

# **RHETORIC AND REALITY OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN CHILE**

A Multiple Case Study of School Improvement Policy and External Technical Support  
Programmes for Municipal Primary Schools

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, including the author's previous writing, this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

Currently we are witnessing the expansion of performance-based reforms in education around the world, based on a global education reform agenda. In Chile, the policy framework for school improvement has changed because of modifications to the governance structure and the introduction of performance standards in the school system. This policy framework defines a performance-based accountability system according to students' achievement in Chile's national examination (SIMCE), and institutes external technical support as the main policy strategy for improvement at the school level. This policy framework assumes a decontextualised, technical-rational perspective of school improvement, influenced by school effectiveness literature.

Based on a social theory perspective, I aim to problematise this notion of improvement by studying the influence of the Chilean policy framework for school improvement on the implementation of external technical support programmes in seven primary municipal schools. Through a qualitative multiple case study, I look at the rationale (*rhetoric*) of the policy framework for school improvement by inquiring about its development and implementation, and in addition, I look at the practice (*reality*) of improvement in schools in relation to the implementation of three distinct external technical support programmes.

The findings from the case studies indicate that the Chilean policy framework for school improvement normalises and places responsibility at the school level, promoting an accountability-based, autonomy-driven, self-improving school system. Furthermore, the influence of the policy framework is found on the implementation of external technical support programmes, the narratives of school improvement that these programmes put forward, and the way these programmes contribute to the attributes of a self-improving school system. Building on this study, and supported with social theory literature, I challenge the dominant notion of school improvement, making the case for and conceptualising an approach to school improvement studies that looks beyond the technical-rationality of effectiveness.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

- ATE – Educational Technical Assistance
- ATP – Technical Pedagogical Advisors
- CLE – Centre of Educational Leadership
- CNED – National Council of Education
- CSR – Comprehensive School Reform
- DAEM – Municipal Department of Educational Administration
- DEPROV – Ministry of Education Provincial Department
- ELE – School Leadership Team
- FICOM – Shared Financing
- JEC – Full School Day
- LEM – Reading, Writing and Mathematics initiative
- LGE – General Law of Education
- LLECE - Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education
- MBE – Framework for Good Teaching
- MECE - Improving Quality and Equity programme
- MINEDUC – Chilean Ministry of Education
- P900 – The 900 Schools Programme
- PAC – Shared Support Plan
- PEI – School Pedagogical Project
- PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment
- PME – School Improvement Plan
- SAC – System of Quality Assurance of Education
- SEN – Special Education Needs
- SEP – Preferential School Subsidy Law
- SEREMI – Ministry of Education Regional Secretariat
- SES – Socio Economic Status

SIMCE – Measurement System of Education Quality

TIMSS – Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

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And to Ximena, thanks for singing, laughing, crying and arguing with me. This is for you.

When the flags coming down / And the Last Post sounds / Just like a love song  
For the way I feel about you / Paradise not lost it's in you  
On a permanent basis I apologise / But I am going to sing

*Blur - 'Under the Westway'*

## CHAPTER I

### PROBLEMATISING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT – PART ONE

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in researching the consequences that the market and accountability policy model has had on education systems around the world. A specific area of research is how schools deal with the issue of raising standards and implementing strategies to enhance the learning experience for all students; in other words, what school improvement is and how it is developed. My thesis aims to understand this phenomenon for the case of Chile, inquiring as to how improvement policy is enacted in schools, considering pressure from a performance-based accountability system, support from State and private external agents, and other relevant issues such as high-stakes testing and school autonomy.

My motivation to engage with this topic of inquiry came from my own professional experience as an external advisor, providing support mostly to municipal schools in Chile to initiate and sustain change and improvement. Before starting my postgraduate studies, I made use of my limited knowledge about school effectiveness and improvement in my professional practice with schools. Consequently, I decided to specialise in this field of research and practice to gain deeper knowledge about how schools improve, what conditions are necessary for this to happen and, more importantly, what counts as improvement. However, while I learned about these issues from what Thrupp (2005) described as *official school improvement*, I also familiarised myself with alternative perspectives, both from within (Chapman *et al.*, 2012; Harris and Bennett, 2001) and outside (Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson, 1998) this field. This led me to reflect about my own practice as a *school improver* and the approaches I used to support schools within the context of the Chilean school system.

The Chilean education policy framework involves elements of accountability as part of a national quality assurance system, within an education market that operates through school choice and where decentralisation, standardisation and local autonomy play a key role (Ahumada, Montecinos and González, 2012; Bellei and Vanni, 2015; Gauri, 1998; Raczynski and Muñoz, 2007). For improvement purposes, schools are periodically assessed and evaluated in terms of their effectiveness (i.e. students' achievement in Chile's national examination) by the central government, to provide information to parents to aid them in exercising their choice of schools, while schools develop local strategies to improve their effectiveness through school improvement plans. In this context, the role of external technical support programmes is vital to assist schools in the design and implementation of

their improvement strategies (González and Bellei, 2013; Muñoz and Vanni, 2008; Osses, Bellei and Valenzuela, 2015). These programmes may adopt different approaches to the task of helping schools, particularly those in challenging circumstances, but they all operate under the assumption that schools need their external expertise to initiate and sustain a process of continuous improvement (Chapman, 2005; Clarke, 2005; Muijs *et al.*, 2004).

Features of this policy framework for the improvement of schools are not exclusive to Chile, with several school systems around the world experiencing similar situations. This is in response to the advance of what Sahlberg has called the *global education reform movement*, which he describes as a politically and professionally accepted globalised ideology of educational change that fosters standardisation, accountability and the teaching of basic knowledge and skills in core subjects (Sahlberg, 2006). Here, I will argue that this global reform movement has been informed by school effectiveness and school improvement research literature, and is inspired by a neoliberal *doxa*, a belief that operates as if it were an objective truth and scientific account of reality, constituting a political programme (Bourdieu, 1977; Chopra, 2003). This reform movement, in line with effectiveness and improvement research, stresses that all efforts to improve quality and equity in a school system should be directed at the school level, or should at least operate in a decentralised way (e.g., local authorities, groups of schools, or groups of teachers and/or school leaders).

Within this institutional arrangement, then, the school can be considered as the centre of change and improvement (Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994) but it can also be positioned as the basic unit of accountability of the system (O'Day, 2002). My assumption is that the positioning of the school depends largely on the policy options and political culture of a given school system, which provide the conditions wherein the strategies for school improvement are chosen and implemented. Thus, in my thesis, I adopt a critical attitude towards the effectiveness and improvement knowledge base, on the understanding that its propositions often fail to engage with such important issues.

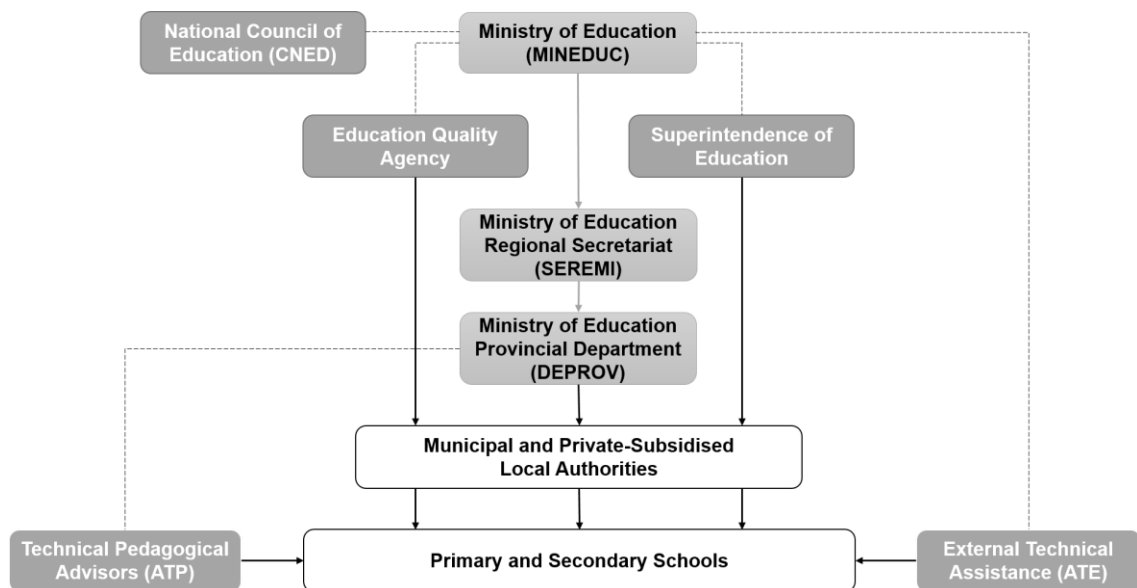
### **Chilean school system: normative and institutional setting**

In the past two decades, the structure and organisation of the Chilean school system has been transformed because of reforms to the legal framework of education (see Figure 1). These reforms have meant important changes to school improvement policy and how it influences what happens in and around schools.

Chilean policy for school improvement is based on what is contained in the law N° 20.248, which sets a Preferential School Subsidy (Subvención Escolar Preferencial – SEP) or *adjusted*

*voucher* for students from poorer families attending state-funded schools, on the understanding that they need more resources to compensate for the influence of contextual and social factors in their educational outcomes. As a condition to receive this additional funding, this law establishes that schools in which these students are enrolled must design a four-year school improvement plan (Plan de Mejoramiento Educativo – PME) and are accountable for their students’ performance in Chile’s standardised test (Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación – SIMCE) for primary and secondary education (MINEDUC, 2008). Furthermore, external technical support to schools’ improvement plans is provided by agencies called Educational Technical Assistance (Asistencia Técnica Educativa – ATE), which are private organisations or individuals with expertise who offer their services directly to schools and local authorities (Muñoz and Vanni, 2008). Although the Preferential School Subsidy law explicitly targets students from low-income families, as a large-scale school improvement policy it aims to influence the achievement of all students by transforming the pedagogical and management practice of schools (Raczynski *et al.*, 2013).

Figure 1. Chilean school system structure



In addition to the Preferential School Subsidy law, in 2011 the Chilean government enacted the law N° 20.529, which sets up a national System of Quality Assurance of Education<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: [www.saceducacion.cl](http://www.saceducacion.cl) (in Spanish)

(Sistema de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación – SAC) and reorganises the role of government institutions such as the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and the National Council of Education (Consejo Nacional de Educación – CNED). Also, this law introduces further accountability and control through the activities of two new government agencies: the Superintendence of Education, which audits schools' and local authorities' compliance with the education legislation on finance and governance; and the Quality Agency, which evaluates and inspects schools' and local authorities' performance based on SIMCE results and a set of other education quality indicators (e.g., school climate, participation and citizenship, gender equity, attendance, among others). Furthermore, as part of this institutional re-arrangement, ministry supervisors have changed their role to that of Technical Pedagogical Advisors (Asesores Técnico Pedagógicos – ATP) to provide external technical support to schools through focalised interventions.

The Chilean school improvement policy framework builds on a rationale that aims to influence the school system towards increasing the quality of education. This rationale operates on a system of rewards and sanctions based on information from standardised tests and other effectiveness indicators, complemented by a novel audit and inspection regime, and the presence of external change agents, to support and challenge underperforming schools. Here, quality is understood as a multidimensional concept that has been reduced to a binary measurement (i.e., good/bad; effective/failing) to operate as a technology of control that links government policies to school organisational practices (Ball, 1997a; Morley and Rasool, 2000). This resembles other reform experiences that have relied on policies that install accountability systems to influence improvement at the school level (Darling-Hammond, 2004). However, for the case of Chile, questions regarding how this policy influence operates in practice, and how schools – especially disadvantaged, state-municipal schools – deal with this policy framework remain unanswered.

Considering the importance of external change agents for the current Chilean improvement policy, it seems relevant to investigate the influence of current policy framework on the provision of external support to schools. Consequently, a key assumption of my thesis is that research and literature on school effectiveness and school improvement offers a relevant background to understand how this policy framework has been configured and enacted in Chile.

### **School improvement, policy and reform**

School effectiveness and school improvement research was at the height of its popularity

during the 1990s and extended its influence worldwide, affecting policy and practice across countries and states, languages and cultures (Anderson, 2010). Advocates of effectiveness and improvement have insisted, based on research evidence, that reform initiatives should aim for schools to develop a strong focus on learning, consistently effective teaching, collaborative work within and between schools, and collecting and using data to monitor and evaluate progress (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Reynolds and Stoll, 1996; Stoll and Myers, 1998). Despite the popularity of effectiveness and improvement research and literature, it has been criticised by some academics for its lack of theoretical foundations and for the favouritism among policymakers and reformers who have pushed for what some argue is a neoliberal agenda in education (Chapman *et al.*, 2012; Gorard, 2010; Slee and Weiner, 2001; Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson, 1998; Thrupp, 2001; Wrigley, 2008).

Later, since the early 2000s, policymakers – and arguably, researchers and academics too – have turned their attention to more appealing topics within school improvement research, such as leadership, effective teaching, and data-driven decision-making (Reynolds, Teddlie and Pol, 2000). This change of interest was backed by data collected through international assessments (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS) and subsequent benchmarking reports about high performing school systems, which highlighted the relevance of the topics mentioned above for the success of these systems (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Barber, Whelan and Clark, 2010; Fullan, 2009; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010). This scenario, in which features of effective school systems are identified through analyses based on international assessments, has forged a path that has inspired improvement advocates to think about the dynamics and processes of system-level change, claiming that we are entering a new phase of this field: systemic improvement (Hopkins *et al.*, 2014).

As I have observed, school improvement as a field of inquiry has faded into the background to make room for the topics mentioned above (e.g. leadership, effective teaching, etc.), which facilitate the implementation of a type of performance-based reform that is global in scale and systemic in its approach. Conversely, as a field of practice, school improvement builds on the global spread of its accumulated knowledge about improvement at the school, local and state/national level, which is often adopted, adapted and adjusted according to the different systemic contexts where it is applied. Nevertheless, the relationship between performance-based, systemic reform and school improvement has rarely been problematised by researchers working in this field.

This leads me to think critically about and study school improvement initiatives in Chile as a way of addressing and problematising the relationship between the school improvement



knowledge base and education reform and policy. I aim to explore in-depth the consequences that this type of reform has had within the Chilean school system, looking at the policy discourse and practices of schools and external agents from a qualitative perspective.

### **Research rationale: rhetoric and reality of school improvement in Chile**

Initially, my research proposal considered a specific education policy strategy in Chile: how school improvement was promoted through programmes of external technical support aimed at low performing, disadvantaged schools. Specifically, I wanted to explore how different programmes targeting state-municipal schools influenced the development of internal capacity for improvement in these schools, to identify key factors associated with these programmes. In retrospect, my initial research rationale was strongly influenced by school effectiveness and school improvement research, and at this initial stage of my thesis I kept policy as a background or contextual issue.

My research was then further developed by focusing on the follow-up of three on-going programmes of external technical support in Chile, as case studies. Given the diversity of programmes, I assumed as a selection criterion cases that would match the three approaches, understood as theoretical models or *ideal types* (abstractions), of external support, which I developed from a review of school improvement literature (Harris, 2001b; Muijs *et al.*, 2004). The three approaches to external support that I chose for my study are:

1. *Collaboration and networking* (Katz and Earl, 2010), characterised by a flexible design that operates based on collaboration between schools to determine improvement goals and strategies;
2. *Target-setting and resource-based* (Chapman, 2005), characterised by a mixed design that determines the goals to be achieved (targets) and supports whatever strategies the school defines (resources) to achieve these goals; and
3. *Prescriptive pressure and support* (Barber and Phillips, 2000), characterised by a strict design that determines the goals to be achieved and the strategy to be implemented by the school.

Initially, I wanted to test my assumption that if each case represented one of the approaches above, there would be a difference in how each programme of external technical support promotes improvement in municipal schools. To study the implementation of each programme, I developed a qualitative case study of external support activities implemented in a small number of schools for each programme. Thus, I looked to explore how these programmes provide external support or intervene to initiate a process of change and

improvement in these low-performing municipal schools, considering their characteristics.

However, while conducting interviews and observing the activities and interactions of school leaders, teachers, and external agents working for these three programmes, I realised that my approach was missing the weight of the influence of the policy framework. I could see such policy influence on the implementation of each of these programmes, and the daily practice of school staff and external professionals. In this sense, the fieldwork experience operated as an *agent provocateur* as it enticed me to challenge some of the initial assumptions of my thesis, which were strongly influenced by the effectiveness and improvement literature. This led me to reflect on the relevance and strong presence of the policy rationale of reward and sanctions and its impact on municipal schools' practice, as such frameworks explicitly target these schools.

Building upon this reflection, which emerged from and during my fieldwork experience in schools, I decided to re-focus my research. I attempted to broaden my perspective and consider the influence of Chile's policy framework for school improvement on the implementation of these three programmes of external technical support, as well as on the practice of schools where these programmes were being implemented. In consequence, I adapted the inquiry topics of my fieldwork, interviews and observations towards the way programmes of external technical support, external change agents or advisors, and school leaders and teachers in municipal schools, experience, react, contest or adapt to the school improvement policy framework and its rationale. In this way, I attempted to focus not only on the strategy of external support for school improvement, but also to consider the political and social contexts where this strategy takes place.

Thus, my reformulated research questions look at the interplay between the Chilean policy framework for school improvement, the provision of external support, and the practice of municipal schools. Specifically, I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the external support programmes being implemented in municipal primary schools?
2. What notion or narratives of improvement are put forward by the theories of change that emerge from implementing a specific type of external support programme?
3. How is the policy framework for school improvement in Chile influencing the implementation of external support programmes in municipal primary schools and the practices of participants of the study?

Based on these questions, I chose to study the influence of the Chilean policy framework for school improvement on the implementation of external support programmes in schools,

through qualitative, multiple case studies. First, I developed theory-seeking and theory-testing case studies (Bassey, 1999) of three external support programmes, each based on a distinctive approach or theoretical position stemming from the school improvement knowledge base, through interviews, documents and observations. For each programme, I wrote a case description on the implementation of the programme in schools and the practice of external agents, school leaders and teachers, local authority officers, among others, to recreate a *theory of change* or narrative of improvement for a given case.

Second, I developed a story-telling and picture-drawing case study (Bassey, 1999) of the policy framework for school improvement in Chile through interviews with eight informants – ministry and local authority officers, researchers, and advisors. In this case study, I wrote about the current policy framework development and implementation through the overt and covert agendas, biases and interpretations of the informants, as a way of performing a critical education policy analysis (Ball, 1997b; Taylor, 1997; Troyna, 1994). To analyse and discuss this qualitative multiple case study, I developed a cross-case analysis to unpick the rationale (*rhetoric*) of the policy framework for school improvement and the practice (*reality*) of improvement at the school level within the context of implementing a specific programme of external support.

Finally, and although my thesis is explicitly underpinned by the effectiveness and improvement literature, I assumed a critical stance towards this theoretical framework to problematise school improvement. I mistrust its reductive nature in terms of defining what counts as effectiveness and improvement, and its technical-rational and managerial orientation when providing evidence of *what works* and *good practice*.

Thus, I set out to explore a different approach to address the problematic relationship between the school improvement knowledge base and education reform and policy, without abandoning this field of inquiry. Adopting an analytical position broadly framed within social theory and the sociology of education, and grounded in the experience of the cases studied, I attempt to problematise and engage with the gap that exists between the rhetoric and reality of school improvement in Chile, to make the case for a critical approach to school improvement studies.

### **Outline of the thesis**

In this first chapter, I have offered a general outline and introduction of the key issues and assumptions in relation to my thesis, as a general rationale for problematising school improvement. In the following chapters, I deal in depth with these and other topics.

In chapter two, I describe and analyse the main characteristics of the Chilean education system, with a special emphasis on school education. I set out the context in which the phenomena under study, the implementation of external technical support programmes for municipal schools, take place. I start by offering a brief historical account of how Chilean education developed into a market and choice system, taking as reference points the events that led to the 1973 *coup d'état*, the subsequent 17 years of dictatorship, and the last 25 years of democratically elected governments. Then, I describe and analyse the main characteristics of the Chilean school system, considering issues such as governance, types of schools and curricular and assessment frameworks. I finally identify achievements and unresolved issues of the Chilean school system.

In chapter three, I step back from the Chilean context to address the global education reform landscape to place Chile's school system and associated policies into perspective. Through a focused literature review, I discuss the current state of global and local reform influences, the drive from comparative education studies and reports, and the political aspects underpinning such globalisation of education policies.

Then, in chapter four, I return to Chile and look further into the evidence of global forces on our local school system context. For this, I focus my attention on the historical development of school improvement initiatives, which emerged during the 1990s and have been expanded and diversified throughout more than two decades of successive reform waves. My description and analysis focuses on two distinctive stages of policy development: 1) between 1990 and 2007 and 2) from 2008 to 2011.

Chapter five encompasses the main body of the literature review of my thesis, dealing with the knowledge base underpinning the policies described in previous chapters: school effectiveness and school improvement. I develop a review of these two research programmes, and engage with epistemological, political and methodological criticisms from within and outside the field. Then, I turn to a specific area of effectiveness and improvement research, which considers the provision of external support to disadvantaged schools as a strategy for school improvement. Here, based on the review of literature, I present three organising principles that configure three distinctive approaches to external support, which correspond to the approaches (theoretical or ideal types) introduced earlier in this section: collaboration and networking; target-setting and resource-based; and prescriptive pressure and support.

Chapter six deals with the research methodology of the thesis. Here, I outline the rationale of the thesis in terms of my initial interest in testing the assumption that different approaches

to external support would yield different school improvement narratives, as well as the subsequent modification of this rationale to consider the influence of the policy framework for school improvement within Chile. Then, I develop an argument for assuming a critical approach to the research that tackles the problems and biases of the traditional research paradigm of school effectiveness and school improvement, deepening the criticisms described in chapter five. Here, I advocate a critical research approach based on the idea of using other theoretical frameworks to comprehend the phenomenon under study, and draw particularly from social theory and sociology of education to do so. Then, I describe the research design of the thesis, covering issues such as case study research, sampling and participants, data collection and data analysis. Finally, I cover some ethical considerations that arise from the thesis, such as consent, confidentiality, protection and insider-research.

Chapters seven, eight, nine and ten present detailed case studies of the current policy framework for school improvement in Chile, and the three external technical support programmes corresponding to the theoretical models or approaches to external support. These chapters constitute the main body of evidence in my thesis regarding the rhetoric and reality of school improvement in Chile. Chapter seven is the first case study chapter of the thesis and it deals with the policy framework for school improvement. In it, I draw on interviews with researchers, advisors, ministry and municipal officers, with whom I describe and analyse the conditions in which the current policy framework has been configured and implemented. Chapter eight corresponds to the School Network project, in which I report on the experiences of three primary schools that participated in a collaborative and networking initiative. In chapter nine I present the Leading Head Teachers project that was implemented in three primary schools and was aimed at supporting head teachers and their senior management teams, as an example of a target-setting and resource-based approach. Chapter ten introduces the Shared Support Plan, a ministry intervention that was aimed at low performing primary schools, which I studied in a single school to represent a prescriptive pressure and support approach. At the end of each of these four chapters, I present a brief analysis of their theories of change around the question of how they promote improvement in schools, to outline emerging narratives of school improvement.

Building on the data presented in the case study chapters, chapter 11 offers a cross-case analysis, addressing the three research questions of the thesis. Here, I summarise the findings of the case study of the policy framework for school improvement and of the implementation of these three programmes of external technical support. Then I move on to develop an account of the narratives of school improvement that emerge from each case, incorporating the influence of the Chilean policy framework for school improvement on the

implementation of the external support programmes.

