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Comparative Education

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Online publication date: 19 November 2010

To cite this Article Montecinos, Carmen , Sisto, Vicente and Ahumada, Luis(2010) 'The construction of parents and teachers as agents for the improvement of municipal schools in Chile', *Comparative Education*, 46: 4, 487 — 508

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2010.519481

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2010.519481>

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The construction of parents and teachers as agents for the improvement of municipal schools in Chile

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This article examines how teachers and parents in 10 municipal schools serving students growing up under conditions of social vulnerability represented themselves, and others, as valid agents for charting school improvement. In four schools parents and teachers saw each other as trustworthy and collaborating to provide an education that could transform students' life chances. In the other six schools, social relations were marked by distrust, staff constructed students as lacking the resources necessary to benefit from a rigorous academic programme, and parents in leadership positions shared with teachers the belief that school failure could largely be attributed to uncommitted parents. These results suggest that the impact of quality assurance policies tends to be associated with the social capital of municipal schools, thus educational policy needs to consider developing and strengthening social capital within schools.

Over the last 20 years schools in Chile have had to face great challenges as a result of a number of initiatives stemming from comprehensive systemic educational reform. Structural approaches dominated the reform agenda in the 1990s, including strategies to perfect the voucher system, extend the school day, improve teachers' salary, and improve the infrastructure of the schools, among other initiatives. During the current decade, instructional approaches entailing the implementation of various quality assurance instruments have aimed at changing classroom practice and school management. These initiatives are those found throughout the world (Bryk and Schneider 2003; Midthassel 2004): national curriculum aligned with international standards, teaching standards, standardised testing of teachers and students, public dissemination of results, and the ranking of schools according to performance. In Chile, these changes have occurred concurrently with an expansion in enrolment and coverage, such that social groups who have traditionally not been in schools are now in the classrooms. Under greater scrutiny and accountability, teachers, especially those working in municipal schools, are being asked to teach a more demanding curriculum to a more academically diverse student population.

As part of an international trend that places higher pressure for improvement on the teacher and the local school, the Ministry of Education started implementing the System for Quality Assurance of School Management (SACG) in 2003. This system targets school management in the areas of: Leadership, Curriculum, Resources, Organisational Climate and Human Relations, and Results (Ministerio de Educación 2005). It involves four components: Institutional Self-Assessment to determine the

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quality of performance in the targeted areas and identify opportunities for improvement; External Evaluation Panel to validate the processes and scores from the Institutional Self-Assessment; School Improvement Plan to address systematically the weaknesses identified in the assessment, with a focus on improving student learning; and Public Reporting to communicate to the wider community served by the school the achievements and challenges encountered as the school seeks to improve and to enlist its commitment and support. The system places the responsibility for conducting the process on the school leadership team, which typically includes the principal, assistant principal, inspector general, and curriculum head.

In 2007 we were contracted by the Ministry of Education to conduct an evaluation study of the implementation of SACG in schools that were entering a second cycle of this quality assurance system. The overall purpose was to examine how schools were using this policy to chart and implement a bottom-up approach to school improvement. Understanding local implementation, particularly in schools showing good results, was deemed important as the management model underpinning SACG is characterised as a non-prescriptive approach towards continuous improvement (Ministerio de Educación 2005). The model only identifies key processes, assuming that because schools are heterogeneous these processes will be addressed through heterogeneous practices. The model also assumes that each school will use evidence to plan improvement, deciding what is most relevant to their particular culture and history. Lastly, the model assumes that continuous improvement involves school staff learning to become increasingly accountable for three sets of outcomes: student learning, key management processes, and satisfaction of the community. Given these assumptions, we designed a study to understand the types of management practices that had been introduced after the first implementation of SCAG in 2003–04, the social processes through which these practices were introduced and implemented, as well as the relationships among these factors.

The evaluation study involved a mixed method design as data were produced through surveys in all participating schools (N=200) and case studies in 10 schools. In this paper we draw from data produced through the case studies to examine specifically the relationship between a school's social capital and how teachers, parents, and students are constructed as agents in these improvement efforts. We contrast the discourses produced in schools that were identified as unsuccessful in their improvement efforts and those identified as successful. Even though both types of schools served families and communities experiencing high levels of social vulnerability distinct patterns emerged in how staff interpreted this fact as a possibility or a barrier for improvement. Before presenting these results, we will first briefly describe the structure of Chile's K–12 educational system and in particular those educational policies that frame parental participation. Next, we examine the international literature on within school factors that are associated with opportunities for parental involvement in school improvement.

Parent participation in a market-driven model

An examination of the international literature shows that educational policy-makers and teachers across the world agree that parents' involvement either supports or hinders students' academic success and social adjustment in school (Epstein 2001; Hufton, Elliott and Illushin 2003; Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack 2007; Symeou

2008). Policies designed to increase parental participation in school governance assume that if parents get involved, then schools will improve. The micropolitics of parental involvement for school improvement, however, are framed by the educational policy context in which participation discourses are produced and reproduced. In fact, in the United States the belief in parent involvement as a strategy to reduce the achievement gap as a function of race/ethnicity and social class is part of *No Child Left Behind*. This policy mandates giving parents the option to use vouchers to leave persistently failing schools and requires direct parental input in school governance (Gordon and Nocon 2008).

In the 1980s, under the rule of a military dictatorship, the provision of educational services using a market-driven model began to be implemented in Chile. This model has been extended and deepened by the policies of governments following the restoration of democracy in 1989.¹ The educational system has been designed to afford parents choice among three types of schools: municipal, which are administered by the country's 341 municipal governments and are totally financed through a per-pupil voucher system based on student attendance; subsidised private, which are financed through the same voucher system and, in most cases, charging parents an additional fee; and private non-subsidised which are fully funded by parents. As expected, these different types of schools serve different socio-economic groups (García-Huidobro 2007). In 2006, municipal schools represented 46.6% of the total enrolment, with 39% of those students growing up in social vulnerability. Privately owned subsidised schools, of which 70% charged additional tuition, represented 45% of the total enrolment but only 9% of these students were identified as socially vulnerable. Private non-subsidised schools enrolled 6.8% of the students and none of them met the criteria for social vulnerability. Learning outcomes, as measured by the Sistema Nacional de Medición de la Calidad Escolar [National System of Measurement of Quality of Education] (SIMCE), are unequal for these three types of schools, with private non-subsidised schools significantly outperforming municipal schools, as well as many private subsidised schools (McEwan and Carnoy 2000; OECD 2004; Redondo et al. 2007; Taut et al. 2009). Moreover, the evidence suggests that school type adds to, rather than mediates, the effect of socio-economic status on educational attainment (Torche 2005).

