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Teachers' Beliefs about Poverty: A Barrier We Must Face

Viviana Gómez, María Paz González and Pablo Gutiérrez

Abstract

The poorest children have the lowest educational results, which the neoliberal model has deepened. The State transferred its responsibility to private and municipalities through supply subsidies, but the amount did not ensure quality. To solve this problem, it provides an additional subsidy for each “priority” child, demanding accountability, but with high institutional and individual consequences. But the gap remains, and teachers are held accountable for these low results. The literature shows that teachers hold beliefs that prevent them from dealing constructively with this reality. Beliefs about poverty were investigated by asking 828 teachers from low and lower-middle SES schools with standardized test scores above and below the average of similar schools to point out four characteristics of vulnerable schools. The data were analyzed by means of thematic and semantic field analysis. A shared narrative was found, independent of the type of school, attributing failure to the degraded context that surrounds it, from which the families and children come. Neoliberal policies based on accountability have intensified the work of the teacher and the constant threat has led them to self-defense. There is an urgent need to change the approach if opportunities for the poorest children are to be improved.

Keywords: beliefs, poverty, teachers, accountability, social justice

1. Introduction

In the last four decades in Chile, neoliberal policies have synchronized the educational system with the market economy [1]. This has implied, on the one hand, the introduction of new concepts and processes such as quality, efficiency, competition, and accountability [2] more typical of a business model than of an educational one [3]. On the other hand, it has led to profound changes in terms of financing, evaluation, and monitoring of these policies in schools. The main consequence was the disappearance of public education in 1982 and the mutation of the State towards a subsidiary role, delegating the responsibility for education to private or decentralized providers in exchange for a subsidy that functions as an incentive to supply and demand [2]. According to [4],

The state acts as a market-maker in this scenario, as it produces and organizes markets for public assets, such as education. It achieves this not only through a competitive

funding system but also by creating policy tools that assign value to education providers through differentiating market signs, such as scores, rankings, and quality ratings, which are then linked to rewards and sanctions. These market signs are crucial for producing school hierarchies, distinction, and comparison, granting school's symbolic reputation and, therefore, a sense of competition (p. 116).

However, this arrangement did not ensure improvement in the supply of education, nor did it improve the quality of learning for the poorest. On the contrary, the system of single-value subsidies, as designed, benefited more those with greater sociocultural advantage [1].

1.1 An education policy of accountability based on results

Despite the attempts of the post-dictatorship democratic governments to strengthen state support to education, a series of public policies that deepened the neoliberal model followed, which were finally integrated into a single system aimed at granting funding to schools whose core is managerial accountability, which is strongly associated with results in large-scale evaluations instead of processes [5].

In 2008, the SEP Law [6] was enacted, aimed at improving educational equity for the most disadvantaged groups, providing additional resources to subsidized schools according to the concentration of “priority students”. This subsidy was provided after the school had signed an Equal Opportunity and Educational Excellence Agreement with the Ministry of Education and submitted a School Improvement Project (SIP) in which the school committed itself to achieve important advances in terms of curriculum, school management, school coexistence, and human resources management [6, 7].

More recently, new public institutions were created to closely regulate the best implementation of these public policies, the Agency for the Quality of Education (ACE) and the Superintendence of Education. This was intended to ensure access to quality education and equity for all [8]. The ACE is in charge of the national evaluation process and, according to its results, annually classifies schools according to the performance of 4th-grade students in the test of the Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de resultados de aprendizaje del Ministerio de Educación de Chile (SIMCE) and other complementary indicators, but with a much lower weight. In this way, schools are classified as “autonomous”, “emerging” or “recovering” according to the criteria shown in **Table 1**. These demands have placed a high pressure on schools, in which eight to nine standardized tests (approximately four levels and four subjects) are applied annually [9].

The “emerging” category is applied when schools show intermediate results, which are qualified as medium or medium-low; when schools have only two SIMCE evaluations or when they are new establishments, or their student body is less than 20.