Lastly, chapter 12 picks up where this first chapter leaves off, in terms of problematising school improvement, dealing with the key concepts from the title of my thesis: the rhetoric and reality of school improvement in Chile.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CHILEAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

In this chapter, I describe and analyse key characteristics of the Chilean education system, with emphasis on school education. Firstly, I introduce the Chilean school system from a historical perspective, to provide a background for its current characteristics. I concentrate on a specific period (1970s to 1990s) when the setting up of an education market took place in Chile. Then, I describe the current characteristics of the Chilean school system, focusing on its governance structure, characteristics of Chilean schools, and the curriculum and assessment framework. Finally, I bring all this information together to discuss the achievements and unresolved issues of the Chilean school system, and inquire into how the State has managed a response to the latter.

Some elements of what is described in this chapter were already introduced in the previous one. My goal for this chapter is to deepen the description of how the system is set up and link that to internal conditions, needs and demands of the country, and external international reform agendas. This chapter, thus, aims to set the scene for what is the focus of my thesis: the link between school improvement policy and practice and rhetoric and reality, in a school system that is markedly influenced by internal and external forces.

#### **Historical background**

The foundations of the Chilean school system are deeply rooted in neoliberal principles and represent a paradigmatic example of post-welfare reforms in education (Gauri, 1998). The system favours parental choice, decentralisation, autonomy and accountability (McMeekin, 2010; OECD, 2004). This is the result of a long political and social debate on the provision of compulsory education in Chile that dates to the early twentieth century.

Since the creation of the first Normal Schools of Preceptors<sup>2</sup> in the 1842 and the enactment of the Primary Instruction Act in 1860, the Chilean State has assumed the obligation to provide instruction to the entire population and not only the elite. This decision sought to

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<sup>2</sup> The Normal School of Preceptors in Santiago was the first formal teacher training institution in Chile and Latin America, preparing primary teachers, which contributed to the expansion of formal education. Normal Schools slowly spread across the country between 1842 and 1950, and were the sole teacher training institution until the 1960s when an educational reform allowed universities to train teachers in their Regional Colleges. Finally, Normal Schools were banned by the dictatorship of Pinochet in 1974.

increase the literacy levels of the population in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nuñez, 2011), marked by a progressive orientation that aimed to build a democratic understanding of nation in opposition to the oligarchic domination that characterised the previous century (Barr-Melej, 2001). Later, in 1964, a constitutional reform ensured eight years of compulsory primary instruction, reformed the national curriculum and increased public spending to expand primary and secondary schooling to the entire population, for both adults and children (Núñez, 1982). From this moment and up to 1972, schooling and literacy became focal elements of a political debate regarding the role of the State in education and the possibility of universal primary instruction facilitating access to social power for the masses (Austin, 2003).

During the 1960s and up to the early 1970s, two main political positions were in confrontation regarding this issue. On one side, left-wing politicians and educationalists advocated the building of a *teaching state* (*estado docente*) to cover the literacy needs of the poor. Conversely, two important groups opposed state-run education under the banner of *freedom of teaching* (*libertad de enseñanza*): Catholic conservatives and liberal free traders, who ‘argued that government ought to leave education to the laws of supply and demand’ (Gauri, 1998, p. 16). After a military coup headed by General Augusto Pinochet in 1973 that overthrew the socialist government of President Salvador Allende, conservative and liberal groups embraced neoliberal principles and deconstructed the basis of the teaching state. Backed by a military junta, they violently interrupted 20 years of social participation and democratisation of education (Nuñez, 1984).

During the dictatorship, neoliberal economists and policymakers explored ways to modernise social services, such as education, with a mixture of decentralisation and privatisation (Gauri, 1998). This modernisation process was inspired by Milton Friedman’s (1962) ideas, which suggest that government should not oversee the administration of schools and should only provide funding through vouchers for families to choose their children’s schools. As a result, between 1974 and 1979 the dictatorship reorganised the territorial administration of the country, and then transferred most social services to municipalities, which were run and controlled by appointed military. Primary and secondary schools were transferred from the Ministry of Education to municipalities between 1980 and 1986, while the dictatorship encouraged private individuals and organisations to set up and run schools with State funding (McMeekin, 2010; OECD, 2004).

To match the administrative decentralisation of education, and building on Friedman’s ideas, schools’ fixed-funding system was changed dramatically to a universal voucher mechanism



where government pays a per-pupil subsidy to municipal and private State-subsidised schools (Mizala and Torche, 2012). Although all families can use this guarantee to apply for any school of their choosing, they do not receive the voucher, but rather it is paid to the school directly based on its enrolment and average student attendance.

Additionally, the dictatorship introduced two further sets of relevant, albeit less noticeable changes. The first involved disbanding the politically active Teachers' Union and replacing it with a less political Teachers' Association or Guild (Colegio de Profesores). Teachers' contracts were transferred from the State to municipal and private-subsidised administration, and salary and collective bargaining conditions of teachers were matched to those of the general workforce (Nuñez, 1984). The second set of reforms related to evaluation and quality control of the school system. In 1988, the dictatorship introduced a national standardised test, known as SIMCE, to evaluate schools' performance and inform parental choice. Later, in his final months in power, Pinochet passed a constitutional law of education that mandates the Ministry of Education to regularly assess schools and publish their results in national newspapers (Meckes and Carrasco, 2010).

Despite promoting decentralisation and privatisation as conditions for the operation of an education market in which parental choice played a key role, the dictatorship kept strict control over schools' activities and their pedagogical work. In fact, decentralisation and privatisation provided a mechanism for enhancing financial efficiency and rationalising State operations, by transferring the administration of education to municipalities. However, 'educational aspects remained under the Ministry of Education, through its recently created Provincial Departments' (OECD, 2004, p. 69). This created a situation where schools were – and to a large extent, still are – under a dual dependence: on one hand, they answer to the municipal government for administrative issues, such as budgeting, repairs and maintenance, and teachers' contracts; on the other, they answer to provincial departments of education (DEPROV) for pedagogical issues, such as authorisation of programmes of study, and students' promotion and retention guidelines.

Overall, the Chilean school system assumed what the literature describes as a *competitive market model of governance* (Glatter, 2002), where schools are the point of delivery of educational service, competing in their relevant geographical area with other schools for parental preference and funding. Simply put, in the context of choice and market policies where funding is associated with pupils' attendance, municipal and private-subsidised schools are compelled to compete for the favouritism of parents as consumers of the educational service.

After a centre-left political coalition, named the Concertación, defeated the dictatorship in a

national referendum in 1989, and contrary to the expectations of many, the new democratic government opted to maintain and enhance many of the policies from the dictatorship, mainly to ensure political stability during the transition years (Aedo-Richmond and Richmond, 1996; McMeekin, 2010). The decentralised administration of schools, the promotion of private participation in State-funded education, the voucher system, and the standardised measure of educational quality through SIMCE continued. Conversely, the Concertación increased the value of the voucher, improved teachers' working conditions and school infrastructure, developed programmes for school improvement, promoted curricular reform and extended compulsory education from eight to 12 years to include secondary education (Aedo-Richmond and Richmond, 1996; Raczynski and Muñoz, 2007).

According to Raczynski and Muñoz (2007), the main rupture with the policies of the dictatorship is the change of the State's role in education: from a subsidiary role as a passive agent in the school system, it assumed a promoting role in the 1990s, actively pushing for improvement and change in schools. This role change did not affect the decentralised delivery of educational services; instead it aimed to deepen decentralisation, hoping to promote increased school autonomy. The change of the State's role in education brought together two models of governance described in the literature as *local empowerment* and *quality control* (Glatter, 2002), involving greater capacity at the local level to decide how to improve the provision of the educational service to appeal to their local community, while complying with centrally defined curriculum and assessment standards.

However, I would dispute this description of the change in the State's role in education for two reasons. First, during the dictatorship the State kept control over key decisions in education (curriculum and assessment, infrastructure, among others) and supervised municipal and private providers of State-funded education through its provincial departments. This scenario sets the State's role as an authoritarian rather than a subsidiary one as claimed before, as it involves active intervention in schools' and local authorities' activities. In other words, for most of the 1980s, the decentralisation of the school system seemed to be only an administrative solution and this situation did not change significantly for municipal and private-subsidised local authorities during the 1990s (González, González and Galdames, 2015).

Second, there certainly was an effort by democratic governments to move towards a more active role. However, I would argue that they did so through quality assurance measures, thus enacting a regulatory rather than a promoting role. Quality assurance mechanisms have been the preferred strategy to drive system performance since the late 1990s: The State

regulates and steers at a distance through specific reform initiatives in key areas such as curriculum or school management, while at the local level schools face increased pressure to keep up with external policy demands through external and self-evaluation and the design of school improvement plans (Ahumada, Montecinos and González, 2012).

## **Current characteristics of the Chilean school system**

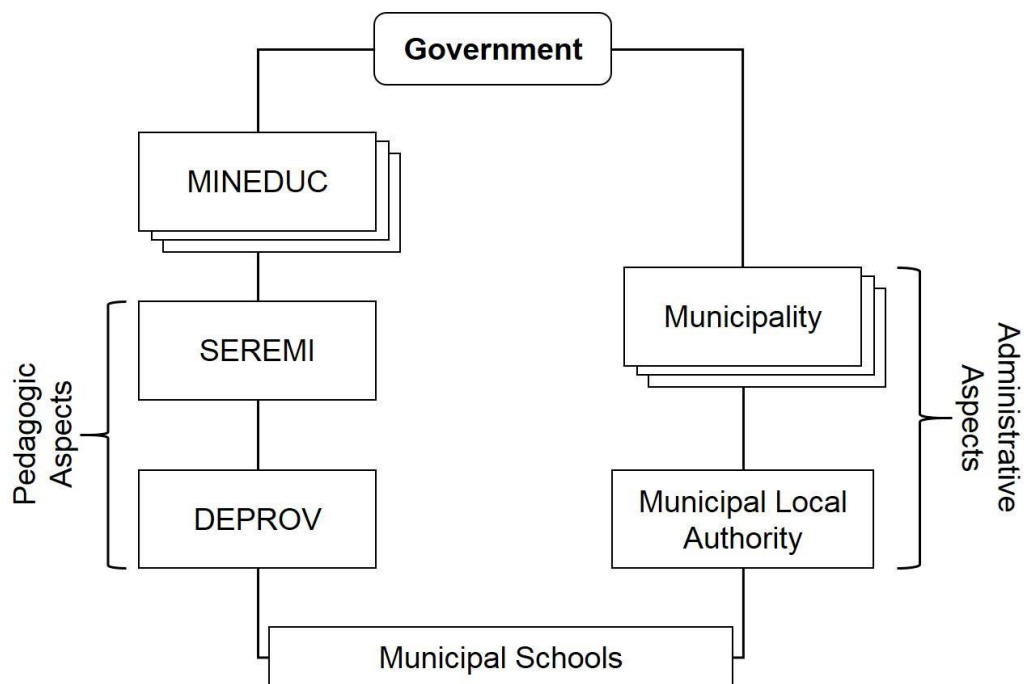
### *Governance structure*

Decentralisation has been favoured as a reform strategy for education governance worldwide, assuming different shapes and forms (McGinn and Welsh, 1999). However, the type of decentralisation implemented in Chile between the 1980s and 1990s resembles more a deconcentration of some central responsibilities to the local level, or what Karlsen (2000) calls a *decentralised centralism*.

Figure 2 represents this governance structure of the Chilean school system up to 2009, which situated the Ministry of Education at the top, making it responsible for policy design and regulation. At the intermediate level are regional secretariats (SEREMI) and provincial departments (DEPROV) of the ministry, responsible for pedagogical inspection and supervision of schools; also at the intermediate level are local authorities (municipal and private-subsidised), responsible for administrative management of schools. Finally, at the bottom of the structure are primary and secondary schools, with autonomy over and responsibility for policy and curriculum implementation (González, González and Galdames, 2015; Raczynski and Muñoz, 2007).

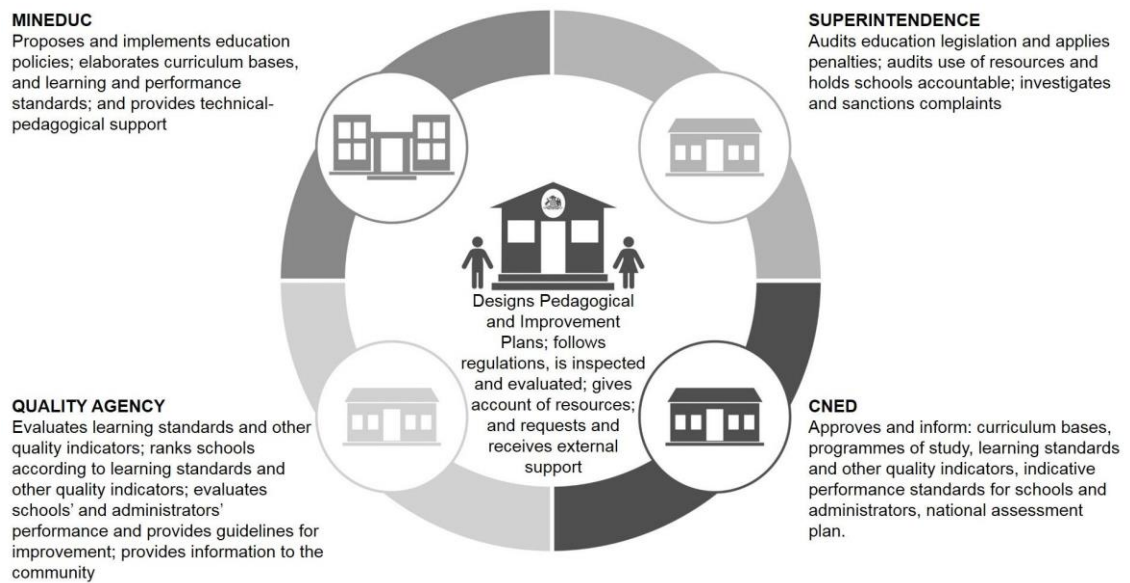
After 2009, the governance structure of the Chilean school system was modified, changing its emphasis from promoting school autonomy to local accountability. Chile moved to a governance that combines what the literature calls *school empowerment* and *quality control* (Glatter, 2002), which entails a managerial emphasis based on the idea that ‘decisions are best taken as closely as possible to the point of action’, while the government controls ‘the quality of key school processes and products even in highly devolved and/or market-like systems’ (Glatter, Mulford and Shuttleworth, 2003, pp. 67-68). These changes were made in response to the passing of two crucial legal norms: the General Law of Education N° 20.370 (Ley General de Educación – LGE) in 2009, and the law N° 20.529 that sets up a System of Quality Assurance of Education (Sistema de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación – SAC) in 2011.

Figure 2. School system governance structure, translated and adapted from Román and Carrasco (2007)



Both laws are part of a larger effort by Chilean politicians to address social discontent with quality and equity conditions, due to structural aspects of the market model of education in the country. Discontent was heralded by protests from secondary and university students during the early 2000s (Bellei and Cabalin, 2013; Bellei, Cabalin and Orellana, 2014; Cabalin, 2012; Hernández-Santibañez, 2013). Both student movements mobilised civil society groups to show their discontent with the Chilean educational model, and prompted urgent reforms. Because of secondary students' protests, in late 2006 the government created an Advisory Council that worked for six months and 'proposed a "new architecture of Chilean education" [sending to parliament] an ambitious set of legal reforms' (Bellei and Cabalin, 2013, p. 118). These reforms consisted, among other things, of a new General Law of Education that would replace the constitutional law passed at the end of the dictatorship (McMeekin, 2010), and the creation of a quality assurance system consisting of a Superintendence in Education, to audit the legal aspects of the system, and an Agency for Quality in Education, to inspect the performance of schools (Weinstein and Muñoz, 2009). The current governance structure and organisation of the school system, represented in Figure 3, became more complex, with the addition of new institutions and the modified attributions of existing ones.

Figure 3. New governance structure of the Chilean school system, translated and adapted from the Quality Agency website<sup>3</sup>



The General Law of Education and the Quality Assurance System changed the role of the Ministry of Education by introducing the Quality Agency, now in charge of assessment (SIMCE) and inspection of schools' performance, and the Superintendence of Education, now in charge of financial and administrative audits of schools and local authorities. The Ministry remains responsible for education policy design, providing pedagogical support to schools (through provincial departments), and funding schools. The National Education Council (CNED) assumes the role of validating the policy proposals of the Ministry and Quality Agency regarding curriculum and assessment. Finally, local municipal and private-subsidised authorities, together with schools, are obligated to fulfil the normative and pedagogical requirements of the upper levels of the system.

I consider it relevant to note that these recent changes compromise neither decentralisation, nor the neoliberal inspired education policies in Chile; if anything, they strengthen these features in the school system, with tighter regulation of local authorities and schools in a choice- and market-driven system. I will discuss this issue further in chapter four, when addressing the Chilean school improvement policy and its characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> Agencia de la Calidad de la Educación – Marco Legal [Education Quality Agency – Legal Framework] <http://www.agenciaeducacion.cl/nosotros/marco-legal/> (in Spanish).

### *Characteristics of Chilean schools*

Since 2013 compulsory schooling in Chile is comprised of a total of 13 years. Five-year-olds attend one year of early childhood education (kindergarten). Then, between the ages of six and 13, students attend eight years of general primary education in comprehensive schools. Finally, between the ages of 14 and 17, students attend four years of secondary education in either scientific-humanist (academic) or technical-professional (vocational) schools according to their interest and academic record in primary school.

The school year is organised in semesters. The first semester starts in early March and runs until mid-July. After a two-week winter break, the second semester runs until early December when the school year ends. According to the OECD (2004), primary and secondary schools can be categorised into four types, depending on their administrative dependency and how they are funded.

- *Municipal Schools* are administered by Chile's 345 municipal governments through either of two possible systems: (i) municipal departments of education (DAEM) that function within the municipal structure; or (ii) non-profit Corporations, chaired by the mayor of the city but managed outside of the municipal structure. These schools receive funding through the per-pupil voucher according to the mean percentage of monthly attendance of students to schools.
- *Private-Subsidised Schools* are administered either by for- or non-profit institutions, or by individual owners. Their funding comes from the same voucher received by municipal schools but most schools charge additional fees to parents.
- *Private Fee-Paying Schools* are administered by for-profit institutions, groups or individuals, and are financed entirely by parental contributions (fees).
- *Delegated Administration Schools* are managed by a few specially appointed business companies, which run a small number of vocational secondary schools (70) with fixed government funding, different from the regular voucher.

In 2013, municipal and private-subsidised schools combined represented over 90% of the national enrolment of primary and secondary students, whilst private and delegated administration schools represented 7.5% and 1.4%, respectively. The proportion of students in municipal and private-subsidised schools has changed dramatically since 1981, when the dictatorship introduced the decentralisation and privatisation of the school system. According to Mizala and Torche (2012), municipal enrolment was 78% in 1981, while Gauri (1998) indicates that private subsidised schools' enrolment in the same year was 15%. Official statistics for 2013 (MINEDUC, 2014) show that between 2004 and 2013, municipal

enrolment went down from 50% to 37% for primary and secondary, while private-subsidised enrolment rose from 41% to 53%. In terms of the distribution of enrolment according to students' socio-economic status (SES), data show evidence of high levels of social segregation. Municipal schools provide education mainly to low SES students and overlap with private-subsidised schools in their provision for lower-middle and middle SES students. Private-subsidised schools also cater to upper-middle SES students, while upper SES students almost exclusively attend private fee-paying schools (Mizala and Torche, 2012; Valenzuela, Bellei and De los Ríos, 2013).

This change in enrolment numbers and the resulting social segregation has been widely studied in Chile, with researchers claiming that competition and differential performance between these types of schools in relation to parental choice are the main cause (Elacqua, 2004; Elacqua, Schneider and Buckley, 2006; Hsieh and Urquiola, 2007; Mizala and Torche, 2012). Although I will discuss these possible explanations further in this chapter in the section about achievements and unresolved issues, I would like to briefly explain some institutional arrangements that play an important part in this phenomenon.

Mizala and Torche (2012) identify three key institutional arrangements that apply differently for municipal and private subsidised schools; two of these can help us understand the problems of the distribution of enrolment and social segregation. First, private-subsidised schools make extensive use of selection mechanisms to which they are entitled based on their pedagogical or religious projects, but also through internal admission and expulsion policies, and parental interviews. This contrasts with municipal schools, which are obligated to accept all applicants to primary education, except in the case of oversubscription. Similarly, secondary municipal schools must take all applicants except for some schools with a special academic status (called *Liceos Emblemáticos* or *Liceos Bicentenario*) granted by the government, similar to grammar schools.

Second, municipal and private-subsidised schools differ in their capacity to raise additional financial resources from those of the per-pupil voucher. Since 1993, primary and secondary private subsidised schools have been allowed to charge parents an add-on fee called Shared Financing (Financiamiento Compartido – FICOM), to complement the per-pupil voucher; about 80% of these schools have implemented this system. Municipal primary schools are not allowed to charge any fee to parents and while municipal secondary schools can do so, only a small number of these schools charge this fee to parents, which is lower in comparison to private-subsidised schools. Thus, shared financing provides another way for private-subsidised schools to select students based on their family's capacity to pay this add-on fee.

In summary, there is evidence that municipal schools are growing increasingly disadvantaged by the effects of selection mechanisms that operate in the Chilean school system. Within municipal schools there tends to be a concentration of those students who would probably be expelled from private subsidised-schools due to behavioural issues or learning difficulties, or those who are simply rejected from private subsidised schools because their parents do not have the financial resources to pay the add-on fee to complement the State's funds (Bellei, 2013a). To tackle this issue, the government of President Michelle Bachelet introduced the law N° 20.845 of School Inclusion, which bans selection of students, profit-making in school education, and gradually replaces shared financing by increasing the voucher value in all State-funded schools. This law was surrounded by controversies between political parties and education experts, but it was passed in Parliament in January 2015, ratified by the Chilean Constitutional Tribunal in April 2015, and finally promulgated by President Bachelet in late May 2015. This law came into effect at the start of the 2016 school-year but its implementation will span several years.

#### *Chilean curriculum and assessment framework*

Something that is common to all schools in Chile is the curriculum and assessment framework, which shows a mixture of central design and local implementation (Cox, 2004; Valverde, 2004). Chile's curricular framework changed from a centrally designed and managed instrument, formally available and enforced in all schools, to a flexible instrument managed through a command and control approach (Valverde, 2004). The curriculum and assessment framework emphasises alignment and compliance, wherein the central government aims to secure better implementation of curriculum policy at the local level through the design and use of standards (Cox, 2011).

During the 1990s, new curricular guidelines were introduced for the primary (1996) and secondary (1998) curricula (Valverde, 2004). Also, in 2001, Chile introduced, for the first time, curricular guidelines for early childhood education, as part of a multi-agency effort to enhance the education and care of young children (Galdames, 2010; Galdames, 2011). These guidelines marked a change from a content-based to a standards-based curriculum framework (Cox, 2004). This change represents a mix of national and international influences, with an emphasis on the development of competences in students for specific subjects (Avalos, 1996).

After substantive evaluations of the curricular reform of the late 1990s by the OECD and MINEDUC, between 2006 and 2009 the curricular guidelines organisation went through an update, with the introduction of more specific content and performance standards for each



grade and subject (Cox, 2011). These standards are compiled in documents called Curricular Bases (Bases Curriculares) for each education level (early childhood, primary, secondary) consisting of compulsory learning objectives that specify competences for students to achieve in each grade, and organised by subjects in Programmes of Study (Montt, 2009).

Correspondingly, Chile's assessment framework consists of internal and external assessment of students' learning based on both content and performance standards from the Curricular Bases. Classroom teachers carry out different types of internal assessment of students' learning to determine whether students will pass or fail a given subject and progress to the next grade. External assessment was carried out by MINEDUC until 2011, but since then the Quality Agency oversees it. This type of assessment is critical to determining the direction of education policy, focusing government intervention and exercising accountability directly over schools, and indirectly over teachers (Ramírez, 2011). In what follows I will concentrate on external assessment due to its relevance for the topic of my thesis.