From a demand perspective, increased privatisation purports to promote and affirm parents' rights and individual responsibility in choosing a school. Theoretically, giving choice to parents will increase quality because they will choose a school that shows good academic results and schools will make an effort to retain the fidelity of the parents. The model also assumes that parents will become highly involved in schools and, because parental involvement relates to learning gains, greater involvement will strengthen democracy and citizenship. Education as a marketplace assumes that parents are rational consumers and that they have access to, and access, the information necessary to make informed decisions (i.e., availability of tests score, a schools' educational project, etc.). Research shows that Chilean schools do not always provide the information that would allow parents to become informed consumers. A recent study showed that less than a third of the more than 600 parents surveyed indicated that they had received the parent SIMCE report card from their child's school (Taut et al. 2009). The most relevant factor for predicting differences among schools regarding the dissemination of SIMCE results to parents was whether the school increased or decreased its performance with respect to the last testing. Schools that showed improvements were more likely to publicise the results as compared to those with stagnant or decreased performance. Given that municipal schools are the lowest

performing, it can be hypothesised that low-income parents are, therefore, less likely to receive this information.

In addition, research shows that parents choose a school based on its status and for practical reasons, like distance from work/home rather than on its purported academic quality (Taut et al. 2009). Schneider, Elacqua and Buckley (2006) studied the school selection behaviour of parents in a large urban area and found that parental decisions, particularly in the middle and upper socio-economic groups, were influenced by factors other than the academic quality of the school. The social class composition of the student body was deemed as the key factor. Their findings stressed the importance that affluent parents place on school as a resource for fostering social capital as students interact with other equally or more affluent families. To the extent that this factor is more relevant than the school's performance on academic measures, the idea that choice will increase quality, thus far, seems unsupported in the case of Chile's highly socially stratified society.

Rustique-Forrester (2005) showed that in England an unintended effect of accountability policies similar to those implemented in Chile has been an increased exclusion and marginalisation of low-performing students. This has also been observed in Chile as many private subsidised schools have implemented rigorous selection processes to exclude those who might have a negative impact on tests scores or 'drive quality down'. Given this practice, data indicate that in Chile it is the school that chooses the family and not the family who chooses the school. The chosen are those with high economic, cultural, and social capital (Bellei 2004). Municipal schools, with very few exceptions, tend not to select their students. They must serve all students – most often this means that municipal schools predominantly serve students who have been rejected by private entrepreneurs, students whose parents lack the resources or know how to consume/compete for educational services, and those living in areas where it is not profitable to open a school. Redondo et al. (2007) persuasively argued that, in Chile, the educational market has introduced competition among families (consumers) and not among schools (providers). In synthesis, in the case of Chile, thus far, the clearest effects of a market-driven model have been an expansion in coverage with more students attending all levels of the system and the growth of private providers, coupled with a progressive increase in the number of students leaving municipal schools (Cox 2004; Elacqua, González and Pacheco 2008; Taut et al. 2009). In 2001, 58% of the schools were administered by municipalities, dropping to 50% by 2005. Moreover, municipal schools, the target of the System for Quality Assurance policy, are not only serving increasingly fewer students but those served are among the most economically disenfranchised and socially vulnerable members of society.

Within-school factor impacting upon parents' participation in school improvement

In addition to the unintended consequences stemming from a market-driven model for the provision of educational services that have been discussed so far, the empirical evidence available shows key within-school factors that make untenable the policy's assumptions about a linear, cause and effect relationship between parental involvement and increased academic achievement. Goddard, Salloum and Berebitsky (2009) noted that efforts to understand and improve academic outcomes for all children have often neglected the important link between the quality of schools' social capital and

the effectiveness of teaching and learning. As social institutions, what schools do, including what they do regarding parental participation, depends on the quality of the interpersonal relations among school professionals. In the sociological literature these interpersonal relations are represented as capital because they constitute a 'form of power, a currency, a *resource*: it can be utilised, traded, exchanged, drawn upon, invested or cashed in' (McGonigal et al. 2007, 80). Social capital is conceptualised as the 'quality of social relationships in communities and how these relationships influence the quality of everyday life and shape collective capacity to solve local problems' (Sebring et al. 2006, 3).

Organisational psychologists have examined organisational and individual characteristics that configure school climate, which Johnson, Stevens and Zvoch (2007) define as teachers' understandings of the psychological context in which they work and teach. The quality of school climate has been found to be associated with the level of achievement schools are able to attain. A number of studies have shown a relationship between a school's level of openness to parental participation with organisational variables such as trust and commitment, collective self-efficacy, depth and density of social interactions, leadership and the practices for collective accountability through reciprocity that school have developed (Bauch and Goldring 2000; Gunter 2005; Brown and Medway 2007; Chan et al. 2008; Adams, Forsyth and Mitchell 2009; Addi-Racah and Ainhoren 2009). From their qualitative study of the involvement of three Latino parents, Carreon, Drake and Barton (2005) posit that a reliable and trusting relationship with at least one school actor provides the scaffolding for a more fulfilling school engagement experience. Studies on school climate have found that positive climate relates to better student achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001). Research has also shown the benefits of developing trusting relational networks connecting parents, students, and community members that treat parents as assets rather than liabilities (Gold et al. 2004).