1.2 Accountability with high consequences

The classification obtained by schools has a direct impact on the funding they receive from the state. High-performing schools are classified as autonomous, receiving double the subsidy per priority child compared to schools classified as emergent. At the other extreme, “recovering” schools that show sustained low performance may have consequences such as the removal of the management team

Weighting	Criteria	“Autonomous” schools		“Recovering” schools	
70%	Achievement in the SIMCE Test	Average in SIMCE higher than the median obtained by similar schools		Average in SIMCE less than 220 points	
		Percentage of students with more than 250 is higher than the median of similar schools		Percentage of students with more than 250 is less than 20%	
		Percentage of students with more than 300 is higher than the median of similar schools			
30%	Administrative dependency	No municipal	Municipal	No municipal	Municipal
	Priority student retention rates	25%	25%	25%	25%
	Priority Student Pass Rates	25%	25%	25%	25%
	Integration of teachers and parents to the IEP	20%	17%	20%	17%
	Educational innovations and attraction of external support institutions	15%	13%	15%	13%
	Improvement in working conditions and operation of the establishment	15%	13%	15%	13%
	Participation of teachers in the national Teacher Evaluation System	—	7%	—	7%

Table 1.
Criteria and weighting for the classification of schools according to their achievements in the SIMCE test and in the other improvement indicators committed to in their IEP.

or be subject to definitive closure [4, 10]. These schools are monitored by the ACE through repeated inspection visits aimed at providing feedback on teaching and school management [11].

The basic principle of neoliberal ideology is that institutions do not feel that they have a secure and stable budget, because permanent quality improvement is achieved only through the promise of incentives, risks, and sanctions [4]. However, after more than a decade of its implementation, standardized assessments continue to report a great influence of socioeconomic level (hereafter SES) on learning, showing a large gap between low and high SES students [12, 13]. These results have led us to wonder about teacher subjectivity. Could there be a problem in the beliefs they hold about poverty?

1.3 The crucial role of beliefs

Beliefs are “individual judgments about the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do” [14] (p. 316). Moreover, because of their affective,

evaluative, and episodic nature, they become filters through which new phenomena are interpreted [15] and expectations are developed that influence the teacher's action [16].

Teachers are not immune to the influence of stereotypical beliefs [17], as these are acquired unconsciously from the experiences and habits of their social environment, which are put into practice on an ongoing basis [18]. A relationship has been found between stereotypical beliefs and low expectations in teachers, which has led to demand changes in the initial and continuous training of teachers to influence their beliefs so that they understand that poverty is a product of gaps in access to opportunities and not of deficiencies in mentality, culture or people [19].

1.4 Research question

What beliefs about poverty hold in-service teachers working in low and lower-middle SES schools with above or below average performance on the SIMCE test of schools of the same type?

2. Methodology

A qualitative design was applied that attempts to detect the importance and meaning of group discourse within a sociocultural context, making explicit the perspective of the subjects within the framework of their global discourse [20].

2.1 Sample

A total of 828 teachers from 1st to 4th grade of the elementary school in the regions of La Araucanía (IVE¹: 85.5%) and Los Lagos (IVE: 81.1%) in the southern part of Chile, and Metropolitan (IVE 65.5%), in the center of the country, participated. The sample is representative, proportional to the national percentage of schools that had the following characteristics: 1) received state subsidy (municipal: 59.6% and subsidized: 40.4%); 2) belonged to the low and lower-middle SES, classified as Type A and B respectively; and 3) achieved performance above and below the average of schools in their same group and region according to national standardized tests (SIMCE). All participants signed an informed consent form after receiving information about the study.

The average age was 40 years (SD: 16.3) and 13 years of teaching experience (SD: 11.4). 83% of the sample were female teachers. A total of 88.3% had a basic education teaching degree. **Table 2** shows the distribution of the participating teachers by region.

2.2 Instrument

In order to collect teachers' beliefs about vulnerable schools, we asked, in the context of a broader questionnaire, the following open-ended question: "State four characteristics of a vulnerable school", which were to be completed in four blank rows provided for this purpose.

¹ Index of educational vulnerability of the Region.

Region	Low-SES, High SIMCE	Low-SES, Low SIMCE	Lower-middle SES, High SIMCE	Lower-middle SES, Low SIMCE	Total	%
Metropolitan	53	42	156	115	366	44.2
La Araucanía	55	64	75	60	254	30.7
Los Lagos	39	39	75	55	208	25.1
Total	147	245	306	230	828	100
%	17.8	17.5	37.0	27.8	100	

Table 2.
Number and percentage of participating teachers according to the region, SES, and performance of their schools.