External assessment operates through the Measurement System of Education Quality (SIMCE). SIMCE is a census-based standardised test that annually appraises students' performance in several subjects for second, fourth, eighth and tenth grades in all types of schools. This test was originally introduced by the dictatorship in 1988 as a way of providing information for parental choice, but its current aim is to 'improve the quality and equity of education by providing data about learning outcomes at the national and school levels' (Meckes and Carrasco, 2010, p. 234). It is important to note that SIMCE does not provide information about individual students' performance, but rather the average performance of the grade group that is tested. The information produced by SIMCE is used to inform decision-making in educational policy and to develop targeted interventions, provide feedback to schools and improve teacher practice, promote school accountability for results, and support parental choice and involvement in their children's education (Taut *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, SIMCE assesses students' performance in reference to the current Chilean curriculum framework, although the test structure has not changed much since the early 1990s and continues to include mostly multiple-choice questions, only recently incorporating one or two short-answer, open-ended questions.

Over the past decade, SIMCE has gradually incorporated new grades and subjects. Until 2005 one grade was assessed per year, either fourth, eighth or tenth grade, but after that two grades started to be tested each year – fourth grade along with either eighth or tenth grade (Meckes and Carrasco, 2010). Later, for the 2011-2015 period, the number of grades and subjects that were tested yearly increased (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2011). SIMCE

was applied in second (only reading comprehension), fourth, sixth (including students with sensory disability), eighth and tenth grades in Spanish (reading, writing), Mathematics, Science and Social Studies (history and geography). Additionally, tenth grade students were tested on their use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and eleventh grade students were tested in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The grades and subjects where SIMCE is applied are set to change once again starting in 2016, since in 2014 the government called on an expert committee to review the national assessment framework. Their report was handed to MINEDUC in February 2015 and in November 2015 MINEDUC submitted a new Plan of National and International Evaluations for 2016-2020 to CNED for its review and approval (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2015).

Although the policy framework in Chile champions decentralisation and school autonomy, the curriculum and assessment framework holds schools accountable for meeting centrally defined learning objectives, represented by both content and performance standards. This framework puts massive pressure on teachers and schools, who are under public scrutiny for their SIMCE results when these are published by the Ministry and in newspapers (Meckes and Carrasco, 2010). This situation is detrimental for disadvantaged schools, since SIMCE results are the key to determining when schools are placed in special measures and, eventually, whether they face closure under new legislation (Ramírez, 2011). These special measures consist broadly of restrictions imposed by the government over schools regarding the use of funding and resources, the setting of strict performance targets to their school improvement plan (PME), and the obligation to hire external technical support using funding from the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP). If after four years there is no evidence of improvement, the State will withdraw schools' official recognition as providers of education and they will close.

### **Achievements and unresolved issues**

In terms of achievements, the Chilean school system has managed to reach important milestones since the return of democracy in 1990. The reform process initiated in that decade aimed to increase public spending in education, improve schools' infrastructure, reform the curriculum and assessment framework, improve working conditions for teachers, extend school hours, and improve overall quality and equity conditions in the system (Donoso, 2005; Martinic, 2002; OECD, 2004). However, as Donoso (2005) explains, these policy orientations were settled in the dictatorship's funding model (voucher) that operated under

different, contradictory principles from those of the reform, adding to the complexity of the task.

One of the most noticeable achievements of this period is the high level of enrolment of school-age children in primary (98%) and secondary (90%) education by the year 2000 (Cornejo, 2006). Access and timely entry to primary and secondary education also improved remarkably in comparison to other Latin American countries (Wolff, Shiefelbein and Shiefelbein, 2002). Similarly, in the year 2004, the government ensured access to free early childhood education (pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten) for four and five-year-olds (Valenzuela, Labarrera and Rodríguez, 2008), as part of a complex multi-agency effort to articulate social policies for young children (health, social care) and women (access to labour) with education policies, drawing on various international influences (Galdames, 2011; Umayahara, 2006). The high levels of coverage from the second transition level (reception stage) to twelfth grade seem to have been facilitated by two further elements of this reform process: the extension of compulsory education in 2003 from eight to 12 years, and then to 13 years in 2013, facilitating access to secondary school to a larger proportion of the population; and increased State spending on educational resources, such as textbooks and didactic material, and on schools' infrastructure (Cornejo, 2006; Martinic, 2002).

As part of the increase in spending in education, in 1996 the Chilean government launched an initiative to extend school hours to implement a Full School Day (Jornada Escolar Completa – JEC) in all primary and secondary schools. According to the OECD (2004, pp. 30-31), the Full School Day initiative sought to 'extend school hours, moving away from two shifts of six pedagogical periods to a full school day, consisting of eight 45-minute pedagogical periods', providing more time for 'curricular subjects, as well as extra-curricular activities, and the possibility of students and teachers taking advantage of facilities outside regular classroom time'. This initiative required substantial planning and investment (US\$ 883 million between 1997 and 2003) to adapt the existing infrastructure and cover additional costs of operation. By 2003, two thirds of the national enrolment for primary and secondary students was under the full school day regime; however, the progress of this initiative was slower than anticipated and successive governments have pushed back the original deadline (2003) for all schools to implement the full school day (Donoso, 2005). Currently, around 1000 schools have yet to join this regime, according to a recent editorial in the *El Mercurio* newspaper<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> *El Mercurio* Blogs. "La Jornada Escolar Completa [The Full School Day]", published on Friday February

A final achievement is the implementation of focused compensatory programmes to improve management and instruction in primary and secondary schools (Avalos, 2007; OECD, 2004). These compensatory programmes were the first strategy developed by the Chilean government in the 1990s to establish a direct contact with schools and teachers, particularly those working in challenging circumstances, under the principle of positive discrimination (García-Huidobro, 1994; García-Huidobro, 2006). Two key compensatory programmes were the 900 Schools Programme (Programa de las 900 Escuelas – P-900), and the Improving Quality and Equity programmes (Mejoramiento de la Calidad y Equidad – MECE) (Roman and Murillo, 2012). These compensatory programmes helped schools raise their performance in SIMCE and in other indicators of internal efficiency, such as enrolment, repetition, or drop-out rates (Donoso, 2005), therefore improving system performance, and slightly reducing the gap between schools, at least until the late 1990s, when SIMCE scores stagnated (OECD, 2004).

In contrast to these achievements, the Chilean school system presents several unresolved issues. One of the most controversial issues is the high levels of segregation reflected in the distribution of enrolment across different types of schools according to students' socio-economic status (SES) (Mizala and Torche, 2012). There has been an important migration of students from middle-income families from municipal to private-subsidised schools, leaving most students from low-income families in municipal ones (Elacqua, 2012; Rambla, Valiente and Frías, 2011; Valenzuela, Bellei and De los Ríos, 2013). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, parental choice in Chile is not restricted by catchment areas and parents can send their children to the municipal or private-subsidised school of their choosing thanks to the voucher provided by the State. The migration of students, thus, seems to be in response to *choice* and *market* policies emphasising competition between schools to drive up standards, as has been documented by international research (Dronkers, Felouzis and van Zanten, 2010; Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Gorard, Fitz and Taylor, 2003; Waslander and Thrupp, 1995). For the Chilean case, some researchers claim that the effects of choice and market policies have been further distorted by specific institutional arrangements that favour the private-subsidised sector (Mizala and Torche, 2012), while others reaffirm that it is in response to a perceived superior performance of private-subsidised schools over municipal ones by parents (Gallego and Hernando, 2009). Nonetheless, research evidence on why parents

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27<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Available at: <http://www.elmercurio.com/blogs/2015/02/27/29710/La-Jornada-Escolar-Completa.aspx> (in Spanish).

choose any type of school reveals the importance of reasons other than the performance of the school on tests, such as access to social networks, distance from home or shared values within a specific school community (Carrasco and San Martín, 2012; Chumacero, Gómez and Paredes, 2011; Elacqua, 2004).

Another outstanding issue is the negative link between selective schooling and equity, due to problems related to parents' ability as choosers (Elacqua and Fábrega, 2004), the differences in the socio-economic mix and segregation in schools (Puga, 2011), and the level and quality of information available to parents for assessing differences between schools (Chumacero, Gómez and Paredes, 2011). Researchers even go as far as to assert that these problems 'may be inherent in a school choice system' (Mizala and Romaguera, 2000, p. 409) when it is based on an imperfect education market, where schools compete under different conditions that allow selectivity in only some schools (Elacqua, Schneider and Buckley, 2006), thus creating more forms of disadvantage in others. In fact, Bellei (2008) argues that private-subsidised schools' response to competition has been the application of sorting and re-sorting mechanisms, consisting of rejecting students who are less likely to succeed in school through admissions tests, and expelling those with low performance, which have contributed to social segregation in the Chilean school system.

Overall, I would argue that these outstanding issues are related to the influence of market and choice policies on Chilean school education. Research evidence shows that choice and market forces have a negative impact on the equity of school systems (Gorard, Fitz and Taylor, 2003). While standards might indeed be driven upwards in popular schools, unpopular ones enter a spiral of decline, progressively becoming more socially disadvantaged, hindering their chances to improve (Waslander and Thrupp, 1995). The Chilean school system shows solid evidence of municipal schools becoming increasingly disadvantaged, and students' performance being directly related to their socioeconomic status and the type of school they attend (Carrasco and San Martín, 2012; Elacqua *et al.*, 2011; Valenzuela, Bellei and De los Ríos, 2013).

Considering Chile's commitment to market and choice policies, it is unlikely that the State will enforce direct intervention to improve quality and tackle social segregation within the system. However, international literature stresses that there are ways in which governments can attempt to influence the education market to move towards a more equitable system in such contexts, generally through different types of bureaucratic accountability measures and support programmes (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Hatch, 2013; Sahlberg, 2007; Whitty, 1997; Woods, Bagley and Glatter, 1998). Chile has decisively embarked on such policies since the

early 2000s, partly in response to the discontent with the outcomes of the reform from the 1990s in national (SIMCE) and international (LLECE, PISA, TIMSS) assessments (Cornejo, 2006; McEwan *et al.*, 2008; McMeekin, 2010; OECD, 2004), and partly due to the influence of international agencies. In fact, in its report about education policies in Chile, the OECD (2004, p. 33) explains: ‘These [assessment results] revealed that the school system was achieving poorly compared to competitive learning standards worldwide’, which clearly positions the Chilean school system in an international comparative context.

Thus, I would argue that there has been an explicit influence of international organisations or agencies, such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, UNESCO (through its regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean) and the OECD, which have been increasingly involved in promoting social and economic policies at a global scale to governments. In the next chapter, I look at this issue for the case of education and address what is usually known as the global education reform movement.

## CHAPTER III

### GLOBAL EDUCATION REFORM LANDSCAPE

There are several commentators on large-scale reforms (Ball, 1998a; Ball, Fischman and Gvirtz, 2003; Burbules and Torres, 2000b; Carnoy, 1999; McGinn, 1997; Scott *et al.*, 2015) who argue for the need to consider the potential effects of globalisation on the development of education systems. Within this globalised context, they acknowledge the influence of international agencies' agendas in pushing reforms that link education with the knowledge society and economy as constituent parts of a supposedly coherent discourse. This is a widely acknowledged, albeit often taken for granted phenomenon in the development of education reform in different countries. In Chile, globalisation is assumed to be the inspiring process of large-scale reform efforts while neoliberalism is identified as the rationale for ready adoption of such global reforms. However, the link between globalisation, international agencies' agendas and neoliberalism is rarely problematised beyond such statements.

Some international agencies and analysts portray globalisation as an unequivocal concept across different social and political contexts and cultures (Carnoy, 1999; McGinn, 1997) and, complementarily, the actions and agendas of different international agencies are considered homogeneous in scope and intention (Hallak, 2000). On the contrary, I would argue that neither globalisation nor international agencies' agendas are unequivocal and homogenous. Although it is possible to identify common elements in large-scale reform efforts in a global context, there are local factors that filter, translate and adapt them to shape these different reform initiatives.

In this chapter, I review the literature on education reform initiatives within the context of globalisation outlined above. First, I present a brief account of the current globalisation landscape with an emphasis on the different accounts of the global, its relationship with the local, and the ideological rationale that underpins this relationship. Then, I discuss the global influence on local education reforms and how this is shaping school systems. Finally, I bring this chapter to a conclusion by pointing out certain key elements that characterise global education reform.

#### **Current landscape: the global and the local**

For many scholars, the influence of globalisation on national policies, including reforms to their education systems, is undeniable (Carnoy, 1999; Carnoy and Rhoten, 2002; Sahlberg, 2006). However, there are critical voices that warn against considering globalisation as an

inevitable process that can be singled out as the causal explanation for such policies and reforms, highlighting that there are other elements at play within local contexts that mediate and articulate the influence of globalisation, such as State power, political ideology, and cultural and historical elements (Arnové, Torres and Franz, 2012; Ball, 1998a; Burbules and Torres, 2000b; Louis and van Velzen, 2012).

Globalisation can be defined as ‘the intensification of worldwide social relations which links distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’ (Giddens, 1991 in Arnové, 2015, p. 94). These intensified social relations consist of globalised flows of ideas, information, resources, people, and indeed policies, which cut across and are mediated, translated and re-contextualised at national and local levels (Ball, 1998a). Additionally, Burbules and Torres (2000a, p. 14) point out that it is critical to understand the complexity of globalisation beyond ‘polar alternatives of “good” and “bad” kinds of globalization’, and they urge us to exercise a ‘reconsideration of, and in many cases a direct challenge to, these sort of easy dichotomies’.

One of the dichotomies used to describe globalisation is heterogenisation/homogenisation: the heterogenisation powered by greater global interconnectedness that allows exchange between different national/local contexts – as suggested by the definition of globalisation above – versus the homogenisation powered by the positioning of specific international large-scale policies over national/local contexts (Lingard, 2000). Interestingly, this dichotomy also results in a productive tension that can be useful for understanding the globalisation phenomenon; globalisation can be thought of as involving cultural homogenisation through a domination flow of one culture over all others, while it also entails very clear signs of heterogenisation because of multidirectional cultural flows. This tension is best described as *glocalisation*, the process by which the local and the global are interrelated and reconstituted in a dialectical relationship (Robertson, 1994).

The concept of glocalisation can be quite useful to explain how certain education policies are globally adopted across nations with dissimilar political ideologies and cultural contexts, while simultaneously being implemented locally in nuanced ways according to local political and cultural emphases. These *political cultures* (Louis and van Velzen, 2012) are long-standing, unique features of a given nation that help explain how the dialectical relationship between the global and the local results in a balance between homogenisation and heterogenisation. In other words, when it comes to reforms, restructuring and interventions in education systems, there will be tensions between globalisation efforts and national priorities (Scott *et al.*, 2015). I will come back to this point later in this chapter.



Another topic relevant for the discussion regarding globalisation and education is the importance of information, innovation, communication and, above all, knowledge to understand how globalisation produces the level of interconnectedness that I have presented above.

Two of the main bases of globalization are information and innovation, and they, in turn, are highly knowledge intensive (...) Today's massive movements of capital depend on information, communication, and knowledge in global markets. And because knowledge is highly portable, it lends itself easily to globalization (Carnoy, 1999, p. 14).

The transmission (communication) of knowledge (information, innovation) at a global scale has an impact on local contexts in economic, political and cultural terms, which in turn has multiple effects on education (Burbules and Torres, 2000a). For example, the economic impact of globalisation is generally associated with the emergence of the knowledge-based economy, leading to the reconceptualisation of the role of educational institutions in transmitting knowledge, skills and attitudes to students that are necessary to operate in such a global economy (Carnoy, 1999; Sahlberg, 2006).

In political terms, globalisation has meant the weakening of nation-states' power – but by no means, of their influence – to the interest of the global economy in terms of setting national priorities and policies (Rizvi, 2000). This has led education institutions to be more responsive to global rather than national issues, decoupling them from direct State control (Ball, 1998a), as has happened in developing countries where State-education has been privatised and handed over to non-governmental organisations, international agencies and the commercial private sector (Rose, 2009).

Further, the cultural impact of globalisation can be analysed in terms of the ideology underpinning how economic and political relations are organised. Neoliberalism and neo-conservatism provide the necessary ideological rationale for globalisation, allowing their proponents to argue for a change in the balance of power from nation-States to global market forces (Apple, 2006). However, as I pointed out before, this does not mean that the State becomes powerless against global market forces, but rather it keeps its influence in terms of regulating and mediating the engagement with this global market (Arnové, Torres and Franz, 2012; Ball, 1998a; Lingard, 2000; Weiss, 1997). The influence of global neoliberal and neoconservative ideology on education is noticeable in the interlinked economic and educational agendas, pushed forward mainly by international agencies on education systems, in exchange for financial aid and technical assistance, particularly to developing countries

(Samoff, 2012).

These international agencies have favoured and advocated a neoliberal version of globalisation, promoting a recognisable set of policies ‘for evaluation, financing, assessment, standards, teacher training, curriculum, instruction, and testing’ (Burbules and Torres, 2000a, p. 15), which push towards increased competition in education markets. Further, the neoconservative elements of globalisation in education, although attenuated by the dominance of neoliberalism, are noticeable on the emergence of the regulatory State, which oversees schools’, teachers’ and students’ activity and punishes them if they are not able to meet (curricular, professional) standards that represent the official knowledge and values linked, in turn, with the global knowledge-based economy (Apple, 2006).

Finally, the practical expression of these two ideological currents in globalisation, and particularly of neoliberalism, is encapsulated in the idea of New Public Management (NPM). NPM focuses on achieving effectiveness and efficiency in education systems by introducing a new set of governance and management practices, such as decentralisation, privatisation and competition (Peters, Marshall and Fitzsimons, 2000). These new practices aim to change the internal structures of education systems by applying the logic of markets to public services (Louis and van Velzen, 2012).

### **Global influences on local education systems**

Although the previous account of the current landscape of globalisation and its dialectical relationship with local contexts presents a compelling case for claiming that education is decisively influenced by globalisation, there are also sceptical views regarding the actual spread of such influence. For example, McGinn (1997, p. 44) argues that a key policy inspired by globalisation, the decentralisation of educational administration, ‘[has] not changed in any recognizable way the content and delivery of education’. Echoing McGinn’s concerns, Carnoy and Rhoten (2002, p. 2) acknowledge:

It is true that education appears to have changed little in most countries at the classroom level even in those nations most involved in the global economy and the information age. Beyond occasionally used computers in classrooms, teaching methods and national curricula remain largely intact.

The argument is that globalisation has exerted its influence on how education is governed, rather than on how it operates in schools and classrooms (McGinn, 1997). However, Carnoy (1999) argues that the impact of globalisation on education is larger than just the operation and delivery of knowledge in the classroom. Globalisation is guiding education systems

around the world towards a type of reform, which includes decentralisation and privatisation, choice and competition, and accountability and testing (Carnoy and Rhoten, 2002; Sahlberg, 2006), and this package of reform strategies – with their corresponding ideology – have been widely spread by international agencies (Ball, 2009; Whitty and Power, 2000).

There are several types of international agencies or organisations involved in education, all operating and influencing national education policies in different ways (Samoff, 2012; Scott *et al.*, 2015). These international agencies can be classified as multilateral organisations (UNESCO), bilateral organisations (USAID), international think tanks (OECD), international development banks (World Bank), nongovernment organisations or NGOs (Oxfam), and foundations (Aga Khan). In addition, Samoff (2012) also includes in this *constellation of organisations* the work of regional and international academic networks or organisations. These groups produce and validate research knowledge that is subsequently used by international agencies and policymakers to guide their actions and decisions. These agencies play a critical role in the global flow of knowledge related to education, particularly in ‘educational research, planning and innovation’ (Scott *et al.*, 2015, p. 57).

Consequently, international agencies exercise a broader influence through conferences and summits, managing knowledge about reform programmes, or by setting global standards that apply to all learners (Ball, 1998a; Samoff, 2012; Scott *et al.*, 2015). In the most recent developments of globalisation (see Morrow and Torres, 2000), the last two points about managing knowledge and setting standards are increasingly important features of the influence of globalisation in education, under the guise of international comparisons of educational performance and benchmarking of education systems. As explained by Carnoy and Rhoten (2002, p. 5):

In educational terms, the quality of national educational systems is increasingly being compared internationally. This has placed increased emphasis on math and science curriculum, standards, and testing, and on meeting standards by changing the way education is delivered. Testing and standards are part of a broader effort to increase accountability by measuring knowledge production and using such measures to assess education workers (teachers) and managers.

International comparisons across systems represent a decisive move towards assessment and evaluation practices worldwide, managed by a handful of international agencies with the necessary political conditions and economic resources to undertake such complex tasks; most notably, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Pereyra, Kotthoff and

Cowen, 2011; Sellar and Lingard, 2014). PISA collects information about systems' performance in certain curriculum areas that are strongly tied to the knowledge-based economy (literacy, mathematics, science), and analyses this information against systems' characteristics (e.g., governance, funding). This information is used to produce a set of reports with international league tables based on countries' performance, reviews or comparative reports of national education policies, and working papers with proposals to improve different aspects of education systems (Scott *et al.*, 2015).

Many international agencies have used the information provided by the OECD to produce consultancy reports that have served to influence local education policies and reform (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Barber, Whelan and Clark, 2010; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010). However, there are several criticisms of these reports and, indeed, of the OECD's information. For example, PISA has been subject to strong questioning in terms of its technical characteristics (reliability, comparability, validity, sampling, etc.) as well as its application, interpretation and use (Pereyra, Kotthoff and Cowen, 2011). Likewise, the consultancy and comparative reports that have resulted from the use of the league tables have also come under scrutiny and have been found to be lacking after careful examination of their assumptions, procedures and proposals (Coffield, 2012).

It is not my intention to discuss the different problems associated with international testing and benchmarking studies in depth, although I am critical of using such testing regimes for comparison purposes. However, and despite methodological and epistemological issues, their influence on local education systems is such that international agencies that produce them have been positioned as global reference points for education reform (Scott *et al.*, 2015). Their position and influence is similar to international declarations such as the Millennium Development Goals or Education for All, which have encouraged subscribing developing nations to provide education to all children by putting important reforms and policies in place, often with the external aid and technical assistance of multilateral or bilateral agencies or development banks (Carnoy, 1999).

### **The influence of globalisation on the development of local education reform**

As a consequence of global influences on local education systems, a set of common reform priorities, such as standards-based curriculum and assessment, and a focus on basic skills, have been disseminated across the world (Sahlberg, 2006). Nevertheless, regardless of the reach of globalisation's influence on local education systems, it is very difficult to claim that the programme of reform pushed by international agencies is applied in a systematic way in

all countries. In fact, as I have noted before, globalisation does not exert a uniform, unequivocal influence, and moreover, there is always a mediating process at the local level. Education reforms are by their own characteristics complex and even erratic processes, and there are several elements that need to be considered: people's reaction, time and resources, political environment, and knowledge bases (Scott *et al.*, 2015).

In addition, a program of reform should consider the political culture of a given country, considering its design and implementation, the integration with parallel policies, the match with the orientation of local/national values, and its coherence with already existing policies (Louis and van Velzen, 2012). Returning to the scepticism of McGinn (1997) regarding the influence of globalisation on education, I think it is necessary to consider that a programme of reform will affect those elements of education systems more exposed to globalisation, such as the goals of education or the governance structure of the system. Other authors add to the list of issues that can be influenced by globalisation: the curriculum and assessment frameworks; the use of technology; teacher education; and the role of the State and other relevant stakeholders (Carnoy, 1999; Hallak, 2000).