Market-driven policies have empowered parents (particularly in affluent and urban communities) to have influence over educational reforms although they are not formal partners in policy-making processes (Conley 2003, cited in Addi-Racah and Ainhoren 2009). In countries around the world educational reforms have included policies that give parents more options to choose among schools ([Schneider et al. 2006](#)). In the particular case of Chile because private schools, but not municipal schools, choose the families we find that teachers working in the municipal schools that participated in this study were serving mostly families that, from a policy design, are assumed to be culturally deprived and lacking the cultural, social, and economic capital that could allow them to compete in a meritocratic system (Rojas 2005). Beyond choice and the accumulation of individual benefits, parent involvement could also be understood as beneficial for community development when their work involves advocating for equity in education or taking part in decision-making at the school and district level ([Abrams and Gibbs 2002](#); Gold et al. 2004; [Gordon and Nocon 2008](#)). What are the possibilities that parental participation in municipal schools' improvement efforts can be expanded beyond the rhetoric of choice and cultural deprivation? To examine this question, we examined the discourses produced in two types of municipal schools: the first type represented schools exhibiting practices oriented toward improvement and rich in social capital; the second type included schools that needed to develop practices and social relations that could support an improvement orientation.

Method

Participants

Using structural sampling, from a universe of 200 schools entering a second cycle of the System for Quality Assurance of School Management, 10 schools were selected for in-depth study using a case study approach (Vallés 1997). By comparing the scores assigned to the Self-Assessment Report by the external evaluation panel in 2003/04 and in 2006/07 we ascertained if schools showed improvement or not in the management processes target by SACG. To assess improvements in learning outcomes, scores obtained by the school in the SIMCE in that same timeframe were compared. Combining the results of these two analyses, we developed three categories from which a sub-sample of schools was selected: (a) schools showing improvement on both evaluation instruments (n=6), (b) schools improving on the management scores but decreasing on SIMCE (n=2), and (c) schools with diminished scores on both evaluation instruments (n=2).

Given that this was an evaluation study of SACG, schools showing gains on both instruments were oversampled because the assumption of the model is that if they have improved they are likely to represent good examples of how SACG has become a tool to support a bottom-up approach to continuous improvement. The selection of schools in the other categories was intended to provide a comparison to triangulate hypothesis generated regarding organisational factors that appeared to support the implementation of this quality assurance policy. Schools presenting no change on either measure were not selected because the purpose of the study was to attempt to explain why some schools increased or decreased scores rather than why they remained the same.

Table 1 summarises key characteristics of these 10 schools which were spread throughout the country. As it can be observed, in eight of these schools over 80% of

Table 1. Characteristics of participating schools.

ID	Area	Grade levels	Enrolment	Number of teachers	% of students identified as socially vulnerable
Improvements on both SACG and SIMCE scores					
School 1	Urban	Elementary, 1–8	252	14	84.7%
School 2	Urban	Elementary PK–8	282	9	85.4%
School 3	Rural	Elementary PK–8	231	17	85.3%
School 4	Urban	Elementary PK–8	749	31	66.6%
School 5	Urban	Comprehensive, K–12	465	24	84.7%
School 6	Urban	Elementary PK–8	497	22	87.1%
Improvement in SACG scores but not in SIMCE scores					
School 7	Urban	Elementary PK–8	335	15	84.7%
School 8	Rural	Comprehensive, K–12	1095	60	83.8%
Decreased scores on SACG and SIMCE					
School 9	Urban	Elementary PK–8	632	35	84.7%
School 10	Urban	Elementary 1–8	1259	39	72.3%

Note. The current structure of Chilean compulsory education involves eight years of elementary education and four years of secondary education. Some schools have PK and K programmes too.

the pupils served were identified as growing up in conditions of social vulnerability. Educational policy calculates the social vulnerability index based on a student's family income, level of education attained by parents or guardian, and the neighbourhood in which the school is located (Redondo et al. 2007).

Data sources and analysis

At each school, group interviews were conducted with the leadership team, teachers, students, and parents/guardians, for a total of 40 interviews. Guided by a flexible thematic interview protocol an active-reflexive interview approach was used to promote open interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Additionally, during a four-week period, participant and non participant observations were conducted in the following settings: faculty meetings, informal spaces for social interaction, and classrooms.

Data produced through interviews and observations were transcribed² and analysed through a thematic content analysis procedure, which uses some of the principles and techniques of grounded theory (Vázquez 1994). This involves decomposing the text and later clustering it following an analogy criterion. Texts are clustered according to the themes that emerge from the direct statements made by participants, allowing also for the interpretation of those texts. Through this data analysis procedure we sought to construct meaning that transcended the actual statements so we could understand the conditions under which those texts were produced as well as their effects. For each school a report was produced offering a characterisation of the conditions, processes, and relationships expressed in the statements and actions, and underpinning beliefs, as various actors narrated how they had implemented SACG. For the current study we reread transcripts with a focus on how school staff and parents constructed each other's agency for developing a better school.

From an analysis of these transcripts we regrouped the 10 schools into one of two categories developed on the basis of the prevailing metaphor that organised teachers' discourses about themselves, parents, and students as agents collaborating for change: (a) schools that were oriented toward improvement (schools 1, 2, 3, and 4) and (b) schools that needed to develop an improvement orientation (5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10). All four schools in the first group had met the criterion of showing improvement on both measures. Of the six schools that did not exhibit an improvement orientation, two had shown marginal improvement on both measures, two had increased in one, and the rest decreased on both.

Results

A cross-case analysis evidenced key differences between these two types of schools: how they organised themselves to carry out their everyday actions, how they collectively assumed responsibility for the results of those actions, and how they understood the goal of their improvement efforts. Next, these aspects will be first exemplified through an analysis of the data produced in improvement oriented schools, followed by examples from schools in the other category. As we discuss these results, we have sought to highlight how the construction of parents as agents in the school's efforts to improve is linked in a constitutive manner to how school staff constructed their own agency and the relations they established with each other.