2.3 Analysis

The responses were processed through thematic analysis and semantic field analysis, in order to configure their beliefs. First, the corpus to be studied was established, namely “the four characteristics of the vulnerable school pointed out by teachers from four types of schools”. Next, three evaluators read the transcripts and lifted the categories that emerged from the characteristics mentioned by the teachers. These were “students”, “families”, “teachers”, “schools” and “social system”. In addition, the textual extracts that exemplify them were selected. After comparison and establishment of coincidences, the extracts belonging to each category were joined and these were renamed using new labels to nominate each semantic nucleus (e.g., “low motivation to learn”, “students with behavioral problems”) included in the theme “students”. Finally, the meanings attributed by the participants were discussed and the semantic field representing the narratives about the vulnerable school underlying the teachers’ ideas was established.

3. Results

As shown in **Table 3** more than half of the mentions refer to families, with teachers and the system being the least mentioned. Students and schools are in between the two trends. We were interested to know what specifically they say about these clusters, are positive or negative characteristics mentioned? These questions motivated us to a second analysis of the data, which we carried out with thematic analysis and semantic field analysis.

The themes that emerged from the analysis of teachers’ responses regarding students, families, and schools are presented in **Tables 4–6**, respectively. It is worth mentioning that there were no differences in the themes among the four types of schools. It is also observed that the teachers coincided in the order of importance given to each theme, which is reflected in the tables in the arrangement of these from left to right. Each table includes the distinctive features that describe each theme. Thus, for example, we have that the family (see **Table 3**) was the most mentioned actor, and of this, the theme most emphasized by teachers was the educational level of parents. A review of the features attributed to each theme allows us to see a rather negative conception of the children’s group of origin.

Table 4 shows that what stands out most for the teachers is the educational level of the parents and the negative characteristics of the families.

Categories	Low-SES, High SIMCE		Low-SES, Low SIMCE		Lower-middle SES, High SIMCE		Lower-middle SES, Low SIMCE		Total	%
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Students	129	22.8	123	22.3	264	21.5	204	25	720	22.8
Families	338	59.7	330	59.8	705	57.3	456	52.3	1.829	57.8
Teachers	8	1.4	9	1.6	34	2.8	22	2.7	73	2.3
Schools	89	15.7	87	15.8	211	17.2	131	16.1	518	16.4
Social System	2	0.4	3	0.5	15	1.2	2	0.2	22	0.7
Total	566		552		1.229		815		3.162	100

Table 3.
Frequency and percentage of teacher references in each category of analysis.

Component/ Theme	Educational level	Family characteristics	Families commitment and support	Family composition	Cultural level
Families	Low level of education; illiteracy; no readers	Poverty; drug addiction; alcoholism; delinquency; violence and abuse; family problems	No commitment to education; low participation; low expectations; lack of accountability; neglect; lack of support	Dysfunctional; poorly constituted; single parent; disaggregated	Cultural deprivation; difficult access to culture

Table 4.
Themes and characteristics attributed to families in vulnerable schools.

Table 5 presents the themes and traits mentioned by teachers with respect to students. There is a tension between the recognition of negative dispositional aspects of the children, such as problems in learning and low motivation, in contrast with others that would be the product of external forces that would be causing great and serious damage to them. This tension could provoke contradictory feelings in teachers, perceiving them as difficult children, on the one hand, and as children worthy of compassion and pity, on the other.

The themes shown in **Table 6** reveal that teachers perceive their schools to be under constant threat from the conditions that surround them and that they feel are beyond their control.

Something interesting to note here is that teachers hardly mention themselves within the characteristics of a vulnerable school. Since there is no clear theme that can be attributed to a particular type of school, it is not possible to condense them into a table due to their low frequency. However, task overload, lack of professional development activities, and lack of collaborative work could be noted as some themes mentioned.