Considering that globalisation is a relevant, although by no means the only influence on local/national education reforms, it is important to consider two further issues. First, is how this global influence on local/national education systems operates to promote a specific reform programme. The second is a focus on common elements or priorities of reform promoted worldwide.

Regarding the latter, Scott and his colleagues (2015) describe five possible ways. First, globalisation can influence local education systems through a process of policy borrowing and policy learning, where a given country acts as the recipient of other countries' policies (see Lingard, 2010). Second, international agencies with enough political power and influence over member States can directly introduce changes to education systems (see Hallak, 2000). Third, international agencies can subtly nudge education systems to move towards a common comparison position (see Bradbury, McGimpsey and Santori, 2013). Fourth, education systems can produce an independent response to a global reform trend, although this could be either a positive or negative response (see Avalos, 1996). And fifth, education systems can produce a domestic response to a global mandate or agreement (see Umayahara, 2006).

Considering the case of Chile, I think globalisation has influenced the education system mostly through policy borrowing. This influence was particularly clear in the 1990s regarding curricular and assessment reform (Avalos, 1996; Flórez Petour, 2015). Similarly, since the

year 2000, the OECD has actively influenced Chile in other areas by producing reviews of national policies (OECD, 2004; OECD, 2015; Santiago *et al.*, 2013) and by inviting it to participate in PISA.

A second issue regarding the influence of globalisation in national/local education reform are the common elements or priorities of reform promoted worldwide. According to Sahlberg (2006), education reform priorities in school systems across the world represent a coherent set of policies that he characterises as a *Global Education Reform Movement*, which emerges from three sources of inspiration: a new learning paradigm based on cognitive and constructivist theories, placing emphasis on basic skills; the social demand for equitable, inclusive education, met through the introduction of learning standards; and the different forms of consequential accountability that have been introduced as a complement to the decentralisation of public services, such as education.

Generally, this global reform movement features three, often interdependent, areas of reform. The first common element of global education reform is decentralisation. This is one of the most notable and longstanding examples of the influence of globalisation on education reform, generally associated with the current tendency towards efficiency and efficacy in national systems, the promotion of political democratisation through local autonomy and responsiveness to local needs, and the clarification of lines of accountability for the provision of education (McGinn and Welsh, 1999). Yet, not all experiences of decentralisation operate identically and in some cases, they constitute a case of deconcentration rather than a devolution of powers (Karlsen, 2000).

Markets and school choice are a second common element of global education reform. Parental preference between State-public and private schools, and the operation of a demand-side funding system such as vouchers provide the basis for an education market (Gorard, Fitz and Taylor, 2003; Whitty and Power, 2000). The competition between schools for parental preference is expected to drive up the quality of education in the system, through the closure of poor performing schools when no parent chooses to send their children there. Nonetheless, education constitutes an imperfect market with many asymmetries between clients (parents) and providers (schools), and this often leads to increasing levels of inequity, social segregation and, in some cases, low student achievement (Ball, 2003a; Dronkers, Felouzis and van Zanten, 2010; Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995).

The third common element of global education reform is large-scale national assessment, based on curricular or performance standards to evidence students' learning. Standards-based assessment and reform is established on the principle that education must be focused

on learning that benefits all students and that it is possible to appraise its progress with clear assessment and accountability indicators and systems (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Willms, 2000). However, this ambitious principle is often outweighed by ubiquitous problems of ‘overstandardization, underresourcing, deprofessionalization and curricular narrowness’ frequently found in this type of reform (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2001, p. 9).

These areas of reform are strongly influenced by the underlying ideology of globalisation, neoliberalism, neo-conservatism and new public management (Apple, 2006), and by the knowledge-base of English-speaking North American and European research, provided by educational experts and international agencies, which are widely exported to developed and developing countries (Sahlberg, 2006). For instance, over the past two decades in Latin America, research supported by international agencies has helped develop a body of evidence replicating school effectiveness and school improvement research from developed nations, which, in turn, helped launch reform programmes in countries of the region, such as Chile (Reynolds *et al.*, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite the preponderance of decentralisation, marketisation and standardisation, they have been adopted and adapted differently in different contexts in response to the political culture of a given country (Louis and van Velzen, 2012), contributing to explaining the differential influence of global education reform on local education systems. For instance, in Chile, there are numerous publications on the effects of the neoliberal policies implemented during the 1980s, described in the previous chapter, on the education system (see for example Bellei, 2008; Cabalin, 2012; Elacqua, 2012; Galdames, 2011; López, Madrid and Sisto, 2012; Mizala and Romaguera, 2000; Taylor, 2003; Valenzuela, Bellei and De los Ríos, 2013; Winkler and Rounds, 1996). Thanks to the sustained commitment to these neoliberal policies after the dictatorship, and the decisive tendency to closely tie economic and education agendas during recent democratic governments, Chile has been keen to incorporate most of the elements promoted by the global education reform (Cornejo, 2006).

In the following chapter, I return to the Chilean system and ponder specific policy initiatives for school improvement that have been implemented there. I argue that this area of policy and practice is very telling of the global influence on the education system, as for three decades the Chilean system has adhered to these principles. I attempt to show that the evolution and composition of school improvement in Chile is the result of both global and local influences and decisions, mediated by specific elements of the Chilean political culture stemming from the 1980s and 1990s.

## CHAPTER IV

### HISTORICAL REVIEW OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES IN CHILE

Since the 1990s, Chilean education policy has shown a strong focus on supporting and fostering school improvement through intervention, support and quality assurance initiatives (Donoso and Donoso, 2009; García-Huidobro and Sotomayor, 2003; OECD, 2004; Raczynski and Muñoz, 2007; Roman, 2008). Initially, these school improvement initiatives relied on centralised strategies of external intervention and support, often referred to in Chile as external technical support or assistance (Osses, Bellei and Valenzuela, 2015), which were designed and implemented by MINEDUC with help and funding from international agencies, most notably, the World Bank (Avalos, 1996). However, within the first decade of the 2000s, MINEDUC took a more distanced position from the implementation of school improvement initiatives, although it kept control over their design, and partnered with local universities, research centres, NGOs and foundations to deliver external technical support to schools (Portales, 2013; Roman and Murillo, 2012).

These school improvement initiatives targeted disadvantaged primary schools, classified as such based mostly on their SIMCE results and socioeconomic status of their students (Meckes and Carrasco, 2010; Roman and Murillo, 2012). They provided instructional (technical-pedagogical) and management (administrative) support to schools that were greatly appreciated by school leaders and classroom teachers (Ríos Muñoz and Villalobos Vergara, 2012; Sotomayor, 2006). However, there were elements of their design that prevented successful implementation or sustainability of achievements over time, such as inconsistent or fragmented strategies instead of a whole school approach, a focus on a handful of grades and subjects, and the withdrawal of material, financial or professional resources after the intervention (Astudillo and Imbarack, 2013; Bellei, 2013b; Sotomayor and Dupriez, 2007).

In this chapter, I approach school improvement initiatives from a historical perspective, identifying continuities and changes in two periods: from 1990 to 2007, when improvement initiatives were centralised; and from 2008 to 2011, when improvement initiatives swung from centralised to school-based and then back. As a result, the roles of the State, external agents and schools have been defined and re-defined over continuous waves of reform. I close this chapter arguing that internal forces and interests are in a constant struggle to define what counts as improvement, and that this struggle is underpinned by the knowledge-base of school effectiveness and school improvement literature, which has been instrumental for



defining what the main drivers should be for improving the quality of education in Chile.

### **Prescriptive and centralised improvement: 1990-2007**

#### *School improvement initiatives in the transition years*

School improvement initiatives implemented during the democratic transition in Chile, between 1990s and early 2000s, focused on disadvantaged urban and rural schools, with emphasis on the first four years of primary education and particularly on reading, writing and mathematics (Roman, 2008). These initiatives responded to the Latin American regional context, where substantial efforts were deployed to improve education quality and equity conditions (Murillo, 2011; Reimers, 2000a). These can be organised into three groups: focalised policies, compensatory policies and affirmative action policies (Roman and Murillo, 2012).

Focalised policies worked under the principle of positive discrimination, which recognises specific needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, giving them and their schools a differentiated treatment to achieve increasingly similar outcomes across the system (García-Huidobro, 1994). Compensatory policies operate by intervening and increasing the inputs available to disadvantaged groups (services and resources), to level their baseline conditions to match those of the rest of the system (Reimers, 2000a); these policies can compensate either the offerer (through resources and infrastructure) or the source of demand (through vouchers and scholarships) to achieve their goal (Roman and Murillo, 2012). Finally, affirmative action policies aim to ensure respect for the rights of minority or socially discriminated groups, such as indigenous populations or people with disabilities, by facilitating their participation in the education system (Shiefelbein and Shiefelbein, 2001).

During this period, Chile preferentially developed school improvement initiatives based on focalisation and positive discrimination, in areas such as instruction, professional development, school management, and infrastructure (Donoso and Donoso, 2009). According to Roman and Murillo (2012, p. 51; translated by the author) '[t]his centralised, systematic and integral support strategy was the primary wager for reducing inequality gaps among students and schools', and the State assumed the control of both design and implementation of these initiatives through MINEDUC (Raczynski and Muñoz, 2007).

In the remainder of this section, I offer a brief description of two school improvement initiatives developed in this period. One is the 900 Schools Programme (Programa de las 900 Escuelas – P900), the first initiative put in place by the recently elected democratic government in 1990, which ran throughout that decade. The second initiative is a pilot

programme called Critical Schools, subsequently reviewed and renamed as the Priority Schools Programme, which ran from the early 2000s up to 2007. I have chosen to describe these two programmes given their explicit remit of promoting improvement of educational outcomes in schools, in contrast to similar initiatives implemented in this period, which focused on issues such as ICT, infrastructure, quality assurance systems, or professional development.

For a more comprehensive review of related policies developed during this period in Chile and Latin America, see Bellei and Vanni (2015), Avalos (2007), Cox (2003; 2004), and Reimers (2000b).

### *The 900 Schools Programme (P900)*

The 900 Schools Programme (P900), named after the number of schools that were initially incorporated into the programme, aimed to generate the necessary conditions in the school system for positive discrimination towards the most disadvantaged students in rural and urban schools (Roman, 2008; Roman and Murillo, 2012). The programme's aim was to offer differential support to the lowest-performing 10% of primary schools according to the results of SIMCE in Spanish and Mathematics for fourth grade students, to improve their learning attainment (García-Huidobro, 2006). On average, the programme supported 1000 schools a year between 1990 and 2003, with schools staying in the programme for an average of three years until they reached the desired level of performance in SIMCE (Cox, 2004; García-Huidobro, 1994).

According to Portales (2013), P900 was the first, and so far, the largest targeted support policy implemented by MINEDUC, initially focusing its intervention on first to fourth grades (1990 to 1998), and extending later to kindergarten to eighth grade (1998 to 2003). Specifically, the programme developed activities with classroom teachers, curriculum leaders (senior teachers with recognisable pedagogic expertise) and head teachers, and students to improve teaching and learning in reading, writing and mathematics, while in parallel providing instructional resources and improved infrastructure for schools (García-Huidobro, 1994; Sotomayor, 2006).

Initially, the programme was funded with support from both the Danish and Swedish governments, who actively supported Chile's transition to democracy, and later with part of a loan from the World Bank to the Chilean government, reaching an average yearly budget of nearly five million dollars (Cox, 2004; García-Huidobro, 2006). During its implementation, P900 was centrally managed at MINEDUC by a team of researchers,

advisors and ministry officers. They developed the bulk of instructional materials for schools and provided training to supervisors from provincial departments (DEPROV), who in turn trained other people involved in the programme's implementation, such as young community facilitators or monitors, school leaders and classroom teachers (García-Huidobro, 1994). The rationale of P900 assumed that improvement is the result of a comprehensive intervention strategy at the school level, involving a wide range of stakeholders such as school leaders, classroom teachers, students and families. This rationale was underpinned by the school effectiveness and improvement literature, and the Chilean popular education movement, of the 1980s (Sotomayor, 2006).

In practice, P900 was developed around five areas of intervention (García-Huidobro, 1994; Portales, 2013). The first area was resources, such as textbooks, books and library materials, audio recorders and copy machines, among other instructional materials destined to support teachers' classroom practice for reading, writing and mathematics. In addition, the programme considered the provision of funds to repair, expand or build the infrastructure necessary for the appropriate operation of schools.

The second area of intervention was teachers' workshops, periodic (weekly or bimonthly) professional development activities aimed at promoting collective action and reflection among teachers to develop teaching skills for reading, writing and mathematics. Supervisors from the provincial departments (DEPROV) led these workshops, for which they received special training and materials from the programme's central team at MINEDUC. Similarly, the third area was students' learning workshops for third and fourth grade students with learning difficulties or special education needs. Young community monitors, chosen by each school, led these workshops and met with students twice a week after school hours. With the help of the school's supervisor, these monitors prepared learning activities and materials to reinforce reading, writing and mathematics, as well as developing creativity, social skills and self-esteem in children.

The fourth area was the implementation of a support strategy for management and leadership in participant schools, aimed at developing tools for head teachers and curriculum leaders to promote the participation of the wider school community, and to engage them in the process of improvement. An important issue covered by this area was creating a culture of high expectations about students' learning and personal development. Finally, the fifth area of P900 was the development of a closer relationship between schools and families. This was linked with the fourth area of management and leadership, putting emphasis on the implementation of adult education programmes for parents without primary or secondary

education diplomas.

The outcomes of P900 were regarded as successful for the most part. Official evaluation reports indicate that SIMCE scores in participant schools showed significant improvement compared to non-participant schools, particularly in the early years of the programme (Cox, 2004; García-Huidobro, 1994). However, there are claims of an overestimation of the impact of the programme on SIMCE scores in participant schools (Chay, McEwan and Urquiola, 2003). Moreover, schools that registered gains in SIMCE, once out of the intervention, quickly fell back to their previous performance levels, creating a situation where schools were coming in and out of the programme regularly (García-Huidobro, 2006).

Conversely, the programme reported improved material and cultural conditions in participant schools, as well as high levels of satisfaction from teachers, school leaders, supervisors and community monitors (García-Huidobro, 2006; Sotomayor, 2006). Nevertheless, the targeted nature of the programme led to the labelling of schools as ineffective or low performing notwithstanding the presence of other systemic factors that might have been producing conditions of inequality for such schools (Roman and Murillo, 2012). Finally, some lessons from this programme indicate that this type of intervention for schools in difficult conditions needs to be complemented by differentiated approaches according to the progress of the school, and that it needs to be coordinated with other positive discrimination policies at the system-level that facilitate the sustainability of schools' improvement (García-Huidobro, 2006).

#### *The Critical Schools/ Priority Schools Programme*

By the final years of P900, there were important gains made by municipal schools in terms of SIMCE scores, but the gap with subsidised and private schools was still substantial and on top of that there were signs of stagnation in the overall outcomes at the system level (Cox, 2004; McEwan *et al.*, 2008). This motivated the implementation in 2002 of a pilot strategy for a reduced number of primary municipal schools in the capital region, named the Programme of Technical Assistance for Critical Schools (García-Huidobro, 2006).

The Critical Schools programme represents a change in the focalisation strategy for school improvement in two key aspects. First, some elements of the design and the entire implementation of the programme were externalised to a select group of institutions (universities, research centres, foundations and NGOs) with expertise in primary education. Second, the strategy focused on schools that showed enduring underperformance, despite participating in P900 or other initiatives, to develop tailored interventions (Roman and

Murillo, 2012). This change in orientation reflects a departure from a prescriptive to a more flexible approach to school improvement initiatives, still centrally designed by MINEDUC but partnering with other organisations for implementation at the school level.

Schools for this pilot intervention were identified based on the criteria of chronic low performance in SIMCE and other indicators such as high levels of grade repetition, dropouts, and low levels of parental involvement. This information was made available to a group of organisations, invited by MINEDUC to participate in a private tender or bidding to present proposals of technical assistance to turn these schools around. Seven institutions were chosen to support 66 primary schools in reading, writing and mathematics, and school management, including two universities, two research centres, two foundations and one NGO. Each institution received around \$11,000 US dollars a year for each school they supported, between 2002 and 2005 (García-Huidobro, 2006).

The rationale of this programme was that schools with chronic underperformance needed a combination of pressure and support to improve. Pressure came from these schools' underperformance in SIMCE and other efficiency indicators, while support was provided by the institutions assigned to each school who would have a moderate to intensive participation in schools' activities (Sotomayor, 2006). The seven institutions focused their efforts in developing effective curricular implementation in Spanish and mathematics for the first four years of primary school, enhancing the capacities for effective school management, and creating a climate favourable for learning (Sotomayor and Dupriez, 2007).

As with P900, the rationale of the Critical Schools programme was influenced by the literature on school effectiveness and improvement, and the lessons learned from previous improvement initiatives regarding the need for differentiated strategies and a focus on classroom practice in each school (Sotomayor, 2006). García-Huidobro (2006) indicates that although the idea was to develop a tailored support for each school, there were some similarities in the strategies of the seven external support institutions, namely:

- Special support for classroom teachers for reading, writing and mathematics teaching, through whole-school workshops, classroom observation and feedback, and in some cases modelling.
- Development of common year, semester and daily lesson plans guided by external advisors during workshop sessions with teachers, adapted to the internal characteristics of schools and the skill level of teachers.
- Focus on improving the assessment of students' learning in schools, developing end of year and semester evaluations, as well as formative assessment to monitor the

progress of students, encouraging the use of data from these assessments and SIMCE.

- Support for school leaders in developing a climate favourable for learning, establishing certain basic operational rules, named normalisation of routines, defining and orienting the school towards a shared purpose, and monitoring and evaluating the progress of the school towards the goals of the programme.

As it is possible to see, the Critical Schools programme focused on monitoring the work of teachers in classrooms and on the role of school leaders in normalising certain routines (monitoring lesson plans, establishing timetables, maintaining infrastructure) considered fundamental for the functioning of the school (Sotomayor and Dupriez, 2007). As I show in the case studies described in chapters eight to ten, both the monitoring of classroom practice and the normalisation of routines still feature in current school improvement initiatives in Chile, without a problematisation of their effect on schools' and practitioners' practices.

By the end of the four years of intervention, out of the 66 participant schools, 45 showed significant improvement in SIMCE, six showed no significant changes, and 15 came out of the programme with a lower performance (García-Huidobro, 2006). The programme had positive effects on fourth-grade students' achievement in both language and mathematics and reduced grade retention rates: however, most of the schools that showed improvement returned to their previous performance level within two years of the end of the intervention (Bellei, 2013b). These results and their sustainability could be explained according to the individual stories of implementation of the programme in each school (Fiabane, Yáñez and Campos, 2009; González and Bellei, 2013).

There were relevant lessons drawn from the Critical Schools programme for school improvement initiatives. For instance, the weight carried by labelling schools as *critical* generated an initial resistance to the intervention and was perceived as an aggression from MINEDUC towards the schools (García-Huidobro, 2006). This led to the subsequent name change of the programme in 2007 from *Critical* to *Priority* Schools, emphasising that these schools had precedence for the Ministry. Other lessons from the programme point to the relevance of improving the school climate and developing a culture of high expectations; the critical role of school leaders to facilitate the change of practice in schools; the normalisation of school routines in and out of classrooms; and the identification of the classroom as a critical space of intervention (Sotomayor, 2006). Additionally, the Critical Schools experience showed the need to develop differentiated improvement strategies depending on the characteristics of schools, which require flexibility from the part of external agents (González

and Bellei, 2013; Sotomayor and Dupriez, 2007).

These lessons were considered for the continuation of this programme as Priority Schools, and have been part of the accumulated knowledge base on school improvement in Chile since. However, the Priority Schools programme was never fully developed in primary schools<sup>5</sup>, despite universities and research centres being already allocated to support schools in many districts. This was due to changes in educational legislation and policy in response to demonstrations of secondary students in 2006; I address this change and its consequences for school improvement initiatives in the next section.

To summarise, evidence shows that both P900 and the Critical/Priority School programmes had a positive impact on short-term improvement, but failed to achieve sustainability over time (Bellei, 2013b; García-Huidobro, 2006; Sotomayor and Dupriez, 2007). Moreover, the centrality of the programmes' design led to a technocratic and managerial view of school improvement, leading to a replication of good practices in schools, regardless of their contexts (Donoso and Donoso, 2009), which could explain the short-term impact and lack of sustainability. Interestingly, however, many elements of these school improvement initiatives have remained over successive waves of reform and change as learned lessons, such as the relevance of SIMCE to target schools, the centrality of the school as the unit of intervention, and the provision of external technical support to schools and their professionals (Osse, Bellei and Valenzuela, 2015).

### **From centralised to school-based improvement, and back: 2008-2011**

#### *Policy framework for school improvement*

Between 2006 and 2007, the Chilean government responded to the massive social discontent led by demonstrations from secondary students (Cabalin, 2012; Orlansky, 2008), by reforming the main education bill, the General Law of Education (LGE) along with the establishment of a new governance structure and a recognisable policy framework for school improvement. The policy framework for school improvement corresponds to two laws that saw the pendulum of control over the improvement agenda swing from centralised to school-based, and back in only a few years.

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<sup>5</sup> The Priority Schools programme continued its implementation in secondary schools for another four years between 2007 and 2010, as the school improvement policy that replaced this programme – the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) – initially applied to primary education only.

The first is the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP), which had been under discussion among policymakers and experts for some time before the protests from secondary students in 2006 (García-Huidobro and Bellei, 2006; González, Mizala and Romaguera, 2002). The aim of SEP is to *level the playing field* between schools by '[compensating for] the inequality of origin that affects disadvantaged children, providing an additional contribution to the schools where they study and committing for them an improvement strategy' (Weinstein, Fuenzalida and Muñoz, 2010, p. 2; translated by the author).

García-Huidobro and Bellei (2006) suggest that SEP consists of two interdependent initiatives. The first is the allocation of a preferential subsidy or adjusted voucher for disadvantaged students, called *priority students*, attending each school (Corvalán, 2012). The classification of priority student is determined by MINEDUC every school year, based on indicators related to social security programmes for low-income families, and schools receive funding for each priority student, and by the concentration of them attending the school in cases when they represent 15% or more of the school's enrolment (MINEDUC, 2008).

The second initiative consists of a system of control and classification of schools based on their students' performance in SIMCE (Contreras and Corbalán, 2010). Schools can be classified in one of three categories, *Autonomous*, *Emergent* and *In Recovery*, based on the scores of the previous three years of fourth grade SIMCE, and other effectiveness indicators (promotion and dropout rates, school facilities and infrastructure, and in the case of municipal schools, teachers' performance assessment results). Autonomous schools are those performing consistently above average compared with schools in the same socioeconomic group; consequently, schools In Recovery are those performing consistently below average, while Emergent schools are those that are not classified in either of the other two categories<sup>6</sup>, that is, they perform inconsistently around average in SIMCE. Schools can use the whole or part of the funds received from the SEP to design and implement a four-year School Improvement Plan (PME) depending on their classification (MINEDUC, 2008). If a school in any of the first two categories (Autonomous and Emergent) fails to achieve its targets after four years it will be downgraded to the next category, and if a school In Recovery fails to achieve its targets both the school and its local authority are placed in special

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<sup>6</sup> These performance categories of SEP should have been reviewed in late 2013 with the publication of new learning standards (Adequate, Elemental, and Insufficient), developed by MINEDUC and approved by CNED. These learning standards are measured and reported by SIMCE and provide the necessary data for sorting and classification of schools by the Quality Agency, but by 2015 it was still being piloted.



measures, and eventually face closure (Raczynski *et al.*, 2013).

