these cases teachers' participation was instrumental and limited only to data collection (Ahumada, Galdames, Gonzalez & Herrera, 2009).

Building a shared meaning and direction was another important factor that affected the functioning of these schools' management teams. In those teams with a higher quality

functioning there were systematic conversations about the school's vision and how to achieve it. According to our research, most management teams faced the self-evaluation phase without delving into the challenges of developing a process such as this one. However, during the implementation of the self-evaluation phase, some teams were able to develop a shared vision about the challenging and meaningful work they had to do in this phase (Ahumada, Galdames, Gonzalez & Herrera, 2009).

During the self-evaluation phase, some aspects related to the construction of meaning and the process for organizing this task emerged, as well as specific aspects associated with organizational learning and the journey of continuous school improvement (Collison & Cook, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 200). However, these aspects were seldom capitalized as time became a scarce resource for the management team and for the teachers engaged in this self-evaluation. These actors lacked the time to reflect on the aim and importance of self-evaluation. Moreover, in many schools it was perceived as an externally imposed task (Ahumada, Galdames, Gonzalez & Herrera, 2009).

The management teams that spent more time and resources to identify problems and found ways to solve them were the same ones that stood out for their internal relationships of trust and mutual knowledge about its members' capacity. These teams, whose functioning was of higher quality, saw self-evaluation as worthwhile and constantly monitored their work, developing strategies to deal with data collection and analysis. In several of these teams, these changes meant redistributing the work schedule, and in some cases, deferring or eliminating other activities; even increasing the number of hours they worked. One of the consequences of these strategies was that some management teams improved their relationship with the rest of the school members, especially with teachers. By contrast, in teams with poor or lower functioning quality the self-evaluation process created a distance between the management team and teachers, negatively affecting the climate within the school (Ahumada, Galdames, Gonzalez & Herrera, 2009).

The second phase, external review, intended to validate the institutional self-evaluation. For the Ministry of Education, the aim of the external evaluation should be providing objective information to the school about their self-evaluation, as a way of contributing to their improvement process (MINEDUC, 2005). This external evaluation was led by a team of professionals – External Panel- who did not belong to the school, but were related to it in their capacity as ministry supervisors or municipal officers. Research evidence indicates that the usefulness of the external evaluation will depend on how the school will assume this instance to generate a learning process, and to ensure commitment and participation of all of the members of the school community (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll & Russ, 2004).

The External Panel's visit to the school marked a turning point in the process. In general, management teams, due to coordination and relationship problems with the Panel members, developed a negative opinion of this phase. These negative perceptions translated into the idea that SACGE was one of the many ill-implemented and abruptly replaced programs that the Ministry of Education has imposed to schools (Ahumada, Galdames, González & Herrera, 2009). This finding was reported for schools that had high functioning as well as low functioning management teams.

The following phase, developing and implementing an Improvement Plan, consists of designing, implementing and evaluating actions that will generate changes in the school's

management or will improve management practices already in place. Thus, the school quality improvement model puts the focus on the school´s and its community´s capacity manage change (Fullan 1999, Canton, 2004). This would involve the establishment of a culture oriented to foster organizational learning and continuous improvement (Stoll, 2009; Voulalas & Sharpe, 2005; Martinez, 2007).

Finally, the Public Accountability phase asks the principal to share, with the community, the school´s outcomes and progress on matters related to the quality of teaching, learning and management processes. The literature has emphasized the importance of schools' responsibility for reporting back to the community their results (Earl, 2004; Glatter, 2002). In this phase, the goal is to promote accountability, seek transparency and facilitate access to the results and management processes to the school community (Marks & Nance, 2007; Ryan, 2005; Schweigert, 2006). However, accountability not only implies to give an account but also to take responsibility for appropriately representing the rights and needs of the community. From this point of view, accountability means building with the community a series of performance indicators that are relevant to them and the school, being part of their success. Accountability as a concept is more about performance than a mere democratic control of processes and outcomes that must be present at school (Anderson, 2009).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The study suggested that systems like SACGE should consider a differentiated approach to quality 'assurance' (compare the schools' performance against a standard) and to quality 'improvement' (review of schools' processes to influence their performance). From this perspective, it is important to consider schools' entry characteristics or base line regarding their school management processes and results, as well as characteristics of the leadership team in charge of this process (Ahumada, Montecinos, & Sisto, 2008). In this regard, findings from our studies indicate the importance of distributed leadership. This leadership is not just that exercised by the principal, as transformational or instructional, but one in which various members of the school community feel responsible for significant improvements in processes and outcomes. As Anderson (2009) points out, it involves leadership exercised by all actors in the school community, ensuring the rights of children who are served by the school.