The great coincidence in the themes, the order of importance, and the features attributed to each theme led us to explore whether there is a semantic network that explains how teachers working in different types of vulnerable schools conceive of vulnerable schools. After analyzing the responses, we were able to identify a shared narrative on the topic (see **Figure 1**). In the first place, it can be seen that the school appears as a victim of the environment in which it is located and as the result of

Component/ Theme	School retention	Readiness to learn	Motivation to learn	Behavioral aspect	Socio-emotional dimension	Socioeconomic characteristic
Students	High absence; school dropout	lack of habits; Special educational needs; Learning problems; low concentration; poor vocabulary; lack of early stimulation; study	Demotivation; low expectations, no vision of the future/ life project; Lack of compromise	Bad discipline; aggressiveness; lack of manners and norms	Parental neglect; loneliness; taken in by other family members; rights violated	Social risk; vulnerability; malnutrition; multiple deprivations

Table 5.
Topics and characteristics attributed to students in vulnerable schools.

Component/ theme	Social environment that surrounds them	Resources	Student characteristics	Selection
Schools	High social risk; conflictive sectors; high dependence on drugs and alcohol; delinquency; vulnerability	Lack of pedagogical resources; lack of technology; infrastructure problems; unmotivating environment.	High rate of priority children; low performance on national tests; high diversity	Not selecting its students; exodus of good students; high student turnover; low enrollment

Table 6.
Topics and characteristics attributed to schools.

Figure 1.
Semantic network on the vulnerable school (own elaboration).

certain conditions imposed by the educational system that has classified it as a vulnerable school. Thus, the socio-cultural environment - which is seen as a place plagued by vice, violence, and crime - determines the bad behavior of the students and the type of family context offered to them at home, which would be the continuity of the external context. These negative characteristics of the family would in turn be caused by their low educational and cultural level and by their inability to change their living conditions given their dysfunctional nature, which are often single-parent families. These latter factors would cause a low family commitment to school and to the education of their children, to whom they would provide very little emotional support, which would have repercussions in the socioemotional area and in the disposition towards learning, preventing them from achieving good educational results. On the other hand, certain school conditions such as the lack of resources and the impossibility of selecting their students, lead them to feel obliged to accept all students feeling without tools to solve the serious discipline problems, learning difficulties, and low motivation to learn that will probably lead students to drop out of school.

4. Discussion

Our motivation for conducting this study was to find out whether there were differences in beliefs about poverty between teachers in vulnerable low and lower-middle SES schools with high and low performance on the national SIMCE test. Our premise was that schools with good performance, despite being in vulnerable contexts, would have more positive beliefs than those with below-average scores. Contrary to what was predicted, our data show us that there is a shared narrative that evidences a negative evaluation of the environment in which they work, which would confront them with problematic children and families that would prevent them from reaching the standards required by current public policy. Our reflection in the following lines will try to stress the effect of accountability policies on teachers' tasks and identity by configuring performance scenarios in which they must act strategically in order to receive the prescribed rewards or punishments.

Although the contribution of the SEP Law in terms of financing cannot be ignored, since it has made it possible to acquire technological resources and pedagogical material for schools, in addition to hiring new support staff (psychologists, special educators, and education assistants), increasing teacher hiring and training hours [21, 22] and contracting external consultants [9], it must also be recognized that it has had undesirable consequences for many schools in contexts of poverty by making them more visible due to the demand to show good results in the short and medium term. These schools have been popularly labeled as "vulnerable schools", which has implied the exodus of non-priority students to more selective schools and a substantive increase in private education [2, 7].

Under the neoliberal model, schools are not only evaluated and ranked according to a competitive logic but are also considered to be comparable to each other [23]. Unfortunately, comparison and competition require that someone always be at the bottom of the ranking [24] and the public policies developed in the last 40 years have left the public school associated with poverty [25]. On the other hand, due to the many demands associated with the results, teachers feel that national tests have standardized and bureaucratized their work, leading them to perform arbitrary and useless tasks [25], which does not allow the development of critical thinking, self-evaluation, and accountability, nor will it motivate school improvement and innovative thinking [23]. Worst of all, trust is placed outside schools, in agencies that are not efficient in sharing useful information for teachers, disempowering them from their expert judgment about learning [24]. When teachers perceive that policies restrict their professional autonomy, in addition to intensifying and deprofessionalizing their work, they adopt strategies of resistance to reforms [5, 25] and will most likely develop narratives of self-defense [23].