The enactment of SEP entails a change in the role of MINEDUC, from playing an active role designing school improvement initiatives, to playing a regulatory role operating in a decentralised school improvement system (Weinstein, Fuenzalida and Muñoz, 2010). The decentralisation of school improvement initiatives is represented by mandating schools to develop their own School Improvement Plans (PME), and to hire external technical support by Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) agencies, under the assumption that ineffective schools would fail to achieve their performance outcomes on their own regardless of the resources allocated (Raczynski *et al.*, 2013).

The second law was also a response to the social discontent of 2006, setting up a national System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) but it took until 2011 for its promulgation. However, it was not until late 2012 when the system formally began its operation. This law reorganised the role of the MINEDUC and the National Council of Education (CNED), and introduced two new government agencies (Ley 20.529, 2011).

First, the Superintendence of Education regularly audits schools' and local authorities' compliance regarding education legislation on finance and governance. These audits are carried out in schools by supervisors and if they detect any infringements the school and its local authority can be fined or sanctioned with penalties that range from the repeal of school policies to school closure. Second, the Quality Agency evaluates and inspects schools' and local authorities' performance annually, based on SIMCE scores (measuring learning standards) and other education quality indicators (e.g., school climate, participation and citizenship, gender equity, attendance, among others). The Quality Agency compiles an index – where SIMCE represents 67% and other quality indicators 33%, adjusting by students' socioeconomic status – to sort schools into one of four performance categories: High, Medium, Medium-Low and Insufficient. Schools in the Medium-Low and Insufficient categories receive inspection visits every two years. If a school is classified as Insufficient for four consecutive years, parents are informed of its classification, the school would be required to hire external technical support and receive inspection visits by the Quality Agency, and if it does not improve, the school would be closed (Ley 20.529, 2011).

The System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) also transformed the role of ministry supervisors at Provincial Departments (DEPROV) since most of their administrative supervision responsibilities were now undertaken by the Superintendence. Thus, ministry supervisors were reconverted as Technical Pedagogical Advisors (ATP), responsible for providing support to schools on the implementation of their improvement plans (PME),

disseminating good practice, and facilitating the implementation of national policies (MINEDUC, 2012). Finally, within SAC, the role of local authorities and schools is circumscribed to responding to what these central institutions determine in terms of national policies, audit and inspection processes. Hence, SAC strengthens centralised control over the school system through the activities of MINEDUC, CNED, the Quality Agency and Superintendence (San Martín and Carrasco, 2012). Both legal frameworks, SEP and SAC, currently represent the core policy for school improvement in Chile, where other initiatives are framed. In the following sections, I offer a description of two school improvement initiatives: Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) and the Shared Support Plan (PAC). These initiatives represent the irregularity in recent policy orientation for school improvement by espousing different, if not contradictory, ways to approach improvement at the school level.

#### *Educational Technical Assistance (ATE)*

Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) is an advisory service provided to schools aiming to initiate or sustain improvement processes through topic-focused and time-specific – but by no means brief – on-site interventions, different from the regular school management activities (Bellei, Osses and Valenzuela, 2010). Within the framework of SEP, university-based departments, non- and for-profit organizations or individual professionals with specific expertise can provide this advisory service (González, 2016).

The role of MINEDUC is to provide schools and local authorities with basic orientations to assess the offers of ATE providers and choose the ones that best suits their needs (MINEDUC, 2009). Similarly, efforts have been made by MINEDUC to develop, in partnership with a university-based research centre, a national register and accreditation system<sup>7</sup> for ATE providers (Valenzuela, 2011). This is a very delicate process and more evidence is needed to inform this policy with empirical data (Bellei, 2010).

Schools and their local authorities will hire an ATE and sign a commercial contract, determining the objectives, activities and participants of the support strategy, as well as defining progress indicators, evaluation criteria, and expected results (MINEDUC, 2009). Schools can hire ATEs either for specific, short-term activities, or for long-term, wide-range external technical support strategies for the implementation of the school's improvement plan (Muñoz *et al.*, 2012). There is still no evidence available to explain why different schools

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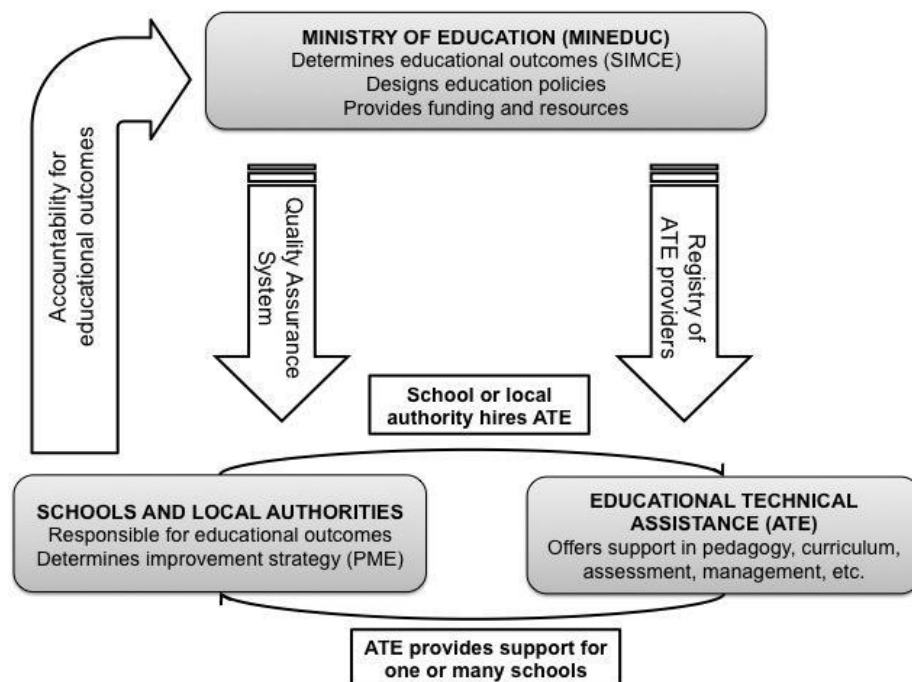
<sup>7</sup> For information about the registry of ATE providers, see <http://www.registroate.cl> (in Spanish).

look for different support strategies, but some authors indicate the capacity of schools to self-assess their improvement needs as critical to understanding this (Bellei, Osses and Valenzuela, 2010).

The external technical support offered by ATEs can take the form of specific advisory services for school leaders, teaching materials and resources, professional development for classroom teachers, standardised tests for students, and general support during the design, implementation and evaluation of school improvement plans (PME) (Bellei, 2010). Furthermore, the strategy of external technical support provided by ATE relies heavily on the effectiveness and improvement literature, and its rationale and discourse is implicit in the current policy context dominated by standards and accountability (Acuña *et al.*, 2014). This issue will be explored further in the next chapter, using as a framework the literature on school effectiveness and improvement.

In summary, the provision of support from ATE to schools is framed by the relationship of three agents (see figure 4): MINEDUC determines the performance targets for schools (SIMCE) and regulates the offer of ATE; schools and local authorities determine the improvement strategy (PME) and seek support from ATE to implement it; and ATE makes a range of alternatives of external technical support strategies available to help schools in the design and implementation of their improvement plans (PME).

Figure 4. Relationship between MINEDUC, schools and local authorities, and ATE within the framework of SEP, adapted from González (2013)



### *Shared Support Plan (PAC)*

In 2010, during the right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera, MINEDUC announced the implementation of a programme for instructional support targeting 1000 low performing primary municipal and private-subsidised schools in the country. The programme was called Shared Support Plan (Plan de Apoyo Compartido – PAC) and was centrally managed by a department at MINEDUC, and locally implemented in schools by school leaders with support from technical pedagogical advisors (ATP). In this section, I offer a brief overview of PAC in consideration of two issues. First, that the research evidence about the programme's implementation and outcomes is scarce and often very superficial. Second, and considering the first point, that in my thesis I decided to develop a case study of the implementation of PAC in a municipal primary school, which is presented in chapter ten, using information from a variety of sources, such as press and media releases, official documents, interview and observation data and personal communications, to describe and analyse the programme. In the remainder of this section, I describe the main features of PAC.

The Shared Support Plan (PAC), as a programme of instructional support, provided educational resources and support in Spanish and mathematics from pre-K to fourth grade (Portales, 2013). Interestingly, PAC picked up certain characteristics of previous prescriptive and centralised interventions such as P900, although it was not as comprehensive in its scope (Astudillo and Imbarack, 2013; Portales, 2013). I would argue that this programme represents a surprising policy decision, as the tendency of SEP (and later, SAC) regarding school improvement policy was to decentralise their design and implementation, as well as removing MINEDUC from the role of providing external support to schools in favour of private providers (Osses, Bellei and Valenzuela, 2015).

PAC's main goal was to improve student learning by strengthening the internal capacities of schools, concentrating on five intervention areas: effective curriculum implementation; developing a favourable environment for learning; effective use of instruction time; monitoring student achievement; and teachers' professional development (Portales, 2013). To cover the five intervention areas, PAC's central team designed and developed highly detailed curriculum plans, assessments and teaching materials for teachers and students, to enhance the level of curriculum coverage in the subjects and grades that the programme covers (Astudillo and Imbarack, 2013). In addition, PAC considered the participation of head teachers and other senior leaders as part of a School Leadership Team (Equipo de Liderazgo

Educativo – ELE), which oversaw the implementation of the instructional materials in each school. These leadership teams received support from Technical Pedagogical Advisors (ATP) in analysing data from the monitoring of the programme and students' assessments. As a result, Portales (2014) describes PAC as a focused rather than comprehensive programme, which is disciplinary and prescriptive in nature. The scarce evidence available about PAC's impact shows that it had a mixed reception from teachers and within schools. Astudillo and Imabarack (2013), when discussing the appropriation of improvement strategies such as PAC by teachers, identify two main tendencies. The first is the fusion of the new intervention into previous individual and collective practices, where teachers and school leaders integrate elements of the external intervention into their own routines and knowledge. For instance, schools adopt PAC's materials making simple adaptations to fit the characteristics of their students or the strengths of teachers. The second tendency is compartmentalisation or isolation of external intervention devices from the regular practice of teachers, as a way of complying with the programme but not necessarily changing school practices. For instance, teaching and learning practices are different in subjects and grades where the programme intervenes, compared to what happens in subjects and grades outside the intervention.

Finally, it is worth noting that since the last government change in 2014 in Chile, PAC has been progressively discontinued as a school improvement initiative. This could be explained as a policy option to provide external technical support to schools through ATE agencies, a decentralised option, rather than expanding PAC, a centralised option. However, there are several schools that continue using the instructional materials provided by PAC, which they have saved from previous years, and with reduced support from Technical Pedagogical Advisors (ATP) or web-based tools.

### **School improvement initiatives: continuities, changes and problems**

Despite the differences in orientation and scope, I would argue that certain elements of the design and operation of school improvement initiatives have remained constant over the past 25 years in Chile. Issues such as focalisation and positive discrimination, normalisation of school routines, the centrality of the school as a unit of support and intervention, and the provision of external technical support are all hallmarks of the initiatives presented in this chapter. Likewise, and as I have noted above, the rationale for these initiatives, as well as the policy framework where they are inserted, is strongly influenced by the literature on school effectiveness and school improvement (Acuña *et al.*, 2014; García-Huidobro and Sotomayor, 2003; Portales, 2013; Raczynski and Muñoz, 2005).

Moreover, although there is evidence of improvement of educational outcomes in schools targeted by some of these initiatives (Bellei, Osses and Valenzuela, 2010; Muñoz *et al.*, 2012; Osses, Bellei and Valenzuela, 2015; Rojas, 2010; Sotomayor, 2006), it is unknown how system level pressure, in the form of high-stakes testing and consequential accountability, can or has altered how those improved outcomes were produced. For example, SIMCE is clearly relevant for targeting schools and subsequently evaluating their progress, which narrows the scope of what can be called improvement. In addition, some studies in Chile show the difficulty of sustaining those improved SIMCE outcomes after the end of the support provided by these initiatives, which might suggest that a case of tactical improvement has taken place (Bellei, 2013b; González and Bellei, 2013).

In the school improvement literature, the notion of tactical improvement has been used to describe how schools respond to the pressure of local and government authorities (Chapman, 2004; Harris and Chapman, 2004). These schools have come to an understanding that they need to show results due to the pressure of external (and sometimes internal) accountability mechanisms. However, as Ball (2003b) suggests, this tactical improvement is nothing but a *fabrication* within a performative regime, in which teachers and schools develop a representation of themselves informed by the priorities set by the policy context.

Particularly, in the case of Chile, this fabrication involves a narrow pedagogical focus on improving SIMCE scores, ‘concentrating on the group of students whose test scores will be considered to evaluate the level of accomplishment with the defined goals’ (Bellei, 2013b, p. 12), and neglecting all other students and disciplinary subjects that fall outside the testing range. Assuming a tactical approach to school improvement means that schools will teach to the test or continue to do so, as a form of unintended strategic behaviour in response to control mechanisms, which is described in the literature as *gaming* (de Wolf and Janssens, 2007; Ehren, Perryman and Shackleton, 2015).

Taking this into consideration, in the next chapter I approach the literature and knowledge base of school effectiveness and improvement, its foundations, influence on education reforms and criticisms. I also give emphasis to the issue of external support for school improvement, as it is a key element in relation to the policy framework for school improvement in Chile, and it will serve as a theoretical basis towards analysing the case studies I develop in subsequent chapters in this thesis.

## CHAPTER V

### SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Over the last three decades, many initiatives of education reform around the world have been influenced by the school effectiveness and school improvement (SESI) research and literature (Chapman, 2012; Hopkins *et al.*, 2014; Scheeners, 2014), despite some authors playing down such influence (Harris *et al.*, 2012; Reynolds *et al.*, 2014). The knowledge-base of school effectiveness and improvement attempts to identify and describe schools that consistently show positive student learning outcomes and investigate their characteristics to understand how they achieved such performance (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995; Stoll and Fink, 1996). Inspired by this rationale, several reform initiatives have put their emphasis on schools' and pupils' outcomes in standardised tests as a measure of educational quality (Darling-Hammond, 2004), while focusing their interventions on school, classroom and system level factors that are associated with these outcomes (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001).

However, a group of scholars has questioned the reductionist nature and the technical-rational and managerial rationale of school effectiveness and improvement, based on theoretical, methodological, and political concerns (Coe, 2009; Gorard, 2010; Morley and Rassool, 2002; Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson, 1998; Thrupp, 2001; Wrigley, 2004; Wrigley, 2008). These criticisms partly echo recent calls from school effectiveness and school improvement advocates to develop better evidence-based approaches to inform education policy, along with a renewed emphasis on developing a suitable theoretical model for the field (Chapman *et al.*, 2012; Creemers, Kyriakides and Antoniou, 2013; Muijs *et al.*, 2014).

In this chapter, I look at the effectiveness and improvement research and literature, the criticism it has received, and how it has influenced education reform and policy. Then I address the provision of external support as a strategy for promoting improvement in disadvantaged schools, with the focus on three key principles; the school as the centre of change, the complement of top-down and bottom-up strategies, and external support to start a process of change and improvement. Finally, I describe three distinctive approaches to this strategy taken from the knowledge base of school improvement and I link these with the principles.

#### **School Effectiveness, School Improvement**

School effectiveness research emerged most notably in the early 1970s in response to a report

by Coleman and colleagues (1966) and a book by Jenks and colleagues (1972), which claimed that schools had little to no effect on the educational outcomes of students in comparison to the strong influence of students' socioeconomic background and previous cognitive ability. Although neither work explicitly claimed that schools did not make a difference to students' learning, they did assert that schools are not effective in reducing cognitive and social inequality, and that attempts to promote equality of opportunity and progressive social reform should be aimed at areas of social policy other than education. The conclusions from these volumes were received with unease by educators and researchers and sparked several small- and large-scale studies, most notably those by Brookover (1977), Edmonds (1979), and Rutter and colleagues (1979), attempting to provide evidence that schools and teachers can and do make a difference, in terms of effectively impacting on students' learning outcomes (Reynolds *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, it is possible to recognise a clear conceptualisation of *effectiveness* in the form of a school effect on a measurable goal, which in this case corresponds to students' learning outcomes.

In general, school effectiveness research focuses its inquiry on those schools that show positive student outcomes, beyond what is expected from the socioeconomic background and ability of those students, to collect information about the shared characteristics of such schools that could explain their performance (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995). This research has been produced in ever more sophisticated ways since the first studies of the field in the 1970s and 1980s, with the development of complex statistical methods that could account for the multilevel nature and the influence of individual and group factors on school effects (Reynolds, 2010). Thus, 'school effectiveness literature takes a technical rational view of schools as organisations and focuses its attention on ensuring that school outcomes are clearly defined and accurately measured' to link them with 'structural and technical aspects of the organisation' (Bennett and Harris, 1999, p. 536). However, school effectiveness research has shown difficulties in operationalising this evidence into a set of strategies to increase the school effect on students' outcomes, due to its essential quantitative research approach that lacks thick, rich descriptions of factors associated with effective schools, and its lack of interest in the study of the context and conditions in which these schools operate (Reynolds *et al.*, 2014).

In contrast with the descriptive and structural orientation of school effectiveness research and literature, school improvement primarily focuses on the organisational culture that supports teaching and learning in schools (Bennett and Harris, 1999; Chapman, 2012; Harris and Bennett, 2001). Organisational culture can be considered as a cause, object and effect of school improvement, and has been advanced as a key factor for school change, 'on the



grounds that in due course it will exercise an improving causal influence on other variables, and eventually on student outcomes' (Hargreaves, 1995b, p. 41).

The beginnings of this field in the 1980s consisted of free-floating initiatives that placed emphasis on organisational change, school self-evaluation and ownership of the change process by schools and practitioners, but results eventually showed a limited impact on classroom practice and, therefore, on student learning outcomes, leading to an abandonment of these initiatives (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001). Research at this stage focused on the study of organisational development in schools, analysing the internal conditions that were determinant of effectiveness in schools, paralleled by the study of the change process in schools as organisations that highlighted the importance of considering the school as the unit of change in contrast to the limited impact of externally imposed change (Hopkins *et al.*, 2014). What characterised the early school improvement research was the proliferation of several experimental innovations in schools, aimed at and mainly led by practitioners, which lacked a solid theoretical basis to support the change practice (Hopkins, 2001; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001).

As a result, during the 1990s, school improvement research and literature moved towards providing schools with clear guidelines and strategies for managing the change process at the school level, based on the accumulated knowledge of early research. This stage of school improvement research and literature met the rising pressure on schools from governments to increase student achievement, and resulted in comprehensive school reform efforts that placed the school at the centre of the change process (Hopkins *et al.*, 2014). Examples of these types of reform initiatives are decentralisation and school autonomy, school-based management, school development planning, and whole-school interventions, all of which readily borrowed from the school improvement evidence on *what works* for the purposes of school change (Gray *et al.*, 1999; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1994; Hopkins, 2002). Despite some encouraging results, these strategies failed to achieve long-term, widespread and sustainable improvement at school and system levels, possibly because the change mandate from this whole-system approach clashed with the internal capacity of some schools, and the application of *what works* in certain school contexts proved difficult to replicate in others (Datnow, 2005; Hargreaves and Goodson, 2006).

Learning from the experiences of whole-school reform and interventions, particularly the difficulty of initiating a sustained change and improvement strategy in disadvantaged contexts, since the early 2000s school improvement has concentrated on certain positive elements, such as collaboration among teachers in professional learning communities,

networking between schools and within districts, and the role of school leadership to facilitate these processes (Hopkins *et al.*, 2014). Two key tenets of current school improvement research and literature are of relevance here: capacity building in schools, either with help from external agents or through collaborative inquiry, to initiate and sustain change and improvement (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006; Earl and Lee, 2000; Harris, 2001a; Muijs *et al.*, 2004; Stoll, 2009) and the importance of leadership at all levels to create the cultural and organisational conditions necessary to improve teaching and learning and facilitate the implementation of educational reforms (Barber, Whelan and Clark, 2010; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004b; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004).

Some researchers claim that school effectiveness and school improvement have positively influenced each other, and since the 1990s there have been serious attempts to merge both fields, paying attention to the complementarity of their knowledge bases regarding how and why schools make a difference (Reynolds and Stoll, 1996; Stoll, 1994; Stoll and Fink, 1996). The effectiveness knowledge base provides insights into how effective schools make a difference for students' learning, while school improvement contributes its understanding of the change process at school and system levels (Fullan, 2000; Fullan, 2009; Hopkins, 2001; Hopkins, 2002). Theoretically, this integrated view promotes improvements to the effectiveness of schools through initiatives that put the school at the centre of the change process, empowered to lead and adapt itself in consideration of its own goals and the demands from the social and policy context (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Hargreaves, 2005; Reezigt and Creemers, 2005). In practice, this integrated model, called effective school improvement, has been tried and tested in several international contexts, including Latin America (Avalos, 2007; Murillo, 2011).

However, after two decades of research and scholarship, the relationship between school effectiveness and school improvement continues to be problematic (Creemers, Kyriakides and Antoniou, 2013; Reynolds, 2010). Effectiveness research has focused strongly on student outcomes and on classroom, school and system-level characteristics associated with those outcomes, leaving aside the change process associated with the improvement of teaching and learning (Harris and Bennett, 2001). Conversely, improvement research has focused preferentially on investigating the process of change in practice in classrooms and schools, with less attention being paid to classroom, school and system-level characteristics associated with student outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 2011). The parallel paths that effectiveness and improvement research programmes have followed, nevertheless, have not prevented researchers from attempting to link these programmes to address the problem of reconciling

epistemological and methodological differences (Bennett and Harris, 1999; Hargreaves, 2001; Harris and Bennett, 2001; Reezigt and Creemers, 2005; Reynolds and Stoll, 1996; Stoll, 1994; Stoll and Fink, 1996). The latest attempt to link school effectiveness and school improvement is embodied in the recently published International Handbook of Educational Effectiveness and Improvement (EEI), which attempts to advance effectiveness and improvement as a comprehensive discipline of research, policy, and practice (Chapman *et al.*, 2015).

### **Critiques to school effectiveness and school improvement**

Despite the popularity of school effectiveness and school improvement in the past two decades, most notably among policymakers, governments and international agencies, they have also faced harsh criticism from a group of educational and social researchers and academics. For instance, school effectiveness has been criticised for its reductionism and *myopia* (Willmott, 1999; Wrigley, 2004), and its lack of political and social contextualisation that supports what some authors consider a type of reform that produces inequality (Thrupp, 2001; Thrupp, Lupton and Brown, 2007). Similarly, school improvement has been called into question for its managerialist approach to school change, the reductionist use of the concept of culture, and the broad support of a technical-rational view of improvement (Morley and Rassool, 2002; Wrigley, 2008). These criticisms have prompted an intense debate between school effectiveness and school improvement advocates and critical voices mainly coming from the sociology of education, although there have also been critical voices within the effectiveness and improvement fields. Most of these critical voices have been registered in heated academic exchanges in journals (Townsend, 2001) and in other edited volumes (Chapman *et al.*, 2012; Harris and Bennett, 2001; Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson, 1998; Townsend, 2007; White and Barber, 1997).

The scope of the debate and criticism has mainly focused on the methodological, theoretical and political aspects of the effectiveness and improvement research and literature. In this section, I briefly deal with each of these three aspects; however, I expand the reflection on the methodological criticisms in chapter six as a way of framing the discussion of the epistemology, methodology and research approach of my thesis.

Methodological criticisms have been aimed at the overreliance of school effectiveness research on quantitative methods that leads to a tendency to overclaim regarding the implied causality between effective schools' characteristics and students' achievements (Gorard, 2010; Thrupp, 2001). Similarly, the use of qualitative methods on school improvement

research has been criticised for its lack of rigour and consistency in reporting and documenting processes of change in schools that would lead to the illusion that certain factors are determinant of a school's effective results (Coe, 2009). Moreover, the preferential focus on studying schools considered to be effective, and back mapping the relationship between their characteristics and the effective results has obscured the process that led these schools to become effective in the first place, as well as the specific challenges faced by schools considered to be ineffective (Lodge, 1998). The common feature of this methodological critique of effectiveness and improvement research points to the fact that 'the well known product of SER [school effectiveness research] – a list of characteristics of effective schools which a hopeful school improver should try to imitate – turns out to be at best weakly related to a somewhat problematic definition of effectiveness' (Coe, 2009, p. 373).