Schools oriented toward improvement: family metaphor

Four interrelated themes emerged from data produced in schools 1, 2, 3, and 4: an open and trusting climate, democratic leadership, strong commitment, and a sense of agency among all actors. These themes were repeatedly tied together in participants' discourses through their use of the family metaphor, which had the effect of conveying a deep concern for each other's well-being.

The most commonly recognised facets of trust are placing the needs of others ahead of one's own, honesty, reliability, and competence to perform agreed-upon responsibilities (Goddard et al. 2009). As illustrated in the following excerpt, in groups characterised by comparatively higher levels of trust, formalised agreements are unnecessary:

Generally, we do not need to tell each other what is it that we need to do... eh, what we have to do, or sometimes ask for help because we have such a bond... that we all know where we need to go to support or cooperate, sometimes without having to ask 'help me with this', instead we are just there and I can rely upon others.³ (Teacher group interview)

The trust that teachers had for each other was also manifested in parents' trust in teachers:

Interviewer: Eh the first thing I want to ask is why you enrolled your children in this school

Parent 7: Ah eh... I changed my daughter to this school because, for one, it was closer and I trusted the school, specially aunt Blanca and aunt Gloria

Interviewer: Like trustworthy?

Parent 7: The teachers, all of them, one trusts them as if they were the second parents because if something happens to them or they have a problem the children will come to them and they try to resolve it (...) I like the environment it is clean, bathrooms in particular because one is always concerned with that. (Parent group interview)

In this excerpt we find evidence that low-income parents are exercising choice and their criterion is their child's emotional and physical well-being. It is unclear if SIMCE test scores played any part as a criterion as they did not explicitly reference this criterion. The value parents placed on their children's safety in an environment that provided adequate physical facilities and emotional support, guided their choice of school. In teachers' voices we heard that commitment to students included the affective component that parents valued when choosing schools. The family metaphor parents used to describe the relations teachers established with their children was also used to describe how they saw relations among staff:

Interviewer: And how do you perceive the relations among teachers... with the leadership team, how do you perceive the environment in the school?

Parent 9: I would say that it is a family

Parent 8: In other schools there are always problems (with) the principal, between the principal something, no↑ I have not seen fights among teachers, no↑ with the principal, nobody is fighting they are always walking around talking all of them together they are always together () and talking about all of their students, consulting, asking questions. (Parent group interview)

In Chilean schools parents' participation is organised through the General Centre which gathers parents' delegates from each classroom. When parents described their own parent organisation's meetings they said:

Parent 8: In the meeting of the General Centre there are some that no, no in other schools I have seen fights or... or complaints and here everything and sometimes the first meeting, cake, cookies, we talk, is like a family at tea time, time goes by and we end up very late talking but we resolve the problems (...) as I tell you in the other General Centre that I go in the high school because (...) it always ends in fights. (Parent group interview)

In these schools the leadership style was described as having what Tschannen-Moran (2009) defines as a professional orientation,

in which rules are applied flexibly, control is shared, and work processes are open to joint deliberation.... A professional orientation is grounded in trust – specifically, that teachers have the knowledge and ethical orientations to be granted greater autonomy and discretion in the conduct of their work. (220–221)

Moreover, leadership was not a function of position but rather represented practices where leadership was transferred between leaders and followers (Gunter 2005). Leadership was distributed among actors and the administrators used institutional power to facilitate and guarantee a flatter organisational structure (Spillane et al. 2008). Parents participated as a result of the instauration of democratic school governance. Leadership teams and teachers actively sought to create spaces for engagement:

Teacher 2: Sure it's a strength because if for any reason the principal needs to be absent, leadership is taken over and everything keeps working. Before all these practices were implemented, such as the assessments (0.3) we were already doing many of these things.

Teacher 1: We have been very democratic, the fact that we have not had a leader for a while or on a more permanent basis has made us grow and mature in that sense. (Teacher group interview)

Parents positioned themselves as invited to participate. Recognition was not only given by keeping them informed. They were also asked to become involved in relevant decision-making as well as in the implementation of key school programmes. The duties were assumed with a great sense of commitment not just to their children but to the school community. Parents narrated themselves as working at par with teachers: 'we have been glued to the school *for two weeks*'.

Interviewer: What other document have you jointly elaborated...

Parent 2: The, the... The Handbook for Living Together... the three-dimensional model of the school (.) the school uniform was also developed by the previous Centre leadership. We... I think that everything... everything

Interviewer: In everything that happens in the school parents... have been...

Parent 3: Everything... umh... at the parent level everything, everything. Parents cooperate a lot...: the leaderships the same ↓they work a lot.

Parent 2: Miss, you know what... you will not believe me... we have been glued to the school *for two weeks* [due to the work being done for SACG]. (Parent group interview)

The enumeration of activities in which they had participated, reinforces this version of themselves as a fundamental agent in schoolwork 'even the three-dimensional model of the school', 'I think that everything... everything'. Through this representation they moved from a condition of being socially vulnerable and deprived to being authors, part of a larger collective in which they had the power to transform.

Teachers and administrators described their students as growing up in social marginalisation, as socially vulnerable:

Yes, our children are the best, we have to bring prestige to our school, to our children because we believe in that, not like in other schools where they say that these are sons of alcoholics, criminals, and prostitutes. Maybe for someone that is the case, but in essence they are children, they are not their parents. Our children are the best and we are great (referring to the teachers). (Teacher, field notes)

Parent 8: (...) They always talk to us that there are no obstacles to continue studying, not poverty, not drug addiction, not many things, not health, these are things that can happen to anyone but we must move forward with the studies because

Parent 2: They can be overcome

Parent 8: Nothing is an obstacle. (Parent group interview)

These interview excerpts show that in these schools the social vulnerability of the families was understood as temporary and transformable. Parents and students were constituted as agents in this transformation and education was seen as having a fundamental role in this process. The use of a statement such as ‘these are things that can happen to anyone’ has the function of signifying the problems described (poverty and drug addiction) as not particular to any group and as changeable, thus they do not get reified as natural or intrinsic features of the people who experience the problems. This has the effect of validating parents who are living under conditions of social exclusion as agents, capable, and responsible for ‘overcoming’. Parents understood that the school was not only educating their children, as they narrated benefiting from that education and their responsibility to share those benefits. Parents and teachers expressed a shared responsibility for what the schools were able to do and attain:

This ↑ is what they teach us, that we need to demand a better quality of life for our children as they learn here the values. We also need to learn those values so we can go to other schools, to other high schools because we cannot stay with what we are taught here, we also need to go outside and spread what we have learned. (Parents group interview)

Interviewer: But who is responsible?