A perverse effect of incentive policies that encourage competition between schools and teachers is that they have stimulated individualistic thinking and strategic behavior that enhances personal productivity [26]. This has led teachers to calculate their efforts and to act according to external standards in order to achieve a positive and profitable image [9]. Another powerful effect is seen in institutions, which create school narratives that can strategically eliminate, debate, highlight or obscure scores, ranking and position in the hierarchy, to generate a sense of institutional success, as well as to justify or separate themselves from their indicators of underperformance, transferring responsibility and assigned blame for failure onto others, such as students and their families [23] (pp. 756–757).

Consistent with our results, many studies at the national level have collected negative attributions of teachers towards families, which they consider “poorly constituted”, “dysfunctional” or “violent” [25]. They complain that families are an obstacle to their children’s education, as they do not attend meetings, do not support homework, and do not collaborate with punctuality on arrival [27]. In addition, they feel overloaded with work because they have to start from the bottom due to deficiencies in home education, taking care of basic needs and personal care (cleaning, clothing, food); affective needs (due to precariousness and lack, mistreatment, violence, and abuse) and basic rules of behavior (punctuality, respect for the turn, asking permission), as there is much permissiveness and loss of authority and, in addition, the whole family is involved in drugs or crime [27, 28].

In social comparison, groups are evaluated according to their social status as a respected/unrespected group and liked/disliked by others. They are likely to be evaluating families as low social status and disliked group. This group includes people who fail, who are seen as parasites and abusers of the system, such as vagrants and addicts in general, who arouse emotional reactions of disgust and contempt, which may lead to attacking or neglecting them because of the great discomfort they arouse [29].

Rojas and Leyton (2014) have found negative attitudes towards priority students. Teachers are upset because they believe that the special subsidy goes directly to the child and not to the school. They also show some resentment with priority students because they feel that the law transformed them into “untouchables” by being prevented from making them repeat the grade [21]. In addition, they feel that the priority classification makes them deserving of multiple welfare “handouts”, which is detrimental to non-priority children whose families work very hard. In other cases, a paradox is observed, as priority students are both desired and rejected [27]. They are desired because they mean a significant increase in school admissions, but they are rejected because they produce enrollment leakage and teaching difficulties.

Teachers consider students as “others” who are different from them and that, due to their cultural legitimacy, it is their duty to “culturize” them. They see them as “problem” children, aggressive, uneducable, who do not adapt to the educational system, and who must be domesticated [30]. They also feel that they must put aside pedagogical aspects in order to provide affectivity, sociability, and quality of life to students, but they also think that they only go to school to eat and play [31]. They think that their children are always hungry and lack affection and that their learning difficulties are related to poor nutrition, dyslexia, dyslalia, and psychological disorders that should have been resolved at the preschool level. These disorders would produce cognitive disorganization, limiting their development in basic skills such as describing, comparing, relating, and understanding [32].

It has been found that teachers in low-performing schools attribute the results to the physical and intellectual conditions of their students, drug addiction, and conflicts in high-risk neighborhoods, and therefore see little possibility of change [33]. In a study on diversity, it was found that teachers classify their students into two broad categories according to the origin of their learning difficulties a) those diagnosed with clinical pictures of permanent or transitory learning difficulties and b) those socially vulnerable due to low family cultural capital, the presence of alcoholism and drug addiction, delinquency, the absence of parental figures, abandonment and prostitution [34]. Teachers feel that they work with the most disadvantaged population, with the “Cacho children”, those whom nobody wants [23].

Using the social comparison model, students could be evaluated by teachers as a disrespected but likable group, which includes those who are considered less capable

of managing their own lives because they have significant deficits or shortcomings, and for whom they feel pity, an ambivalent emotion that is both paternalistic and neglectful [29].

The effects of the policy of accountability have led to various consequences on teachers. On the one hand, it has technologized their work, deprofessionalizing it. On the other hand, it has aroused negative emotions such as fear of the permanent threat of closure of schools due to persistent underperformance [25]. But in the face of this bleak scenario, many turn to vocation to reaffirm their commitment to these schools [35] and raise their self-perception with a sense of sacrifice, altruism, and transcendence in their teaching action [25]. According to Assaél and Cornejo (2018), teachers feel trampled, repressed, and undervalued, but do not possess for the moment, a more elaborated reaction. In this becoming of subjectivities, many teachers wish that vocation begins to be part of the accountability mechanisms [25].