The under-theorisation of effectiveness and improvement research and literature is another area of critique. Thrupp (1999; 2001) delivers a strong criticism of the theoretical development of the field by asserting that the study of school effects from the perspective of organisational theories offers only a limited view into the complexity of the schooling process, neglecting its social dimension and limitations. Furthermore, he declares that school effectiveness research has failed to engage with this rich social data (i.e., social mix, policy context, school environment), suitable for generating theory that would be more fitting of the social nature of schools, and 'as a result, school effectiveness processes and concepts remain poorly theorised' (Thrupp, 2001, p. 23). Similarly, critics argue that effectiveness and improvement research portrays schools by simply labelling them as good/bad, or successful/failing, fabricating a theoretical simplification of a socially complex and inherently paradoxical institution (Ball, 1997a). In addition, despite numerous accounts of individual schools, the knowledge produced from research into effective schools is inevitably selective, the improvement factors identified are unavoidably vague, and the rationale that links these factors with school effects is inescapably reductionist (Elliott, 1996; Wrigley, 2004).

Finally, the political criticism of school effectiveness and school improvement research and literature addresses the use that policymakers make of the accumulated knowledge of the field, and of the close link with a political programme that some authors characterise as neoliberal (Ball, 1998b; Morley and Rassool, 2002; Wrigley, 2008). For example, the publishing of league tables based on performance data creates an effectiveness scale that plays against disadvantaged schools, building on an epistemological discourse of managerialism and quality control that characterises neoliberal reforms in education (Morley and Rasool, 2000). Similarly, critics claim that if schools are placed at the bottom of the

effectiveness scale, it might not be because they are low quality but because of how success and failure have been measured (Slee and Weiner, 2001), often to the detriment of disadvantaged schools. Furthermore, the original aim of the effectiveness and improvement field, to provide evidence that schools can and do make a difference for students' learning, was taken by policymakers to suggest that schools make all the difference, thus supporting the practice of blaming and punishing those schools judged to be less effective (Thrupp, 2001).

These three broad types of criticism have been received with unease by some of the major figures in school effectiveness and improvement; in some cases, even claiming snobbery and envy from critics (Reynolds, 2010). Others have taken most of these ideas on board and have provided responses to them, particularly regarding methodological and theoretical criticisms (Chapman *et al.*, 2012). However, I think the political criticism remains a highly-contested issue, even among effectiveness and improvement advocates. In this sense, critics have called on effectiveness and improvement advocates to detach themselves from controversial political agendas and interact more with other fields of study, such as the sociology of education (Thrupp, 2001). For instance, Wrigley (2004) rejects calls to continue the exclusive relationship between effectiveness and improvement by stating that 'they have actually come too close to one another, and that the effectiveness discourse has had far too limiting an influence on how improvement is conceptualized' (p. 242), which suggests that school improvement should look beyond being a mere delivering mechanism for school effectiveness factors (Elliott, 1996). I think this might promote an approach that will be more concerned with issues of social justice and equity in education, than current concerns with the quality of education as a restricted measure of school and pupil performance.

### **School effectiveness and school improvement influence on education reform**

Despite the previously espoused criticisms, school effectiveness and school improvement research and literature has shown a consistent influence on education reform and policymaking at a global scale (Anderson, 2010; Chapman, 2012; Scheeners, 2014). Effectiveness and improvement advocates insist that reform initiatives should aim for schools to develop consistently effective practice, emphasising collaborative work within and between schools, with a strong focus on teaching and learning, and collecting and using data to monitor and evaluate progression (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Stoll and Myers, 1998; Wikeley *et al.*, 2005). However, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) alert us to a tendency in large-scale reform to put forward traditional ways of teaching and learning with a strong reliance on standardisation, displacing and even suffocating innovative local initiatives to the

detriment, particularly, of disadvantaged student populations. There is also the risk of schools developing ways to game the system (de Wolf and Janssens, 2007; Ehren, Perryman and Shackleton, 2015), also to the detriment of students, especially those with learning difficulties (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Sandholtz, Ogawa and Scribner, 2004).

Similarly, Fullan (2011) has noted that system reform should aim to promote intrinsic motivation, instructional improvement and teamwork within a whole-system approach, but most reform initiatives often fail to do so by using the wrong drivers for large-scale reform. Such wrong drivers are:

- Promoting accountability measures based on standardisation to reward or punish teachers and schools instead of promoting capacity building through professional learning;
- Focusing on teachers' and leaders' individual qualities instead of promoting collaborative teamwork;
- Trusting heavily in technology as the lead input to improve instruction instead of promoting smart pedagogies that uses technology as a tool; and
- Implementing fragmented strategies of improvement that lack coherence instead of promoting a systemic approach carefully linking reform efforts into a general strategy for improvement.

Other authors propose to focus on factors that schools can change within their organization to respond to the demands of their social and political context that would assure improved education quality (Hargreaves and Goodson, 2006). This suggests a rationale in which there is a relationship between the effective outcomes (product) and the school's characteristics (process), mediated by certain '*enabling conditions*' that allow the process to affect the product' (Hopkins, 2001, p. 94, italics in the original). From my perspective, these enabling conditions are closely linked to the process of building internal capacity for learning in schools, a complex socio-political process of combining different sources of internal and external resources, information and knowledge (King and Newmann, 2001; Stoll, 2009). Therefore, the role of the enabling conditions is key to provoking and initiating a process of organisational learning in schools, which, according to Berson *et al.* (2006), consists of a multilevel process that goes from individual, to group, to organisational levels and back.

Furthermore, schools' contexts, understood as the 'environmental and organisational conditions that moderate the school's capacity for improving student learning' (Hallinger and Heck, 2011, p. 2) is the key for the success or failure of reform efforts. For example, in terms of organisational conditions, Wikeley, Stoll and Lodge (2002) claim that 'schools need

to be “ready” to become involved in largely self-controlled programmes that emphasise teamwork, self-analysis and focus on developing teaching and learning’ (p. 383). This points to the school’s internal capacity to manage the change process in terms of professional capacity. As for environmental conditions, Hallinger and Heck (2011) identify elements of the social context, student composition and school size and level as relevant to explain the effectiveness of schools. I would add to these conditions the influence of policy initiatives, specifically those that have relied on driving up standards by competition rather than cooperation between schools (Stoll and Myers, 1998).

Context becomes particularly relevant when measuring the effectiveness and supporting the improvement of disadvantaged schools, that is, schools facing challenging circumstances or difficulties (Clarke, 2005; Potter, Reynolds and Chapman, 2002). However, policymakers, rushed by the urgency to speed up the change process, try to lead reform without careful consideration of environmental and organisational conditions, with a magical solution or recipe in mind (Stoll and Myers, 1998) usually taken from top-performing countries (Fullan, 2009). This approach fails both to account for the different stages and typologies of ineffective schools and to determine the kind of support they need to progress (Lodge, 1998). Indeed, some researchers have called on policymakers to carefully consider the available evidence to implement reform initiatives (Scheeners, 2014) as well as the use of comprehensive ways of measuring effectiveness within and between schools (Chapman *et al.*, 2012; Reynolds, 2010).

### **External support for school improvement**

Chapman (2005, p. 21) points out that to help schools improve, particularly disadvantaged ones, it is necessary to develop ‘a sophisticated understanding of the context within which these schools operate’, as well as ‘appropriate interventions to support improvement processes within these schools’. Similarly, Ainscow and Southworth (1996) point out that what is needed is a continuous search for what works locally, instead of adopting and transferring what has worked in other settings. This relates to the development of inquiry-based practice for both practitioners and researchers/advisors during school improvement initiatives, documenting good practice within schools to disseminate it among teachers, or developing learning communities in schools (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001).

Research evidence on improvement initiatives highlights different approaches to external intervention and support provided to schools with difficulties or those facing challenging circumstances (Clarke, 2005; Muijs *et al.*, 2004; Reynolds *et al.*, 2006). These approaches are

based on principles stemming from the school improvement research and literature.

### *Principles of school improvement initiatives*

The principles outlined in this section are not intended to be comprehensive but rather they represent my attempt to use available school improvement research and literature to understand and analyse improvement initiatives, and particularly those that have relied on external support. These are not principles for education reform but rather I conceptualise them as underlying assumptions that school improvement has contributed to the development of reform initiatives in different contexts. Thus, I see these principles as critical to any attempt to understand and analyse improvement strategies, such as external technical support to Chilean schools, which is the focus of this thesis.

The first principle considers the school as the centre of the change process to engage teachers and school leaders within it (Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994). In this sense, the external support aims to assist schools during this process of cultural change to promote improvement (Harris and Bennett, 2001). However, in the context of standard-based reforms and decentralised systems, the school is not only considered as the centre of change but also as the basic unit of accountability, which means it is expected to meet certain externally defined conditions, such as performance outcomes, and to undergo inspection processes (O'Day, 2002).

A second principle relates to the complement between top-down and bottom-up strategies in terms of design and implementation of the improvement initiatives to promote a more comprehensive approach to improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2005). This is critical so as to avoid the problem of centrally imposed (top-down) improvement initiatives, where policymakers 'assume that implementation is more an event rather than a process' (Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994, p. 17), with a narrow accountability focus. On the other hand, it is also important for schools to exert ownership and lead their own process of improvement (bottom-up) to generate professional involvement and commitment to a wider notion of accountability that would help push reform and improvement from the local level (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

A third principle rests on the fact that, more often than not, disadvantaged schools need 'outside consultants or experts [putting] their knowledge forward for possible utilisation' (Reynolds and Stoll, 1996, p. 98) to trigger a process of change and improvement. Although the schools' capacity for change can be influenced by external support, this does not necessarily happen in a positive way. As argued by Chapman (2005), the pressure schools in



challenging circumstances are faced with can lead them to engage in a short-term view of improvement in response to external interventions, resulting ‘in a series of cyclical short-term strategies and ‘quick fixes’ linked to previously key issues’ (p. 143).

### *Approaches to external support*

Building upon the previously described principles, in this section I will introduce and describe three approaches to external support, which represent theoretical models or *ideal types*; in other words, these approaches are abstractions that have emerged from the experiences that have been reported in the school improvement research and literature. The approaches are (i) collaboration and networking; (ii) target-setting and resource-based; and (iii) prescriptive pressure and support. Table 1 summarises how these approaches relate to the previously described principles of school improvement initiatives, in terms of the role of the school, the balance between top-down and bottom-up strategies and the role of external support agents.

*Table 1. Approaches to external support, and principles of school improvement*

<b>Approach to External Support</b>	<b>Principles of School Improvement</b>		
	<i>Role of the School</i>	<i>Top-down and Bottom-up Strategies</i>	<i>Role of External Support (Agents)</i>
<i>Collaboration and networking</i>	School as the centre of change with autonomy	Mostly bottom-up design and implementation	Critical friend, reflecting and supporting schools in defining outcomes and developing their strategy
<i>Target-setting and resource-based</i>	School as the basic unit of accountability with autonomy	Balance between top-down design and bottom-up implementation	Facilitator, mediating and negotiating the strategy, but not the outcomes, with schools
<i>Prescriptive pressure and support</i>	School as the basic unit of accountability with limited autonomy	Mostly top-down design and implementation	Technical expert, delivering or supervising the delivery of the strategy, and assessing the outcomes in schools

I consider it important to clarify that these three approaches are distinctive in *theoretical* terms, suggesting different rationales for change and improvement. However, I think it is important to ask whether it makes a difference *in practice* to choose one approach over the others, and how their theory of change would play out schools and their context. At this point, this is a theoretical exercise that I put to the test with the three cases described in chapters eight to ten. In the subsections that follow, I briefly describe the main characteristics of each approach to external support or intervention, presenting the rationale for each approach, along with some examples of how they are put into practice.

#### 1. Promoting improvement through a collaboration and networking approach

A first approach puts emphasis on collaboration through the development of professional learning communities within schools, and networks between schools. This is in response to research evidence indicating that decentralised reforms have had an impact on some schools, but many simply do not have the capacity to improve on their own (Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003). The implementation of school networks based on collaboration has been used to distribute organisational resources throughout the network, enhancing individual school capacity for improvement through an interconnected approach (Connolly and James, 2006).

Similarly, professional learning communities promote teacher involvement and commitment when responding to external policy demands, developing internal capacity for learning (Scribner *et al.*, 1999; Stoll *et al.*, 2006; Stoll and Louis, 2007). Examples of this approach are networks of head teachers where more experienced or successful ones support their colleagues; federations or consortiums of schools grouped by different criteria (geographical area, reform strategy, type of school) working within similar policy contexts; and departmental or school-wide efforts to develop common lesson planning and collaborative inquiry among teachers and other relevant stakeholders (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Newmann and Sconzert, 2000; Wikeley, Stoll and Lodge, 2002).

Despite the potential benefits of this approach to external support for school improvement, '[it] is not a straightforward option, that can be easily introduced, nor is it necessarily suited to all contexts and challenges' (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006, p. 201). In fact, there are several education systems that place emphasis on competition and choice to promote greater accountability and efficiency, as in the Chilean case (Winkler and Rounds, 1996). In such contexts, the classification of schools as effective/ineffective according to their performance and the introduction of *league tables* promote an isolated approach to improvement that would restrict schools' willingness to collaborate with other schools (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006; Datnow, 2011; Evans *et al.*, 2005). However, networks and learning communities be a

way to balance the pressure of accountability by employing a collaborative approach that provides schools with additional resources that could not be available to them in other ways, and aiding them in achieving legitimacy in their professional activity in relation to their improvement efforts (Connolly and James, 2006; Wallace, 1998).

## 2. Promoting improvement through a target-setting and resource-based approach

A second approach to external support involves a combination of target-setting and the provision of necessary conditions to achieve such targets, or what the literature also calls accountability and resource-based interventions (Chapman, 2005). Target-setting interventions consider, for example, the development of an inspection system, with increased monitoring of schools in a technical-rational view of improvement, e.g. schools should be able to achieve certain floor performance outcomes following a framework or model for quality assurance and acting on the corrective feedback provided by inspectors (Chapman, 2002; Hargreaves, 1995a; Wilcox and Gray, 1996).

Complementary, resource-based interventions consider the allocation of funds, materials or professionals to schools to help them improve, under the assumption that underperforming schools fail due to a lack of resources or internal capacity (Clarke, 2005; Lodge, 1998; Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2005). Some examples of this type of intervention are the allocation of external consultants to support both school leaders and classroom teachers during the implementation of targeted schemes to improve specific curricular subjects or school management in disadvantaged areas (Ainscow and Southworth, 1996; Finnigan, Bitter and O'Day, 2009; Finnigan and O'Day, 2003; Harris, 2001b).

In England, the work of School Improvement Partners (SIP), and more recently National and Local Leaders of Education (NLE and LLE) are good examples of this type of approach to external support for schools (Hill and Matthews, 2010; Swaffield, 2005; Swaffield, 2015). In the United States, experiences such as the Chicago School Probation and the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program in California, which 'recognized the need to build capacity in identified low-performing schools and (...) provided resources to do so' (Finnigan, Bitter and O'Day, 2009, p. 3), are also examples of this approach. Similarly, in Chile, experiences such as the 900 Schools Programme and Critical Schools draw on this approach as well (Bellei, 2013b; García-Huidobro, 1994; Osses, Bellei and Valenzuela, 2015). In these experiences, despite acknowledging that underperforming schools need support to develop internal capacity to meet targets proposed by national or State policies, the external support offered is often limited in scope and is unable to develop such capacity, given that it only concentrates on the demanded targets (García and Donmoyer, 2005). Nevertheless,

this approach to external support is often welcomed by schools and their professionals in the context of a performance-based reform that positions them as the basic unit of accountability (O'Day, 2002).

### 3. Promoting improvement through a prescriptive pressure and support approach

A prescriptive pressure and support approach can operate in diverse ways depending on the context where it is implemented, but it often employs a whole-school approach and is mediated by external agents (Desimone, 2002; Rowan, Barnes and Camburn, 2004). This approach to external support relies on the combination of top-down pressure and support, particularly to underperforming schools, mainly because schools need clarity regarding what is expected of them and specific resources to make sure they can meet those expectations (Fullan, 1992; Hopkins, Harris and Jackson, 1997).

Pressure usually takes the form of academic standards, strong assessment systems and performance-based accountability measures; meanwhile support is associated with the provision of adequate professional development that is teacher-centred, classroom-focused and school-based (Barber and Phillips, 2000; Fullan, 2009). In this sense, prescriptive interventions need to consider the fusion of pressure and support to guide schools towards improvement and change without demoralising practitioners with such daunting tasks, and ensuring control over the programme implementation across schools (Rowan and Correnti, 2009; Rowan and Miller, 2007). Moreover, this approach relies on the leadership capacity of schools to implement dependable management mechanisms and lead the implementation of these interventions, and subsequently, the process of change and improvement (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004a).

Several school reforms have adopted this top-down approach, mandating large-scale change through performance and curricular standards, classification or inspection systems, and instructional interventions, based on effectiveness, improvement and educational change literature (Fullan, 2000; 2009; Reynolds, Kelly and Chapman, 2015). Examples of this approach are the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in England (Earl, 2003; Fullan and Earl, 2002), and Success For All in the United States (Datnow and Castellano, 2000). Both examples exhibit a focus on achieving proficiency in basic competences (reading and writing, and mathematics) across the whole system, and deployed the necessary resources to achieve such proficiency. In Chile, there are elements of this type of approach in the Improving Quality and Equity (MECE) programmes from the 1990s, and the short-lived Reading, Writing and Mathematics plan (Lecto Escritura y Matemáticas – LEM) from 2005 (Roman and Murillo, 2012).

To summarise, school improvement initiatives that rely on external support can take many forms, depending on the context where they are being implemented and the aims that are pursued by their proponents. Particularly in the case of Chile, the school improvement strategy of external technical support does not prescribe a specific approach; rather, such decisions are left to the institutions and professionals who provide support to schools. In fact, Osses, Bellei and Valenzuela (2015, p. 286) argue that, by operating in a ‘market-like framework within a test-based accountability policy’, institutions and professionals providing external technical support offer a wide range of services to schools, from long-term complex interventions to short-term narrow strategies to reach their performance targets. This situation makes the Chilean case interesting and an ideal one in which to test how these three approaches are implemented in practice, within a specific policy context that is representative of the core elements of the global education reform movement.

## CHAPTER VI

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I conceptualise my thesis as part of the discipline of school improvement as a distinctive field (Chapman, 2012; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Hopkins *et al.*, 2014), although it is often presented alongside school effectiveness (Creemers, Kyriakides and Antoniou, 2013; Gray *et al.*, 1999; Reezigt and Creemers, 2005; Reynolds and Stoll, 1996; Stoll and Fink, 1996). Effectiveness and improvement research is underpinned by different paradigmatic positions, from positivism/post-positivism to constructivism, and more recently assuming a pragmatic stance, which is understood in this research programme as an intermediate position between positivism and constructivism (Reynolds, Teddlie and Pol, 2000). I aim to problematise the integrated school effectiveness and improvement research programme as it has been defined by its advocates, encouraged by a critical (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011) or transformative (Mertens, 2015) paradigm, and a social theory perspective on educational research (Ball, 1998b; Murphy, 2013; Popkewitz and Fendler, 1999).

In this chapter, I outline the research rationale and background of my study. Then, I analyse the epistemological and methodological framework that informs school effectiveness and school improvement research, and describe the research approach that I adopted for my study in response to it. After that, I present the research design of my study concentrating on the characteristics of the sampling and participants, as well as the methods for data collection and analysis. Finally, I reflect on some relevant ethical considerations for the thesis, particularly those related to my fieldwork experience in schools and my conditions as an *insider researcher* or *returning native*, having previously worked as an external advisor for schools in Chile.

#### **Research rationale and background**

As noted in the introductory chapter, the aim of my thesis changed from its initial formulation in response to my fieldwork experience in schools. Originally, the aim of my thesis was narrowly focused on understanding the influence of external technical support programmes on the improvement of municipal primary schools, to identify key factors associated with these programmes. I decided to focus on primary municipal schools as they have been particularly targeted by school improvement initiatives in Chile. The selected programmes represent the three approaches of external support that I described in the previous chapter; namely, collaboration and networking, target-setting and resource-based,

and prescriptive pressure and support. For each programme, I describe a case study where I explored issues related to their implementation in and influence on a small number of schools. My interest in this topic was motivated by my professional experience as an external advisor for schools and my concern with gaining deeper knowledge about whether the strategy of external technical support promotes improvement in schools. Similarly, I hoped to test the assumption that the provision of certain types of external support, concerned with building internal capacity for improvement in schools, could challenge the policy rationale in Chile that improvement is best achieved through performance-based accountability, which leads to tactical improvement.

Despite the straightforwardness of the research aim, during my fieldwork experience in schools, I was faced with many complexities, both theoretically and practically, regarding how to engage with my research topic and the participants. Theoretically, the three approaches that I developed from the school improvement literature, which served as guidelines to select the cases, turned out to be a very good fit to the design of the external technical support programmes chosen for the study, but its adjustment to how the programmes were being implemented in schools was problematic and sometimes even contradictory. In other words, the inquiry topics that the effectiveness and improvement literature would recognise as relevant for my research fell short in terms of helping me understand the data that I was collecting from each of the case studies.

For instance, when interviewing head teachers, classroom teachers, or external advisors they frequently referred to the policy context as a way of explaining what improvement is, and how or why it does or does not happen in their schools, instead of quoting internal organisational processes that the literature on school improvement often highlights. During one specific interview, with a first-grade teacher, we were discussing how the external support programme was assisting her school to improve. In response, she described how the school had changed its orientation and ethos as a well-regarded arts and technology school, to concentrate almost exclusively on reading, writing and mathematics. She told me how the leadership in the school decided to reduce lesson time for technology, and even transformed the physical space of the school's workshop to have mathematics tutoring. She argued that this was in response to the external pressure to perform, and declared that this change in the school's orientation had discouraged her as a teacher.

These fieldwork experiences showed that I was missing the weight of the influence of the policy framework for school improvement on the practice of both the external technical support programmes and the schools. As a result, my research practice was affected when

faced with the fact that the theory-inspired topics I was researching turned out to be tangential, and sometimes even irrelevant to the context where I was carrying out the research and for the participants of my study.

This fieldwork experience led me to decisively incorporate the policy framework for school improvement in Chile as part of the research scope rather than keeping it as a background element, to better represent participants' accounts of their experience implementing external technical support programmes. The fieldwork experience, thus, acted as *agent provocateur* for my position as a researcher working within the school improvement field of inquiry. I use the idea of *agent provocateur* to describe my fieldwork experience, as it enticed me to act against the common sense of the school improvement literature and research, and consider other complementary epistemological and methodological options that would help me address the issues that emerged as relevant for the participants of my cases.

I refocused my research aim to explore and understand the influence of the Chilean policy framework for school improvement on the implementation of external technical support programmes in municipal primary schools, and the notion of improvement put forward by these programmes and schools. Consequently, I defined the following research questions:

1. How are the external technical support programmes being implemented in municipal primary schools?
2. What notion or narratives of improvement are put forward by the theories of change that emerge from implementing a specific type of external technical support programme?
3. How is the policy framework for school improvement in Chile influencing the implementation of external technical support programmes in municipal primary schools and the practices of participants of the study?