Teacher 2: Everybody

Interviewer: And who would be everybody?

Teacher 2: Teachers, students, parents, ↑ all. (Teacher group interview)

If we do not integrate, principal teachers, parents, and students, then a leg of the table is missing, it will bend over

As the principal said, the three groups, parents, students, and teaching staff must work together in the same direction. A few days later during the celebration of parents’ day, the idea was repeated by the principal and one of the teachers directing the event as they spoke to the attending students, parents, and teachers. (Parents group interview)

Supporting the development of children growing up under specially challenging circumstances entails at times extraordinary commitment from school professionals, particularly in the context of decentralised improvement efforts that expand teachers’ professional roles to include collaboration with administrators, colleagues, and parents (Sebring et al. 2006). Teacher commitment manifests itself in the strength of

their acceptance of the schools' goals and values, the amount of effort willing to be exerted on behalf of the school, the teaching profession and students, and the strength of their intention to remain in teaching and in a particular school (Chan et. al. 2008). In these schools a fourth dimension of commitment appeared when teachers also grounded their work in a commitment to the neighbourhood:

- Teacher 1:* Many of us worked, I would stay up until three am working
Teacher 5: Eh... what really helped us was our experience, our more than thirty years in education
Teacher 1: And our commitment with the school
Teacher 6: You see we really love the kids and to work with them you need to have a heart, we all have many years working with students
Teacher 2: And it is a commitment with education and with this neighbourhood. (Teacher group interview)

The positive disposition of teachers was particularly important for those parents who lacked the academic background to support adequately their children's school-work:

- Parent 1:* I want my children, (...) to learn a lot because for one thing I was never sent to school, I never went to school and I want many things for my children, that they learn a lot because I do not know [her voice quivers] (...) but when my children say to me mother help me with this, I can't, because *I cannot help them* and they say 'Mommy it doesn't matter if you can't, I can ask at school anyways'. (Parent group interview)

Schools needing to develop an improvement orientation: metaphors of sickness and death

Hoy (1990) described healthy organisations as those that can effectively deal with external forces and disruptions because they have a long-term vision of the goals to be accomplished. In these types of organisations staff know how to acquire the resources needed, can adapt to changes in the environment, can define and implement goals, and create and maintain a value system, congruent with the previous demands, which stress solidarity among members (Goddard et al. 2009). These elements were largely absent in two of the schools which had experienced modest gains in both measures (5 and 6), as well as in the other four schools that had shown a lack of improvement on one (7 and 8) or both of these measures (9 and 10).

This notion of 'unhealthy organisation' echoed a recurrent metaphor in teachers' talk about themselves, their schools, and the families with whom they worked. Teachers narrated themselves as victims and martyrs. The burden they must endure was such that they anticipated going crazy, becoming gravely ill, or directly dying:

- To think that every teacher who leaves this place is destined to go directly into the box [coffin] (...) one works so hard all your life for what? To end like this, because the life of the teacher is hard. Every teacher after they retire, they last three years maximum and I do not want that. I have already decided, I decided it yesterday; I will retire at 55 even if I starve (...) I want to end happy. (Preschool Teacher, field notes)

Here, all of the teachers who retired, all left crazy, with their mental health damaged. They should have retired 10 years earlier to enjoy their old age. With a damaged mental health you do not enjoy your old age. (Field notes)

...here you need to take Armony! [a herbal-based pill for stress] before you come to work [laughter]. (Teachers group interview)

In addition, teachers reported receiving threats of physical harm from parents

Teacher 2: Or you or you stand there by the entrance and you become aware of what type of parent you work with

Teacher 3: There are some who are very disrespectful, brash

Teacher 2: And can you work at ease when you are told that I am going to take the [expletive language] to the old lady who gave a bad grade to the girl?

Teacher 9: Like those ones who ask that you hit them [laughter]. (Teacher group interview)

With privatisation, Chilean municipal schools have seen a major decline in enrolment. In this persistently low-achievement school, the *death* of the school and the possibility of losing their jobs loomed clearly:

Teacher 2: In each grade level when I got here there were 5 [sections]

Teacher 1: ...about 50 students per classroom, we were transferred to the municipality and this was, each day, that is each day, die, die, die. I arrive to a class with 20 students, that is, we are dying (.) the management both within the school and the municipality, because the goal is not to educate it is a profit goal here we have to have students we have to receive anything (...) therefore because it is a municipal school here get everything that other schools do not receive and the good students, because we used to have very good students, they have all emigrated to the [private] subsidised schools ...everything they throw away, all the expelled, all the bad ones arrive here and with those children we have to work (0.1). (Teacher group interview)

What is striking about these excerpts is that in the midst of teachers' sense of alienation and agony students had become objects, 'we have to receive anything'. The word 'student' was used by this teacher to refer to those who have left, the 'good students'. Children and parents are responsible for what schools are not able to achieve, not the hard working teachers. In this alienation teachers failed to see the connection between what they did/say and how students and parents behaved. Teachers' perceptions that parents do not care about their children and their education seemed at odds with their description of parents' choosing to leave, looking for better performing schools – a contradiction missed by the teachers and parents interviewed in these schools.

In some schools we observed a lack of leadership and in others the leadership style was described as having poorly executed elements of what Tschannen-Moran (2009) defined as a bureaucratic orientation. Leadership and teachers demonstrated low expectations for the capabilities of teachers, parents, and students. In places where leadership was weak or lacked social validation, problems went unresolved and the impact was felt in terms of decreased instructional time:

Interviewer: And in that sense, how do conflicts get resolved?