Unrest also stems from conditions that affect teachers' job stability. The ambiguity of neoliberal policies has increased "labor flexibility", making their work more precarious. For example, the Teachers' Statute allows termination of the contract or reduction of the working day with ease for the employer and the SEP Law reduced stability and hourly wages [26]. This has deepened the feeling of low valuation due to low salaries and work intensification, resulting in discomfort, anger, and fatigue [25]. Most teachers feel pressured and sued by these policies, in addition to feeling unfairly judged by society, because they appear to be responsible for the failure of the poorest students [5, 25, 36, 37].

According to Pascual Medina and Rodríguez Gómez (2018), subjects go through different levels as they become aware of power asymmetries [38]. These start from the first level of "submission" where "asymmetry" exists, but this is perceived as natural, given, and unmodifiable. A second level is "pre-critical" in which "inequality" is felt, in the face of which certain dissatisfaction and resentment begin to manifest themselves and explanations and causalities are sought. The third level would be "integrative criticism", in which one openly feels "injustice" and begins to analyze social reality with greater precision in order to propose actions for change. The last level would be "liberating criticism", in which after perceiving "oppression", the process of social transformation as such begins.

When considering the effects on the learning of the most disadvantaged students, accountability reduces the curriculum to the subjects measured by the standardized test, classes concentrate on rehearsing for the test, cultural and social diversity are considered as problems, and the integral education of students is renounced [24]. It is therefore paradoxical that the Chilean model is used as a reference of quality and an example of success at the international level [25].

5. Conclusions and recommendations

First, we can conclude that teachers have a common narrative about the vulnerable school. This means that the themes, traits and the effect that these variables have been transmitted almost unalterably from one group of teachers to another. We interpret this as a defensive response to the pressures of the neoliberal system that imposes classification categories that no school wants to be in and highly visible negative consequences that threaten the psychological and professional integrity of teachers. The struggle to survive in this scenario leads them to rescue small achievements or to distort information by shifting the responsibility for low results to students and their families.

The teachers' justification is that the degraded environments surrounding the schools are determining the type of families that bring their children to school and that their nefarious behavior would be affecting their children's willingness to learn. These discourses are further associated with feelings of pity towards the children and of disgust and contempt towards the families. In this study we see that teachers are only at a second level with respect to becoming aware of asymmetries, looking for causes of failure outside the school's responsibility, on which they feel they cannot act directly. We must support schools to move to the levels of integrative criticism and liberating criticism so that they can empower themselves by creating adequate solutions to the challenges they face and the ideals they can set for themselves as a community.

Before concluding, we would like to reflect on the title we used to begin this chapter: are teachers' beliefs the barrier to be considered in the face of the low results obtained by the poorest children? In our analysis, not only did we find a shared narrative without variations from school to school, but we were also able to verify the same narratives in other studies at the national level, all of which were carried out a few years after the implementation of these policies and continue to be reproduced to this day. This story is a barrier, indeed, but it is a way of showing the resistance of teachers to falling into disrepute.

Neoliberal policies in education are based on mistrust, as they postulate that only through incentives and threats will school and teachers mobilize to improve their quality. This causes teachers in schools with high rates of priority students to face stressful working conditions, such as intensified bureaucratic and meaningless tasks, super vigilance, and the obligation to cover the entire curriculum, in addition to preparing children for testing, which leads them to ultimately reduce opportunities for those who need it most.

We believe that there is an urgent need to transform accountability policies towards a notion that encourages school communities to engage in thoughtful and complex dialogs about school challenges and opportunities and ways to improve. Teachers should engage in ethical discussions about the daily practice of schools and promote both professional development and the actualization of democratic principles [23]. This is not only because their purposes and assumptions are not being achieved, but also because they impede the achievement of greater social justice. Intelligent accountability should be based on principles such as trust, dialog, school and teacher autonomy, equitable participation, high expectations, respect for diversity, contextualization, creation, and strengthening of school communities with their own identity, all of them as means for all actors to be mutually responsible for education [24].

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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