Considering the exploratory nature of the thesis, I developed a qualitative approach to study the cases to investigate the influence of the policy framework for school improvement on these programmes and schools in-depth. In practical terms, this shift in the research focus meant changes to the research design in several aspects. First, I decided to add to the research a new case study (case zero) to explore and learn about the policy framework for school improvement in Chile; this involved contacting informants, and identifying relevant documents. Second, I created a new interview schedule for informants of this case zero, which dealt with issues such as *education policy and school improvement*, *evidence-based policymaking* and *external support for improvement*. Third, I added a theoretical strand (*School improvement policy and practice*) to the interview schedules for the three case studies of external technical support



programmes, to address directly rather than tangentially the influence of policy in schools (see Appendix 3 for interview schedules). Fourth and finally, this also meant that I needed to expand my analytical framework beyond school effectiveness and school improvement. To do so I needed first to reflect on the problematic issues associated with the research paradigm of my initial framework. This reflection led me to explore alternative frameworks that allowed me to address this new research rationale.

### **Paradigms in research: epistemological and methodological framework**

Given that my research topic is set in a highly complex context, where policy and practice are intertwined, I consider it relevant to pursue this study by openly exploring different research alternatives. These alternatives are informed by specific paradigms, understood as philosophical assumptions and worldviews that guide the research activity, which can be described according to how they deal with four major questions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The axiological question deals with the nature of ethics; the ontological question deals with the nature of reality; the epistemological question deals with the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and what can be known; and the methodological question deals with the nature of inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Mertens, 2015).

In this section, I concentrate on epistemology and methodology, as they deal with two issues that have been critical in informing my research process: knowledge and inquiry. Regarding axiology and ontology, I will address them implicitly when discussing the ethical implications of my study (the axiological question) and my position as a researcher towards a notion of reality as constructed in the dialectical exchange between subjects and their political and social context (the ontological question).

#### *Effectiveness and improvement research: post-positivism, pragmatism and constructivism*

School effectiveness research was framed initially in a positivist or post-positivist paradigm, as it strove to identify and describe relationships between school variables and students' learning outcomes to provide empirical, objective scientific evidence about the importance of school effects (Reynolds *et al.*, 2014; Reynolds, Teddlie and Pol, 2000). Positivism and post-positivism share the belief that there is a reality *out there*, which can be studied. Positivism assumes that what can be studied is limited to what it is possible to observe and measure, and that the knowledge that results is objective and generalisable, while post-positivism acknowledges that this reality can only be known imperfectly as a non-falsified hypothesis that allows a limited apprehension of a single reality (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). Post-positivism assumes that the researcher's hypothesis, theory and choice of methods can

influence what is observed, but they still hold to the objectivity of research findings if the researcher is aware of and controls his or her personal and methodological biases (Mertens, 2015).

Early school effectiveness studies operated with a post-positivist notion of knowledge as objective and generalisable by applying quantitative, statistical methods to isolate and study the school effect on students' learning outcomes (Reynolds *et al.*, 2014; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2001). However, as noted in chapter five, critics of school effectiveness observed that this epistemological and methodological approach implies a reductionism of the complex phenomena of schooling, which is consistent with a functionalist perspective that solely aims to discover *what works*, disconnected from social, cultural and political factors (Angus, 1993). In fact, it has been suggested that the commitment of school effectiveness research to a post-positivist epistemology explains the conflictive relationship between this research programme and its external critics, who operate with an entirely different epistemological stance (Willmott, 1999).

Nevertheless, Thrupp, Lupton and Brown (2007) indicate that this criticism is not only external, but is shared also by members of this research programme and particularly those working on school improvement. Echoing this claim, Reynolds, Teddlie and Pol (2000) identify three broad groups of school effectiveness and school improvement researchers: scientists, often school effectiveness researchers identified with a post-positivist position; humanists, often school improvement researchers identified with a constructivist position; and pragmatists, who occupy an intermediate position between scientists and humanists. Reynolds and Teddlie (2001) argue that pragmatism is the paradigmatic stance that will push the integrated research agenda of school effectiveness and school improvement forward.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) explain that pragmatism considers knowledge as both constructed and based on people's experiences with the world. Pragmatic research would focus 'on actual behaviour ("lines of action"), the beliefs that stand behind those behaviours ("warranted assertions"), and the consequences that are likely to follow from different behaviours ("workability")' (Morgan, 2007, p. 67). The main concern of pragmatism is developing knowledge about the consequences of social practices to promote new ways of thinking (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008), where knowledge is understood 'as a function of and for human action, and an understanding of human interaction and communication in thoroughly practical terms' (Biesta and Burbules, 2003, p. 107).

Regarding school effectiveness research, pragmatism favours an epistemology where both objective and subjective positions are possible, as well as a mixed methodology that

combines quantitative and qualitative research strategies (Sammons, 2012; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2001). Mixed methods is described as a third methodological moment, where quantitative and qualitative methods are considered compatible under the *what works* pragmatic argument (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008). However, some critics contend that researchers who employ mixed methods are underpinned by a soft, apolitical pragmatic paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), moving back and forth between quantitative and qualitative research frameworks to introduce and validate a post-positivist position (Denzin, 2010).

Despite pragmatism and mixed methods being advocated to further the integration of effectiveness and improvement, most school improvement research has tended to identify itself with a constructivist paradigm, which favours a qualitative methodology (Bennett and Harris, 1999; Chapman, 2012; Creemers, Kyriakides and Antoniou, 2013) and an interpretative epistemology (Reynolds, Teddlie and Pol, 2000). Interpretivism is often presented alongside qualitative research, where knowledge is conceived as the interpretation of 'the meanings and actions of actors according to their own subjective frame of reference' (Williams, 2000, p. 210). An interpretative approach looks to study phenomena in their natural setting, trying to make sense of them through the meanings of the participants, implying an epistemology where researcher and researched co-create realities in a process of social interaction (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995).

Thus, the constructivist paradigm in school improvement research concentrates on representing individuals' and groups' perception of *what reality is*, in terms of the cultural characteristics of the school organisation. This is a marked difference from the post-positivist and pragmatic stance of effectiveness research, which concentrates on the identification and description of variables found in effective schools. In other words, effectiveness and improvement research position themselves between a structural and a cultural analysis of schools (Bennett and Harris, 1999). However, I would argue that post-positivist, pragmatist and constructivist positions exhibit the same problem as underlying paradigms of effectiveness and improvement research, namely, the narrow focus on the effective, ineffective, improved or improving school as an unproblematic natural phenomenon, neglecting the historical, political and social conditions in which this phenomenon takes place. For instance, when discussing the proposed merger between school effectiveness and school improvement research, Wrigley (2008) points out that the issue is merely reduced to bridging the differences on methods chosen to study schools, neglecting the political context in which these two research programmes are operating. Accordingly, critics have called for a reconsideration of the effectiveness and improvement research agenda, moving away from

its current paradigmatic position towards a more critical and political stance (Elliott, 1996; Thrupp, 2001; Thrupp, 2005; Wrigley, 2008); a call that resonates with my own research.

### *Social theory and educational research*

Critics highlight the need for effectiveness and improvement research to consider the contribution of social theory (Thrupp, 2001), as a way of focusing attention and incorporating social and political concerns linked to the core of its subject of study: effective and improving schools. The relevance of the social and political dimensions of effectiveness and improvement research is summarised by Bogotch, Mirón and Biesta (2007), and by Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson (1998) a decade earlier, in two interrelated questions: effective for what; effective for whom? These questions highlight the need to consider both school effectiveness and school improvement efforts beyond a technical-rational perspective, incorporating 'issues of quality, purpose, social values and politics' into its research agenda (Bogotch, Mirón and Biesta, 2007, p. 106).

Social theory represents a wide range of analytical frameworks or theories from the social sciences and humanities that examine social phenomena (Murphy, 2013), which provide the foundations for an epistemology sensitive to the social and political stakes of educational research (Popkewitz, 1999). These analytical frameworks or theories are often grouped within a critical or transformative paradigm, which addresses the politics in research placing central importance on the lives of diverse, often marginalised and disadvantaged groups (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2015). The transformative or critical paradigm focuses on and examines the social and political action that constitutes the conditions in which the researched groups are situated, favouring an epistemology that considers knowledge as constructed by cultural and power issues that define what is considered legitimate knowledge, and a methodology that is pluralistic and encourages active participation (Mertens, 2015). Therefore, the critical or transformative paradigm acknowledges a dialectical relationship between knowledge and inquiry, mediated by the political values of the researcher. However, by essentially constituting a political programme, the critical or transformative paradigm risks ignoring the careful citing and collection of data that constitutes the evidence base for its claims, to further its political agenda (Scott and Morrison, 2006).

To summarise, social theory frameworks move away from the actor as the focus of research and centre their attention on knowledge as the social construction of reason instead (Popkewitz, 1999). For the purposes of school improvement research, I would argue that a social theory epistemology would concentrate on researching school-improvement rather

than on the school itself (which does or does not improve), paying attention to the social spaces in and around schools, to understand how the school has been constituted and reconstituted in those spaces. A social epistemology, thus, plays a problematising role in social practices by making the rules of *telling the truth* contingent, historical, and susceptible to critique (Popkewitz, 1999). Furthermore, I would argue that the notion of a unitary, unequivocal concept of improvement should be questioned considering the historical, political and social space from which it emerges; in other words, the contextualisation of school improvement research is key (Thrupp, Lupton and Brown, 2007).

## **Research approach and design**

### *Thinking with theory in qualitative research*

While considering my thesis as part of the school improvement research programme, I attempt to build upon the epistemological and methodological reflection from the previous section, and outline a research approach that is sensitive to the critique of the effectiveness and improvement research. Consequently, my research design not only focuses on the implementation of external technical support programmes in schools, but it also considers the policy framework in which these programmes emerge. The incorporation of this element, nevertheless, could be rendered irrelevant if I were to follow the effectiveness and improvement orthodoxy of considering policy as a contextual or background issue (Thrupp, 2001; Thrupp, 2005; Thrupp, Lupton and Brown, 2007).

To overcome this difficulty, I look at the critical role that theory should play in my research approach. In this regard, Ball (1998b, p. 79) writes,

Theory is a vehicle for ‘thinking otherwise’; it is a platform for ‘outrageous hypothesis’ and for ‘unleashing criticism’. Theory is destructive, disruptive and violent. It offers a language of challenge, and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others. It offers a language of rigour and irony rather than consistency. The purpose of such theory is to de-familiarise present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open spaces for the invention of new forms of experience.

Theory, then, can provide me with the possibility of engaging critically with the data produced in my study and addressing emergent issues beyond the orthodoxy of the effectiveness and improvement research and literature. Nevertheless, I cannot deny that such research and literature provided me with the foundations to identify and select the cases to study in the first place.

To make sense of this tension, I subscribe to Jackson and Mazzei's (2012; 2013) notion of *plugging in* theory into data into theory. Plugging in – an idea that Jackson and Mazzei borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* – is understood as a process rather than a concept, as it offers a way for researchers to arrange, organise and fit together different texts (interview data, theories, research methods, memos and notes, etc.) to think with theory in qualitative research (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). This notion of plugging in facilitates the process of producing new analytical questions throughout the research process by 'disrupting the theory/practice binary' and 'showing how they *constitute or make one another*' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013, p. 265; italics in the original).

In my research, the initial plug in of theory into data is produced with the selection of cases based on a systematisation of school improvement literature on external support, which gave rise to a set of analytical questions. Then, while observing that these questions are constantly challenged by the data from the cases, I see myself in need of plugging in such data into another theory and producing new analytical questions. I have opted to draw on ideas from social theory and the sociology of education (Ball, 1997b; Ball, 1998b; Boyask, 2012; Murphy, 2013; Popkewitz, 1999), as I think they will allow me, as a school improvement researcher, to *think otherwise* about the influence of school improvement policy on the implementation of external support programmes and the notions of improvement they put forward,

Therefore, I conceptualise my study as qualitative research, based on a critical or transformative ontology that considers reality as constructed in a dialectical relationship between the subjects and their social and political context. Qualitative research runs across disciplines and fields of inquiry, involving 'an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), qualitative research consists of different sets of interpretive practices, which use and collect a variety of empirical materials that describe the social world in naturalistic terms. For my thesis, I decided to develop a multiple case study of the implementation of three external technical support programmes in municipal schools, and the current policy framework for school improvement in Chile.

#### *Case study research*

I have chosen to develop my thesis as a case study to understand the influence of the policy framework for school improvement on the implementation of external technical support programmes in schools. Case study research allows researchers to deeply investigate a phenomenon (external technical support programmes) in order to understand similar ones (Gerring, 2007), while also considering the context (policy framework for school

improvement) of the studied case (Yin, 2003). This is relevant for my thesis, as it allows me to engage with the political and social dimensions of the phenomena, often silenced or neglected in school effectiveness and improvement research (Thrupp, Lupton and Brown, 2007).

Case study research is a strategy of qualitative inquiry – although it is not exclusively qualitative – which is defined by the interest in the case itself as an object of study that has intrinsic value in its representation of research themes or issues (Stake, 1998). Yin (2003, p. 16) describes case study research as,

[A]n empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident, [which] allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events

In this sense, the qualitative case researcher must ensure that the case is well bounded, that is, clearly conceptualised as an identifiable object of study or singularity in space and time (Stake, 1998). At the same time, the case is studied in its natural setting, exploring its significant features according to the themes or issues emphasised in the research question (Bassey, 1999). This is done by collecting multiple sources of information or evidence from direct participants or indirect observers (Yin, 2003), triangulating sources (observations) and analyses (interpretations), and selecting alternative interpretations to contrast in order to develop general assertions and possible generalisations about the case (Stake, 1998).

Researchers may have different purposes in mind when deciding to study cases, and those purposes define different types of case studies. For instance, Bassey (1999) describes three types of what he calls educational case studies. The first is theory-seeking and theory-testing case studies, where cases are typical of something more general and can lead to tentative generalisations to similar cases. Stake (1998) also describes these types of case studies as ‘instrumental’ given that they are studied as representative of a larger theme or issue. The second type is story-telling and picture-drawing case studies, where cases present a narrative account of an event or process that has clear time limits and it is unique. Yin (2003) describes this type of case as a ‘descriptive case study,’ considering that the case is a unique, well-defined phenomenon. The third type is the evaluative case study, where cases inquire into the value of a programme or project that is examined in depth. Despite the differences between these three types of educational case studies, Bassey (1999) argues that they all contribute to the development of theoretical frameworks that underpin educational policy

and practice. In other words, an educational case study represents ‘a prime strategy for developing educational theory which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice’ (Bassey, 1999, p. xiii).

Based on these types of educational case studies, the three case studies of external technical support programmes included in my thesis are theory-seeking and theory-testing cases, as each of them represents a typical example of a specific approach to external support. These cases will provide empirical findings or statements about external technical support as a school improvement strategy in Chile. Conversely, the case study of the current policy framework for school improvement resembles a story-telling and picture-drawing type, as it describes the process that led to the design and implementation of such policy framework, providing a descriptive account or narrative of a series of events and an analytic account of these.

A final concern regarding case study research is the issue of generalisation or transference of conclusions beyond the boundaries of the studied case or cases (Scott and Morrison, 2006). According to Flyvberg (2006), case study research is particularly well-suited to produce context-dependent knowledge that is specific to the social sciences, and offers a type of generalisation that provides critical evidence to build and test theory from empirical experience. Building theory from case studies ‘involves using one or more cases to create theoretical constructs, propositions and/or midrange theory from case-based, empirical evidence’ (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 25), taking advantage of the empirical richness of a case or group of cases to develop or test theoretical propositions. This is a key issue for my research approach, as case studies provide me with the opportunity of plugging in theory into data into theory to think with theory about school improvement research.

#### *Sampling and participants*

The selection of cases is a critical issue, as it defines the possibility of understanding the phenomenon under study. As theory-seeking and theory-testing types of cases, the three external technical support programmes for municipal schools were selected employing theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling of multiple cases implies choosing cases that fill certain theoretical categories to extend or replicate an emerging theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). For that purpose, I used the three theoretical approaches to external support described in chapter five.

1. The Schools Network project (*Proyecto Redes*), a programme that brought together six primary schools from the same district in a network championing a collaborative



approach to school improvement with support from external facilitators, which represents a *networking and collaboration* approach.

2. The Leading Head Teachers project (*Directores Líderes*), a programme that defined effectiveness indicators for head teachers and provided professional and material resources to support them, which represents a *target-setting and resource-based* approach.
3. The Shared Support Plan (*Plan de Apoyo Compartido*), a programme from the Ministry of Education that focused on achieving maximum curriculum coverage through a strict instructional intervention, which represents a *prescriptive pressure and support* approach.

Additionally, as a story-telling and picture-drawing type of case, case selection is predicated on the phenomenon of interest that pre-establishes the case to be studied (Stake, 1998). In this sense, the case study of the policy framework for school improvement was of interest for my research aim, as it represents the social and political context for the three external technical support programmes.

I introduce and describe the detailed characteristics of the selected cases and the process of researching each of them in their corresponding chapters (seven to ten), for the sake of clarity and organisation of the thesis. Nevertheless, table 2 offers a summary of the participants, sampling, and data produced and collected from each case<sup>8</sup>.

Furthermore, the sampling within cases corresponded either to a convenience or snowball strategy (Emmel, 2013; Patton, 2002). For the external technical support programme cases, as there were many schools implementing the selected programmes, I employed a convenience sample of schools that were available and agreed to participate in the study. In two of the three cases (Schools Network and Leading Head Teachers) I secured the participation of three schools, while for the third case (Shared Support Plan) only one school positively answered the invitation to participate in the study, even though I contacted several schools directly or through gatekeepers.

The selection of participants within schools and external technical support programmes was agreed to with gatekeepers in each case. For schools, gatekeepers were the head teachers, who introduced me to other school leaders and classroom teachers that were directly involved in external support activities. For external technical support programmes, a similar process took place, where the gatekeeper introduced me to external advisors, preferentially

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<sup>8</sup> More details about the data set of the case studies can be found in Appendix 2.

those who spent considerable time with school staff implementing the programme. To summarise, participants from the three cases of external technical support programmes included nine classroom teachers, 12 school leaders (seven head teachers, four curriculum leaders and one discipline leader), and five external advisors.

For the policy framework case, as there were many possible informants on the policy framework, I employed a snowball sampling strategy by asking the participants about other people that could provide insight into the case. Initially, I contacted former colleagues to assist me with recruiting participants for this case study. Then I formally approached them to explain the purpose of my study and asked them to participate in an interview. After each interview, I asked each participant if they could put me in contact with someone else they considered relevant for my study. Participants from the policy framework case included a total of two university researchers, two education advisors, three ministry officers, and one local authority officer.

#### *Data production and collection*

Several methods of qualitative inquiry can be employed within a case study research design, adding rigor, complexity and richness to the inquiry. As Denzin (2012, p. 82) explains, '[t]he use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question'. Data produced in each of the four case studies of this thesis came from three qualitative methods: interviews, document analysis and observations. I employed these methods simultaneously during fieldwork with teachers, school leaders and external agents in schools, and with key informants working at other educational settings (ministry, universities, non-government organisations, and local authorities).

Unfortunately, it was not possible to develop a trial or pilot of the data production and collection methods, given that funding and time restrictions impeded me to travel from England to Chile before the end of my first year in the doctoral programme (2012). I was only able to informally discuss some inquiry topics with former colleagues in Chile and received very useful feedback on the methodology of my study from my upgrade examiners in the autumn of 2012.

In January 2013, I travelled to Chile to begin the initial contact with potential participants with whom I shared a research summary. Most of the data production and collection activities took place during the first semester of the 2013 school year in Chile, specifically between March and June. The exceptions to this were two interviews with participants about

the policy framework and three interviews with classroom teachers about the Shared Support Plan (PAC), all performed between July and August 2014.

In this section I briefly outline a description for each of these qualitative research methods, and the rationale for their selection as part of my study.

Table 2. Description of cases and fieldwork activities undertaken for each of them

	<b>Case 0. Policy Framework</b>	<b>Case 1. Schools Network</b>	<b>Case 2. Leading Head Teachers</b>	<b>Case 3. Shared Support Plan</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Eight key informants involved in different aspects of the design, implementation and evaluation of the policy framework for school improvement in Chile.	Six primary schools from the same municipality participate and manage this initiative, supported by the municipal local authority.	This programme is managed by an education NGO. It is implemented in four municipalities where three or four primary or secondary schools work with an advisory institution.	Approximately 1200 primary schools participate in the programme at national level, which is managed directly by MINEDUC.
<b>Sampling</b>	Snowball sample (until saturation)	Convenience sample of three schools.	Convenience sample of three schools.	Convenience sample of one school
<b>Data produced and collected</b>	Interviews with each of the key informants	Interviews with head teacher, curriculum leader and classroom teachers in each school, local authority officers and external advisors	Interviews with the head teacher of each school, two external advisors, and project manager	Interviews with head teacher, curriculum and discipline leaders and classroom teachers of the school
	(no observation data produced or collected)	Observation of faculty meetings in each school, teacher training sessions, and network meetings attended by head teachers.	Observation of group workshops between head teachers and advisors.	Observation of lessons in primary classrooms (grade 1 and grade 3).
	Set of official documents from MINEDUC and Quality Agency in relation to the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC), and Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP)	Set of documents associated with the initial proposal for setting up the network, and official minutes from network meetings.	Set of documents related to the programmes' aims and characteristics, and PowerPoint presentations of workshops with head teachers.	Set of public records and documents of the programme produced by the Ministry of Education, available on the programme's website.

## 1. Semi-structured interviews

In order to inquire into the meanings that people assign to their experiences and understand their perspective, interviewing is an appropriate research strategy (Seidman, 2006). Although interviewing is not the exclusive domain of qualitative research (Gillham, 2000b), it is more closely related to qualitative approaches in the field of social sciences, especially unstructured and semi-structured types of interviews (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). In education, for instance, interviewing can be used as a method to address certain kinds of research interests; as Seidman (2006, pp. 10-11) argues,

The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution or processes is through the experience of the individual people, the “others” who make up the organization or carry out the process [...] If the researcher’s goal [...] is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always sufficient, avenue of inquiry

As an avenue of inquiry, interviewing focuses on people’s narratives about their social reality, and can be considered as a site of knowledge production, which is inter-relational and set in a specific context or situation, where a conversation takes place. In other words, interviewing offers a type of knowledge that is ‘produced, relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative and pragmatic’ (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009, p. 53). Consequently, this requires that the interviewer keeps a balance between structure and flexibility during the research interview; structure in terms of leading the conversation towards the research topic, and flexibility in terms of listening and responding naturally to what the interviewee (informant or participant) has to say about the topic (Gillham, 2000b).

In this sense, I would argue that interviewing addresses phenomena that are eminently contextual, both in terms of the social and political (macro) context where the inquiry is set, and the specific (micro) context that is produced between the interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009). According to Wengraf (2001) the socio historical backgrounds of the interviewer and the interviewee interact during the process of interviewing and shape the relationship established between them. Position, hierarchy, gender and age are the basic elements of the social identities that interact in the relationship generated during the interviewing process (Seidman, 2006), while the interview itself constitutes a particular site of knowledge production, which in turn produces particular subjectivities (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009).

Considering this, I employed qualitative interviews in my thesis as a way of exploring both the meanings and contextual conditions in which these meanings come to exist from a range

of informants from different educational settings. Particularly, I decided to develop semi-structured interviews as a way of understanding different informants' experiences in relation to the implementation of external technical support programmes and the policy framework where these programmes took place. Semi-structured interviews have a discernible setting and pre-established categories that are useful to identify key informants and frame the conversation with them around certain issues, but at the same time this type of qualitative interview is open to gaining greater depth by aiming to understand rather than merely explaining such issues through the experiences and meanings of the informants (Fontana and Frey, 2003).