Teacher 2: They cannot get resolved, because management is not organised to go about resolving those situations. She had to give her exams, whatever, she needed some quiet time, that a classroom be assigned, you will need those things, but there is no management for that

Interviewer: So how are decisions made?

Teacher 3: On the road, everything on the road. Children could not take their tests because the pencils were not available, finally we had to spend about half an hour trying to get the pencils, going everywhere, desperately trying to get them, imagine that. (Teachers' group interview)

Schools in this category were described as fragmented organisations with little integration within the leadership team, within teachers, and among various stakeholders. Repeatedly trust was represented as a problem:

Teacher 3: I think that here the biggest problem that we have is the problem of communication and we have had it for the last six years

Interviewer: In what sense you mean communication, where is it broken?

Teacher 3: You learn about everything in the hallways

Interviewer: The communication is informal

Teacher 4: And what is worse is that here is that the relations among colleagues are not good, I am sorry to say it, relationships among colleagues are very bad. (Teachers' group interview)

Parents who held positions in the leadership of the parents' organisation confirmed that teachers worked hard. However, they also wondered if this work was in the right direction and who was benefiting from it:

Parent 1: Well, here they work enough... that is because I always see that they work, they are working in the improvement [of the school] that is, (0.1) the Curriculum Coordinator, they work (0.2) but whether I understand any of that, no, not really...

Parent 4: Yup, they say we are working on this, but never explain what it is about, why, who will benefit...

Parent 1: But I know they work a lot (in...) that, because I know that goes in the content for the different classes, but I do not know if that is right or not. (Parent group interview)

With respect to participation and decision-making the bureaucratic orientation in these schools was evidenced in vertical, rigid relations. Everyone described themselves as performing their functions and roles, spaces for dialogue were seldom described. Differences in opinions were perceived as threatening. In these organisations a sense of powerlessness had settled in. Whereas some teachers had given up, others felt frustrated:

Interviewer: Then you do not see yourselves represented in...n the outcome of your participation in the activity?

Teacher 2: Nothing

Teacher 1: In some things sometimes

Interviewer: Then, then for you differences, divergent means to remain silent, means not to speak up

Teacher 1: Why talk? If each one decides. What for, if things will continue marching in the same way?

Teacher 2: Yes, what for?

Teacher 1: Frustration, frustration. (Teacher group interview)

In teachers' discourses parents were often constructed as criminals, drug addicts, with this evidencing their lack of money but mostly their lack of values: 'The ones who damage the school's reputation' (Teacher). Social vulnerability was understood by teachers as a stable condition that determined what schools could achieve. Parents

and students reported feeling discriminated against both by the school and the broader society. They had also come to naturalise the conditions in which they found themselves, indicating that there was no possibility for transformation ‘They tell us we are criminals, drug addicts...’ (Focus group with students). They had taken on the descriptions that others ascribed to them, reproducing them as they talked about themselves ‘We are the dumpster’ (Focus group with students). To the extent that the pupils who attend the school *are* not good enough and this is in their nature, the possibilities for transformation are denied.

The identification of the students with their parents and their community was seen as a weakness, a source of disappointment:

Teacher 3: We have attempted to get along with the kids, that is, to come to some agreement in quotes, with the older kids, but they, I do not know I have suddenly become disillusioned with them because everything that they have been given, everything they have been afforded, I have seen the work of some colleagues from high school, their work is very intense, but the kids have no perspective of the future, that is, finish the fourth [last year of high school] and continue the same line of work as their fathers (...) I feel disappointed by the students and the other thing is that the parent with the extension of the school day they threw us the children, you figure out what to do, we wash our hands, it is your problem (...). (Teacher group interview)

In these schools we also found evidence of parental participation, but like teachers, parents spoke about their involvement with frustration and trying to find someone to blame for what the school was not able to achieve. In one of the schools parents had been invited to become classroom helpers. The conflict that emerged was twofold. First, these mothers had been recruited and trained by the Curriculum Head thus were caught in the conflicts she had with teachers. Teachers became threatened when parents not only assumed helping roles but also started monitoring the quality of teachers’ work. To the extent that work became less private and apparently no efforts were made to ensure the development of trusting relationships between teachers and their helpers, the programme failed.

Interviewer: I heard that mothers had a role of supporting teaching

Teacher: Yes, it started with that role, it began very well, very well, but...afterwards...based on what ↑I saw ... the classroom, according to teachers then some comments began to be aired outside and that is very sensitive to have someone in your classroom if you do not fully trust them

Teacher: When things started coming out of the classroom that they transmitted, then the conflicts ensued. (Teacher group interviews)

The relationship between parents and teachers was described as if not antagonistic, at least distant. When parents at one school were asked what they wanted to request from the leadership team, they responded:

Parent 5: That he involves parents because otherwise they will be driven away, then they will call the parent

Parent 4: As the saying goes, I am not there with the school because they do not take me into account. (Parent group interview)

In contrast, parents holding leadership positions in the parents’ organisation at another school had aligned themselves with the schools to place on parents the responsibility for a lack of participation. These mothers also had come to believe that their

peers lacked commitment to their children's education. The mother quoted in the next excerpt also showed that parents' support for their children is not determined by schools' attitudes toward them and that they can claim agency because it is not just something that is given by those in power. However, in contrast to parents in schools oriented toward improvement, only the individual dimension of agency, her personal effort, was acknowledged.