The concept of distributed leadership is understood here as the one that emerges from everyday actions, involving people responsible for tasks related to the design and implementation of the improvement plan. In our view, this is particularly interesting for understanding the ways of organising work as well as the social relationships involved in performing the tasks entailed in a quality assurance system such as SACGE. On the other hand, distributed leadership is concerned with the contextual variables associated with performing this task, and it seems particularly important to strengthen schools' internal capacity for organizational learning, understood at the individual, team and organizational levels.

We have learned from our research that, for a quality assurance system to be effective, it requires: a culture that facilitates learning, teamwork and strategic clarity where members of the organization share the organizational mission and goals. Strategic clarity must be reflected in the schools' strategic orientations and should guide the development and implementation of the Improvement Plan. In summary, we believe that both the distributed

leadership and organizational learning at different levels are central to the current educational reform that seeks to generate a change in the management of educational institutions.

Based on the differences observed between low and high functioning leadership teams, we conclude that capacity building for school improvement is one of the necessary aspects to consider when developing a policy for quality assurance. There are certain skills that should be installed in the educational communities in order to achieve autonomy for improvement: data-driven decision making, distributed leadership, communication and transparency between stakeholders, ability to innovate, to generate new practices and a participatory culture, are just a few.

International research evidence is consistent with our findings regarding the importance of identifying internal characteristics of schools for assuring and improving school quality (Anderson, Leithwood, & Strauss, 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Stoll, 2009). Collectively, these studies have noted that building internal capacities for data based decision- making, distributed leadership and organizational learning are critical for initiating and sustaining processes for quality assurance and improvement in schools.

To develop these skills it is necessary to articulate the different levels at which a policy for quality assurance and quality improvement is designed and implemented. Greater coordination is necessary among the central (Ministry of Education), intermediate (regional ministry and municipal administrators) and local level (primary and secondary schools). A joint effort among the various stakeholders that make-up the school organization (administrators, students, teachers, and parents) is crucial to achieving a quality education. Quality and equity in education is not a problem that can be resolved at the school level; political and social organizations linked to education must also join in this effort.

Regarding the definition of 'good quality', it is important to consider the interaction between internal and external contextual environments. According to Tikly (2011) there are three overlapping contextual environments that define what good quality education means: policy, school and home/community. The author states that 'creating a good quality education involves paying attention to the interface between each environment' (Tikly, 2011, p.11). In other words, considering the external policy demands, internal capacities of the school and the social and intellectual capital of the community.

The interplay among these factors as well as the school's base line, creates particular configurations cautioning against the 'one size fits all' approach to quality assurance and improvement initiatives (Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nikel, & Ukpo, 2008; Sayed & Ahmed, 2011). The same goes for the external support that might be provided to low-performing schools, as the literature advises against transferring 'what works' in some school contexts to a different one (Harris & Bennett, 2001).

According to findings from our studies, the school principal and his/her management team, in conjunction with all school´s stakeholders, must work to develop a learning-oriented organizational culture that engages in a continuous improvement of its processes and outcomes. This is certainly hard work that can be facilitated to the extent that there is a shared understanding of where the school stands on the indicators for educational quality and the capacities that need to be developed in order to improve.

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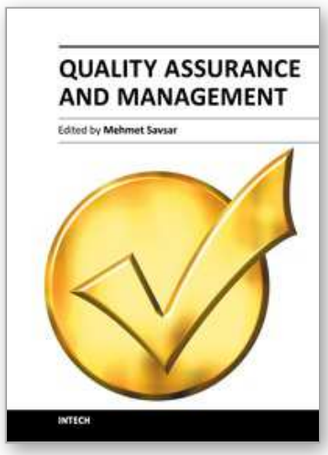
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The purpose of this book is to present new concepts, state-of-the-art techniques and advances in quality related research. Novel ideas and current developments in the field of quality assurance and related topics are presented in different chapters, which are organized according to application areas. Initial chapters present basic ideas and historical perspectives on quality, while subsequent chapters present quality assurance applications in education, healthcare, medicine, software development, service industry, and other technical areas. This book is a valuable contribution to the literature in the field of quality assurance and quality management. The primary target audience for the book includes students, researchers, quality engineers, production and process managers, and professionals who are interested in quality assurance and related areas.

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