Parent 3: What else can we expect if behind those children are (0.2) those people as support, that is nothing, that is I know my daughters, thank God, are intelligent because I am behind them, pushing, pushing and I know it is the same case for them [the other participants in the group interview] because we are the parents who are constantly pushing and we come to the school, that there is this to do, that, how is your child (.) some way or another you need to know how to come close, see how it is, how is your child, I don't know, cooperate, but here, unfortunately, the thing is not that way here. (Parent group interview)

The problems that prevented the school from improving students' results on SIMCE were described as natural and structural. Given *the nature of students and families served*, teachers thought that all they could do was to try to educate the moral character of students with the purpose of curbing discipline problems. This, therefore, became the purpose of schools and their work as educators:

Teacher 2: I believe that when there is discipline in the classroom, there is learning, they go hand in hand. (Teacher group interview)

Principal: And we need to be even more, even more and tougher, they outside [ask for discipline] parents ask for discipline. (0,1) (Leadership team interview)

This focus on the behavioural discipline of student was shared by some parents:

Parent 4: That is the big problem nowadays, because since the rights of children were born, it seems that parents are left behind, teachers got lost because children have more rights than parents, they have more rights than mothers (...) then if there are so many problems with students it is because they come from the home, and I am not saying this is a bad high school because it is not a bad high school, the children, I have always said that children make the high school then teachers really can't do much when they sit down and talk ten thousand times to a child and the child will not obey because the child does not have the conditions to say ah...I was scolded or this is not appropriate but the home I think is the most. (Parent group interview)

Parents, contrary to what teachers believed, did expect schools to provide students with academic knowledge:

Parent 4: I have always, the other problem I have always criticised in the school, I have told this to the Curriculum Head (.), to the former principal I presented this (0.2) that bad students get promoted because they are prohibited from holding students back so they [do not repeat a grade level] (0.3) they are not doing anyone any favour (.) it is no help that they provide to them by letting them pass, pass, pass, (0.3) (e::h) these children if they then go to another school after a month they are back here because they bounce in the other school (...) because you achieve nothing if children get to the fourth year in high school knowing nothing (0.3) [the fourth year is the last year]. (Parent group interview)

In this excerpt we find additional evidence that low-income parents want to exercise the choice market-driven policies intend. However, these low-income parents saw

their choice constrained not by their lack of information to be better consumers but by their children's lack of academic preparation. Students in schools that provided poor educational services could not afford to move to better performing schools. In other words, the parents understood that schools were not contributing to the development of cultural capital that could allow their children to compete in the meritocratic system that underpinned the highly selective admissions processes developed by the highest-achieving municipal schools.

Discussion

A purposive sample of 10 schools was selected based on the performance scores obtained on two measures of school quality. In eight of these schools, over 80% of the families were identified as socially vulnerable, with the proportion representing 66.6% and 72.3%, respectively, in the other two schools. Notwithstanding this fairly homogeneous sample with respect to the social characteristics of the population served, schools differed in terms of their results as well as in the social capital developed. In six, schools showed improvements from the 2003/04 to the 2006/07 scores on the management processes measured by SACG and on SIMCE measures of student learning. Contrary to our expectations, only four of these schools had developed and nurtured social capital and other organisational characteristics associated with an improvement orientation ([Hoy 1990](#); [Bryk and Schneider 2003](#); [Midthassel 2004](#); [Brown and Medway 2007](#); [Chan et al. 2008](#); [Spillane et al. 2008](#); [Goddard et al. 2009](#)). Two schools that had shown gains in those performance measures did not evidence the kinds of characteristics the literature associates with improvement. In fact these two schools' climate resembled the climate of the two schools which were selected because they had not improved as well as those two selected, given that they improved on only one measure. This could be explained by the fact that improvement was not measured as a trend overtime, thus improvement between two data points is not necessarily reflective of sustainable growth. Given that at the time of the study SACG had only been implemented twice, further research might explore this explanation by comparing schools that sustain improvement in these management processes over several quality assurance cycles.

The four schools that exhibited an improvement orientation exhibited an open climate in which both teachers and principals saw each other as genuinely committed to each other's well-being. Teachers' reported working well together, carrying out their duties in ways that achieved the goals and fostered social satisfaction among co-workers. In these schools leadership was understood as a collective process distributed among members of a community. In schools oriented toward improvement, parents participated as a result of the instauration of democratic school governance rather than as a matter of individual effort or policy mandates. In schools that saw their mission as working with parents to transform students' life chances leadership, as Gunter (2005) has proposed, was less about controlling relationships through team processes and more about generating a connected sense of agency through which everybody – staff, parents, and students – learned.

In contrast to the schools we just described, in the six schools identified as needing to develop an improvement orientation the school staff had not been able to adapt to the changing demographics of their student body. Collectively the staff lacked a positive vision for supporting the development of children as they thought that pupils' and families' social vulnerability were insurmountable barriers for improvement.

Relations among the various actors exhibited low trust and even antagonism, thus in these schools scarce resources (such as teachers' time) were spent in the creation of formal contracts that ultimately were not enforced. In some schools we observed a lack of leadership and in others the leadership style demonstrated little consideration for the capability of teachers, parents, and students. Schools in this category described a fragmented organisation with little integration among the leadership team, among teachers, and among various stakeholders. In these schools we also found evidence of parental participation, but like teachers, parents spoke about their involvement with frustration and trying to find someone to blame for what the school was not able to achieve.

The differences just outlined were exemplified in how the words 'family', 'we', and 'our' were used to signify who was acknowledged as an agent for improvement. Whereas in schools oriented toward improvement 'family' was a concept used to signify bonding and mutual commitment, in schools that lacked this orientation 'family' was a concept used to signify intractable barriers to improvement. In the schools oriented toward improvement 'we' was used to include everyone, to communicate a shared sense of purpose that transcended the schools as a closed system. In these schools repeatedly the word 'our' was used to signify ownership as well as to signify personal and collective responsibility for what the school was able to accomplish.

In the schools that needed to develop an orientation toward improvement, 'we' was used to distinguish groups that were antagonists, to create exclusion. Thus, 'we' the teachers had to fight 'they' the parents and the students who created problems that could not be resolved by the school. In these schools parents attending the focus groups were typically involved in the school's parent organisation and represented themselves as model parents. They thought that participation resulted more from their personal efforts than from the school's understandings of their contributions beyond fund-raising and organising social functions for children. The use of 'we' in both types of schools, however, tended to reinforce a positive identity through a process of differentiation from others. Parents, for example, used 'we' to exclude and distance themselves from their counterparts who failed to be present in the activities schools requested from them. As parents emphasised that distinction, this study provides evidence that policies of school choice are also materialised in low-income communities. In the schools with a positive school climate, choice was based on the ethic of care shown by staff. In the schools with an unhealthy climate, parents reported that their choice was limited when schools did not provide a strong academic curriculum to their pupils.

Both types of schools served a very large proportion of pupils living in poverty; however, how school staff understood the impact of this fact on school achievement was markedly different. In schools oriented toward improvement poverty and other social ills associated with social exclusion, were seen as temporary and not privy to underserved communities. Moreover, these were the conditions that schools should strive to change. In the other type of schools the social composition of the student body was deemed as the cause of persistent failure. In schools oriented toward improvement, with a clear vision and a democratic ethos teachers and administrators were able to find their way out of the complexities entailed. In the schools lacking this orientation repeatedly discourses reflected a dualistic thinking: good vs. bad children, hard-working teachers vs. lazy, uncommitted parents, good/bad administrators vs. good/bad teachers, and so forth. Without a vision and a simplistic perspective, school

staff in the latter type of school were unable to see connections between the different pieces that colluded to create persistent failure. The broader problems of poverty and marginalisation were seen as external forces that made the problems even more intractable. The repeated absence of the word ‘our’ and the externalisation of the responsibility left staff to await the arrival of a death that had already been announced as enrolment declined year after year.

Conclusion

SACG assumes that continuous improvement involves school staff learning to become increasingly accountable for three sets of outcomes: student learning, key management processes, and satisfaction of the community. Hopkins (2001, in Wrigley 2006) indicated that a bottom-up approach to improvement entails not only a concern with results, but also a fundamental concern with the organisational processes that sustain them. The findings of the current study show that the extent to which these outcomes are promoted through the implementation of this quality assurance is associated with the level of social capital the organisation has been able to develop. This conclusion lends support to Bryk and Schneider’s (2003) contention that reform ought also to attend to the quality of social relations required for effective teaching and learning. Goddard et al. (2009) noted that in the United States the schools targeted for special compensatory programmes are overburdened by the simultaneous fronts to be addressed and are the types of schools in which they found lowest levels of trust. Based on findings that indicate that there is a relationship between academic achievement and teachers’ trust in students and parents, they suggest that it is essential that efforts to improve struggling schools and increase equity include a focus on building and maintaining trust within the various schools’ actors. The current findings support that recommendation as a sense of collective agency when required by the state to implement a quality assurance system was found in schools that exhibited high levels of trust, but not in those in which staff spoke of having little trust in each other. In the absence of this type of agency instead of fostering collective responsibility, policies like SACG might be fostering low morale and deepening the attribution of outcomes to factors external to the schools (Rustique-Forrester 2005; Finnigan and Gross 2007).

Beginning in 2005, Chilean schools receiving state subsidy (municipal government or private entrepreneur) are required to form a School Council that includes representative from the school’s various stakeholders. According to this law the owner of each school may decide if it will afford decision-making power to this Council. The current study showed that in both types of schools professionals had retained the power to name the problems the school needed to confront, with the ensuing implications for the actions and strategies deemed appropriate. Given this legal framework, developing structures to redistribute power among teachers, school leaders, parents, and students to define the problems and its solutions may be where schools oriented toward improvement can further develop. Further research needs to explore under what conditions, internal and external to the school, recognition of parents as agents in the transformation of schools maybe deepened in ways that are democratic and inclusive. As exemplified in the current study, and others, involving parents as partners in the educational work of schools is not exempt from conflict. Top-down reform, cannot mandate collaboration and mutual influences between parents, teachers, and school leaders – these must be constructed on a daily basis by people who bring to their interactions different agendas and levels of social, economic, and cultural capital

for leverage in the decision-making process (Abrams and Gibbs 2002; Gordon and Nocon 2008; Addi-Racah and Ainhoren 2009). School improvement is not just about developing technical expertise; fundamentally it is a process by which the school organisation develops and reconstructs an identity based on the ideal that all stakeholders have a sense of belonging.

Acknowledgements

The preparation of this manuscript was partially funded by the Centre for Advanced Research in Education (PIA-CONICYT, Project CIE-05) and a grant from the Chilean National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development (Fondecyt # 1060444).

Notes

1. Although privatisation has continued, it is important to note that with the restoration of democracy the state redefined its role from one that limited itself to subsidising education to one that actively enacted a number of policies to promote and enhance the quality and equity of education (OECD 2004). In this role of educational promoter, beginning in 2000 the Ministry of Education has been increasingly involved in developing a number of quality assurance frameworks for municipal schools – which are the only schools under the technical-pedagogical oversight of the government. This movement is framed within a policy of increased decentralisation that purports to afford greater control of improvement efforts at the school level. Among these initiatives is SACG which rests on a bottom-up approach to school improvement.
2. The Jefferson system of transcription used by conversation analysis and discursive psychology is used when reporting direct quotations from interviews (Sacks, in Potter 1996). By using characters available in a keyboard, the transcription highlights characteristics of the talk that are relevant when analysing it. The following notations from the Jefferson system are used in the transcriptions cited in this article:
 - Colon (:) signals the elongation of the sound immediately prior (s:o), the longer the person emits the sound the more colons used (Ah:::)
 - Vertical arrows are used to signal the raising or lowering of the intonation (↓ Very good).
 - The hyphen (than-than:ks) signals an abrupt ending of a word or sound
 - Numbers in parenthesis (0,2) reflect the duration of the pauses in seconds (in this example, 2 tenths of a second); a period in parenthesis (.) signals an audible pause that is too short to measure.
3. Interview excerpts have been translated from Spanish to English by the first author. Every attempt was made to provide a literal translation, however on occasions a literary mode was taken if the meaning was lost in translation.

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