In my study, interviews with school leaders, teachers and external agents often took place in schools, although in some cases I met with external agents in their offices or in public spaces (cafes). Conversely, interviews with participants of the policy framework case study took place mostly in public spaces (cafes or libraries); only in a few instances interviews were carried out in people's offices.

The interview process consisted of two phases. First, before the interview, I contacted participants either in person, via email or over the phone to agree on a date and time. When it was possible, I gave them a copy of the interview schedule for their information or sent it via email. Second, on the day of the interview, I arrived early to the agreed place and explained to participants the aim of the interview and why I wanted to speak to them. I took advantage of this conversation to create rapport with the interviewee and gain his or her trust. As the interview started, I requested their consent to use their data, informed them of the possibility to withdraw from the study at any point, and requested permission to use a recorder.

While talking to the participants, I tried to address all the categories or topics from the interview schedule. However, I kept in mind that this was a conversation where two people meet to exchange ideas and information about a topic, instead of an interrogation. As a result, my encounter with these people was clearly marked by our personal identities and the relationship that was established between us, but it was also influenced by the social and political elements that surrounded the topics that we discussed.

## 2. Document analysis

In addition to interviewing, I collected several materials and documents related to my research topic. For instance, when studying the cases of the external technical support programmes I collected hard and electronic copies of official public documents, internal documents, minutes of meetings, among others. Similarly, for the case study of the policy

framework for school improvement, I collected electronic documents about the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) from the Ministry's and Quality Agency's websites. These non-technical materials can be considered sources of empirical data that can be used for research purposes by employing documentary analysis.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009, p. 27).

In this sense, documentary analysis can be described as an analytic procedure, which involves finding, appraising and synthesising materials, and produces data in the form of excerpts or quotations (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997). The data produced through the analysis of documents and materials, such as historical and enduring artefacts, is well suited for qualitative and interpretive studies as they provide an opportunity to explore information that might be different from or not be available in spoken form (Hodder, 2003). In my thesis, the process of collecting documents varied from case to case. In the Schools Network case, documents were requested from the university advisors; in Leading Head Teachers documents were requested from the project manager and downloaded from the programme's website; in the Shared Support Plan, documents were downloaded from the programme's website. Conversely, for the policy framework case, legal documents were obtained from the Chilean library of congress, and technical reports were downloaded from the Quality Agency's website.

Finally, as a research method, document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies, where it is often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation (Bowen, 2009). In my thesis, this triangulation was very productive, for example, when studying the cases of the three external technical support programmes, where I used the collected documents to contrast the participants' views expressed during the interviews, and to inform my decision as to which events were relevant for observation while doing fieldwork in schools. In this sense, documents and other materials are useful to inform the context where informants operate; to develop and refine research questions that can be used in interviews or observations; to provide supplementary data or corroborate what has been found through other sources, and as a way of tracking changes in the development of an organisation or a programme (Bowen, 2009).

### 3. Observation and the observer-as-participant

Several of the events that were part of the focus of my thesis, particularly those associated with the implementation of the three external technical support programmes, consisted of activities that took place within schools and involved the participation of external advisors, school leaders and classroom teachers. These activities happened in the *natural settings* (Spradley, 1980) of the schools and classrooms, and my aim was to record those activities by observing and taking field notes that could later be rendered into descriptions.

However, what is called naturalistic observation is not neutral nor objective, as it interferes with the people or activities that are being observed (Angrosino and Mays de Pérez, 2003). The problem of arriving at an honest and fair account of an observed phenomenon and the people who participate in it, depends on the type of relationship that the researcher establishes with the people involved and the role that he or she assumes while observing the phenomenon (Delamont, 2002). The observer, then, can assume different roles according to the varying degrees of interaction with people and the context or setting where the observation is carried out. These roles are often presented as a continuum between a totally immersed participant-researcher and a completely detached observer-researcher, although qualitative and ethnographic studies often favour a position of participant observer, who while studying a social situation would seem like an ordinary participant to any external commentator (Spradley, 1980). According to Angrosino and Mays de Pérez (2003), a balanced position can be achieved by assuming an observer-as-participant role that allows the researcher to interact in a non-directive way with people and is casually involved in the situations that he or she aims to observe. The observer-as-participant develops a focused observation, which is a systematic way of organising the observation process where the researcher ‘concentrates on well-defined types of group activity’ (Angrosino and Mays de Pérez, 2003, p. 114). In my study, I found that this type of observation can be very well accompanied with interviews to, first, identify and define with some specificity those activities that are to be observed because of their interest for the research purpose or question; and second, to re-visit the meanings that participants assigned to the events that were noted by the observer.

In general, the observations I did during fieldwork concentrated, as I explained above, on the activities that people engaged in within schools to implement the external technical support programmes. For instance, the School’s Network initiative was comprised of a series of meetings between the six participant head teachers in addition to training sessions where



classroom teachers participated. On the other hand, Leading Head Teacher consisted of periodic visits of external advisors to schools to accompany and provide feedback regarding the routine of the head teachers, but also involved structured meetings or workshops where all three advisors and head teachers got together and worked towards a product. Finally, the Shared Support Plan provided instruction materials for schools to apply in their classrooms, and the school leaders' role included formal and informal classroom observations to check on the use of these materials by teachers and students. I engaged in these activities through an observer-as-participant role, taking notes, asking clarifying questions and actively interacting with participants. These field notes were handwritten in a journal in the same moment of the observation, without much editing. Then, after the observation and once I had left the proximity of the place where the observation took place, I audio recorded my first impressions of the events I had witnessed. Then, I transcribed the handwritten notes and added or revised any relevant details with the help of the audio.

### *Data analysis*

The process of analysis is a difficult endeavour due to the unstructured and unwieldy nature of qualitative data, and the need to detect and develop the ideas, concepts and other elements from the discourse of the participants (Huberman and Miles, 2002). Considering this, I attempted to develop an analytical process that would operate on two levels. The first is the analysis of each of the data sources described in the previous section: interview transcripts, documents collected, and field notes from observations. The second is the analysis of the case studies where the first level of analysis feeds into the analytical description of each case, based on themes or categories, and a cross case analysis, based on common patterns between cases.

#### 1. Qualitative content analysis (QCA)

For the first analytical level, the analysis of data sources, I employed a specific type of thematic analysis to examine the data produced and collected: qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012; Schreier, 2014). In general terms, thematic analysis refers to the recognition of patterns within the data, also called coding, which leads to the identification of emerging themes and the development of categories for analysis (Bowen, 2009). Thus, through coding of interview transcripts, documents and field notes, the researcher builds themes that are pertinent to understanding a phenomenon.

As a specific variant of thematic analysis, qualitative content analysis is, in its essence, a strategy to identify substantive statements in qualitative interviews and other material data

about a certain theme or topic (Gillham, 2000a; Kohlbacher, 2006). Qualitative content analysis stems from the quantitative version of this method that was applied to the study of mass media and communication since the 1940s, focusing on the description of manifest content meaning (Kohlbacher, 2006; Krippendorff, 1980). However, this quantitative definition of the method was challenged early on, given its reductionist definition of meaning and the assumption that the frequency of a given theme (content) could imply its importance, which led to the advocacy of a qualitative type of content analysis that is not limited to manifest content and frequency counts (Schreier, 2014). Mayring (2000, para. 5) defines qualitative content analysis ‘as an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step-by-step models, without rash quantification’. In this sense, qualitative content analysis deals both with the data itself (e.g., interview transcripts, documents, field notes) and the context where this data is produced, with the aim of describing its meaning in a systematic way (Schreier, 2012).

According to Schreier (2012; 2014), three features characterise qualitative content analysis as a method: it reduces data, it is systematic, and it is flexible. First, qualitative content analysis helps to reduce the amount of material by focusing on selected aspects of meaning, yielding data that is responsive to the research question; although some specific information might be lost, it is possible to obtain a sense of a stronger relationship between different sets of the qualitative materials. Second, qualitative content analysis is a highly systematic method of analysis, as it requires the researcher to examine all the material that is in any way relevant to the research question in a pre-established sequence of analytical steps, namely: the definition of a coding frame; the application of such a frame to segments of the material; the evaluation, correction and reapplication of the coding frame to the material; and the development of categories of analysis. Third, qualitative content analysis is flexible, typically combining theory and data in the development of analytical categories, which is reflected in the coding frame; nevertheless, the coding frame needs to be consistent with the material to ensure that it provides a valid description of it.

Furthermore, at the centre of qualitative content analysis is the development of a coding frame or agenda (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012; Schreier, 2014). Researchers initially develop the coding frame by defining a criterion based on the research questions and theoretical assumptions, establishing categories that assist them in summarising the material (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000). The material can be summarised by data sources, informants’ characteristics or by other criteria (Schreier, 2014). These concept-driven categories are subsequently applied to the text to structure and

generate a set of data-driven subcategories by a process of *subsumption*, where the material is systematically reviewed for relevant information related to concept-driven categories and subcategories, which are created based on what the text says about this category, until the coding frame covers all relevant aspects of the material (Schreier, 2012; Schreier, 2014).

In my thesis, I summarised the material by each case, and then developed initial categories based on my research questions in relation to the implementation of external technical support programmes, the notion of improvement that is promoted by the programmes, and the influence of the policy framework for school improvement. Then, by looking at the material for each case with these concept-driven categories, I developed subcategories based on the data from interviews, documents and field notes. This helped me develop a coding frame that combined the thesis research questions with the specific aspects of each case.

## 2. Case description and cross case analysis

For the second analytical level, the analysis of cases, the challenge was bringing together the analysis of the research materials and data to write up each individual case study, and subsequently, look at all these cases together to identify patterns and draw conclusions in relation to the research questions and theoretical assumptions. In this sense, in this second analytical level I attempted to pull together the findings from the first analytical level and develop a theorisation based on what the evidence (concept- and data-driven categories) from the cases, individually and taken together, suggested for the strategy of external support for school improvement within the Chilean policy context. Considering the complex characteristics of the studied cases, and the research approach of thinking with theory outlined earlier in this section, I used both a case description and cross case analysis strategies (Yin, 2003) to build a theorisation from the cases.

Theory-building from case studies is a complex and difficult enterprise, and it is driven by an iterative process of analysis that goes back and forth between theory and data, which is a process that does not follow a pre-established pattern (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Regarding this issue of analysing data from case studies to build theory, Eisenhardt (1989, pp. 540-541) writes,

Within-case analysis typically involves detailed case study write-ups for each site. These write-ups are often simply pure descriptions, but they are central to the generation of insight [...] Coupled with within-case analysis is cross case search for patterns [...] Overall, the idea behind these cross-case searching tactics is to force investigators to go beyond initial impressions, especially through the use of structured and diverse lenses on the data. These tactics improve the likelihood

of accurate and reliable theory, that is, a theory with a close fit with the data.

I would argue that these two analytical strategies associated with theory-building from case studies aim to keep a connection with both the research questions and theoretical assumptions, and the material and data collected and produced during fieldwork. For instance, the aim of what Eisenhardt calls *within-case analysis* – or what Yin (2003) calls *case description* – is to organise the case study according to a descriptive framework that is responsive to both the research questions and theoretical assumptions, and patterns that emerge from close examination of the data (Yin, 2003). In my thesis, this descriptive framework is informed by the initial ideas or concepts associated with school improvement and education policy literature that underpin my interest in doing a case study about the strategy of external support, and it builds upon the patterns that emerge from the data collected for each case study. Thus, each of the case study chapters, seven through ten, present a case description consisting of several categories, which is informed by my initial theoretical assumption, developed by emerging patterns from the data and discussed with further theoretical tools that are appropriate to the individual characteristics of each case.

Meanwhile, a *cross case search for patterns* (Eisenhardt, 1989) or *cross-case synthesis* (Yin, 2003), as an analytical strategy, involves using multiple cases to develop theoretical propositions from case-based, empirical evidence (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). This analytical strategy is suitable for the analysis of multiple cases that are part of the same study, treating each individual case study as a separate study and then aggregating the findings from individual cases according to a common framework of categories or themes that emerged from such cases (Yin, 2003). According to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, p. 27), multiple cases facilitate the development of robust theory ‘because propositions are more deeply grounded in varied empirical evidence [and] constructs and relationships are more precisely delineated’. For this purpose, in chapter eleven, I pick up the themes that I highlighted in each of the individual case studies to make a comparison and contrast across cases to synthesise my findings and establish analytical patterns that can be further theorised.

In summary, by employing these two analytical levels, the analysis of data sources and the analysis of case studies, I identified key themes, patterns and trends within and across cases from which analyses and reflections were formulated from the data, in response to the three research questions of my study, and with support from the theoretical perspectives that inform my thesis. These analytical levels and associated strategies – qualitative content analysis, case description, and cross case analysis – facilitated the process of linking the theoretical framework that influenced the initial inquiry topics in the data collection strategies

(interviews, documents, observations) with the data produced through these strategies, and with the theoretical frameworks employed to make sense of the data produced; in other words, they facilitated *thinking with theory* by *plugging in* theory into data into theory, as I explained earlier in this chapter.

### **Ethical considerations**

The ethical dimension of educational research, as in many studies within the social sciences, is a fundamental element linked with the axiological question of what the values and principles are that will operate in the research activity (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). There are several ethical issues that need to be considered by researchers when developing their study, such as consent, confidentiality, and protection (Israel and Hay, 2006). Additionally, a specific issue that is relevant to this study is my position as a researcher with previous experience working as an advisor for external technical support programmes at a university-based department that offered educational technical assistance (ATE) to municipal schools. This previous professional experience positioned me as an insider researcher (Mercer, 2006; Perryman, 2011; Sikes and Potts, 2008), as I interacted with former colleagues in settings, such as municipal schools, that were familiar to my previous role while doing my research.

Most ethical issues are covered in professional codes of conduct and ethical regulations for specific academic fields. In this case, I follow the ethical guidelines for educational research defined by the British Educational Research Association (2004; 2011), which identify as a fundamental principle the development of an ethic of respect with people participating directly or indirectly in the study. Similarly, the literature on qualitative research understands that this is a value-laden territory, where interaction and reflexivity are salient, thus leading to the emergence of ethical dilemmas throughout the research process (Mertens, 2014). For instance, ethical problems in qualitative interviewing can emerge because of the complexity of exploring the private lived experiences of people, and placing such accounts in the public arena (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009).

The first ethical consideration, informed consent, ‘implies two related activities: participants need first to comprehend and second to agree voluntarily’ (Israel and Hay, 2006, p. 61) to the aims of the research they are invited to, and their role within it. Usually, in social science research, this consent is obtained through written letters explaining the aims of research along with a form that participants need to sign to have a record of this procedure. For me, it was very important that participants were fully aware of the intention and relevance of the

study, to establish a trustful and open relationship with them from the start and throughout the fieldwork period. For this reason, apart from using written consent letters and forms all participants were informed orally about the research purpose and the activities in which they were invited to take part, and that they could refuse to participate if they considered their personal and professional integrity could be compromised, or if they had any qualms or objections with the study. Furthermore, I encouraged them to ask me questions or raise concerns about the study in all the occasions I had access to them, and I reminded them that they could opt out from the study at any time, without having to justify their decision, stressing the voluntary nature of their participation in the study.

The second ethical consideration, confidentiality, and the related issue of anonymity, are in direct relation to how the information is collected during the research process and, most importantly, with the subsequent use of such information when the research findings are disseminated (Israel and Hay, 2006; Mertens, 2014). As my study investigated the design and implementation of school improvement policy and programmes, certain sensitive information divulged by participants could have entailed a certain level of risk for them. This is because such information was directly associated with these professionals' jobs working for non-government organisations, universities, the ministry, local authorities, schools and external technical support programmes. Thus, I considered it an important ethical issue to prevent the possible use of the data collected for any purpose other than those of this research. Despite this precaution, I acknowledge that the use and dissemination of research evidence is a dynamic process that precedes the final publication of findings, and can be traced back to the creation of knowledge with the participants through discussions and reflection during interviews or observations, or through formal written reports and informal conversations (Mertens, 2014). There are also power issues involved in the decision – mostly from my part as a researcher – to how these materials were organised and presented, particularly in this manuscript.

Considering the above, during the study I made the necessary arrangements to secure the participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of the information provided by them. All original data sources (audio recordings, interview transcripts, documents, field notes) were anonymised and stored securely in an external drive. Similarly, preliminary reports released for the purposes of doctoral supervision and participants' validation were anonymised and pseudonyms have been used for schools and people. When preliminary reports were produced, these contained summarised general information from the cases without identifying any informant, for the sake of institutional and personal confidentiality.

A crucial issue that emerged during fieldwork in relation to confidentiality is that, as I gained the trust of informants, I could access sensitive information, such as institutional stories, gossip and criticisms between and among colleagues and within and between institutions. This situation introduces a third ethical consideration: protecting participants. The idea of protecting research participants is often associated with avoiding physical harm but ‘in social science, research harm is generally more likely to involve psychological distress, discomfort, social disadvantage, invasion of privacy or infringement of rights than physical injury’ (Israel and Hay, 2006, p. 96). For instance, the issues I explored through interviews and observations covered topics that could involve a risk for participants’ social and professional conditions, as they disclosed sensitive information and personal views on their role as teachers, school leaders, external agents, etc. Similarly, by developing case studies of the implementation of external technical support programmes in schools, I needed to be extremely careful to maintain the anonymity of the participant schools to protect them from a potential backlash when the findings of the study are disseminated. I did this by carefully selecting the demographic information that I would disclose about the sample of schools for each case study.

Nevertheless, risk minimisation is not the only ethical concern regarding protection, as it is also important to be able to ensure that the research offers some benefits to the studied communities and individuals, in reciprocation for their voluntary participation and to advance their current conditions (Mertens, 2014). Social and educational research usually claims that producing knowledge about a certain phenomenon constitutes a benefit for the individuals and communities that participate in such research and others like them; however, this could be argued to take advantage of the research opportunity while the potential benefits of research become long-term and theoretical for those directly involved (Israel and Hay, 2006). Thus, balancing protection, benefits and research opportunities becomes a relevant challenge for researchers. In fact, when I interacted with participants during fieldwork, I was open to discussing and reflecting with them about topics related to my study, but also devoted time and attention to their current professional and work conditions to think about ways in which they could enhance them.

Finally, a fourth ethical consideration deals with my role as researcher with previous professional and personal ties with some of the individuals and institutions that participated in this study. Sikes and Potts (2008) call this *insider research*, which they describe as those research projects where the researcher has a previous involvement ‘with the institutions or social groups in, or on, which their investigation are based’ (p. 3). Nevertheless, I was not a complete insider, nor a total outsider in most of the spaces where I did my fieldwork (schools,

local authorities, ministry, etc.). For instance, I used to work for the university-based ATE that provided external technical support to the Schools Network project in case one, and through former colleagues I had access to the ATE agency that implemented the Leading Head Teachers project in case two. For cases zero (policy framework) and three (Shared Support Plan) I did not have a direct connection to the participants, but was introduced to gatekeepers and key informants thanks to my professional network.

Perryman (2011) uses the notion of *returning native* to describe this hybrid position, which moves along a continuum between insiderness and outsidership, depending on the circumstances, and benefits from ‘combining insider knowledge with outsider detachment’ (Perryman, 2011, p. 873). This insiderness presents many advantages and risks for research within educational settings (Smyth and Holian, 2008). Among the advantages was easier access to certain informants and institutions, documents and information, and a type of allegiance from former colleagues towards my research purpose. Conversely, among the risks there was the potential bias regarding the work of individuals and institutions that I was familiar with, a certain degree of complicity and familiarity with some participants that could lead to compromising sensitive information, and power issues that arose between participants and myself by being associated with people in positions of authority (ministry and local authority officers, head teachers) who acted as gatekeepers.

I weighed these advantages and risks individually for each case, as I experienced different degrees of insiderness in different settings. In general, I dealt with the risks of bias and familiarity by reflecting constantly about my own practice as a researcher in different settings, aided by the guidance of my supervisors. Similarly, I dealt with power issues by assuring participants their anonymity and confidentiality, and by reminding them that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any moment. The result of these efforts is reflected in the following chapters, which present the case descriptions of the policy framework for school improvement in Chile and the three external technical support programmes (chapters seven to ten), and the cross-case analysis of the previous case descriptions (chapter 11).



## CHAPTER VII

### CASE STUDY ZERO: CURRENT POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In this chapter, I develop a focused case study of the current Chilean school improvement policy using evidence from interviews carried out with eight key informants. Here, I critically analyse school improvement policy concentrating on how it has been designed and implemented at the central (ministry, quality agency, superintendence), intermediate (local authorities) and local (schools) levels of the school system. In addition, I aim to consider in this analysis the role of other actors associated with the development and enactment of these policies, such as national and international consultants, university researchers and academics, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Many of the current features of school improvement policy relate to the institutional and normative changes to the school system's governance structure described in chapter two. For instance, the enactment of the General Law of Education (LGE), the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) and the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) implied a change from centralised to decentralised improvement strategies, with an increasingly important role being played by schools. These changes can be characterised by the introduction of systems of standards and performance-based accountability in several areas of the school system, such as curriculum, assessment, and schools' and local authorities' performance.

However, as I show in this chapter, the development of the current policy framework for school improvement also contains some contradictory decisions that respond to the different political orientations of recent governments in Chile. As a result, this policy framework, in its ensemble of discourses, provides the opportunity to empirically explore and analyse the linkages between different arenas where policy texts are made and remade (Taylor, 1997). Thus, I deliberately decline to provide an account of school improvement policy in Chile in the traditional academic way by relying on published materials and secondary sources, which may be obscuring some of these linkages and their complexity. In contrast, I choose to forefront the personal views of key informants, with their overt and covert agendas, biases and interpretations, as a way of performing a critical education policy analysis (Ball, 1997b; Prunty, 1985; Troyna, 1994) that considers and engages with the processes of knowledge production and exchange within a specific political, economic and social context (Gunter, Hall and Mills, 2015).

## **Researching the policy framework**

While preparing for fieldwork, I contacted several colleagues from universities who are related in different ways to my research topic to gain access to some of the external technical support programmes I wanted to include in my study, and obtain general information about the current situation in terms of school improvement initiatives in Chile. Thus, I initially talked informally with researchers whom I knew were developing school improvement projects and researching the conditions in which external technical support was being implemented in schools. Eventually, this led me to formally interview people who, at the time, were or had been in key positions in relation to the design, implementation and evaluation of the policy framework for school improvement.

During these interviews, I broadly inquired into the informants' perspective on school improvement policy and practice, with an emphasis on initiatives and programmes of external technical support for underperforming schools. The structure of the interviews aimed to gather information about key issues, such as the design and implementation of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) and the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC); the role of different external support agents, such as the External Technical Assistance (ATE), Shared Support Programme (PAC), and Technical Pedagogical Advisors (ATP); and the operation of the Quality Agency and Superintendence of Education. In addition, in each interview I explored more specific topics regarding policymaking and policy implementation, considering the expertise and experience of each informant.

## **Participant informants**

I interviewed eight people involved in different ways with the current policy framework for school improvement in Chile. As mentioned above, some of them were or had been in key positions within the ministry or other government agencies, while others were involved in policy implementation and evaluation. I have classified their positions as: university researchers, education advisors, ministry officers and local authority officers.

The informant's professional practice and experience facilitated the discussion about the topic of school improvement and external technical support in Chile. In table 3 I provide a summarised view of their roles at the time of the interviews in 2013, and some additional information on their past and present activities.

*Table 3. Participant informants interviewed, their role and additional information – Policy Framework for School Improvement*

<b>Informant pseudonym</b>	<b>Role at the time of interview (2013-14)</b>	<b>Additional information</b>
<b>UR1</b>	University researcher	Former researcher at an NGO. In 2013 worked as lecturer at a private university and served as advisor for a government agency.
<b>UR2</b>	University researcher	Lecturer at a State university. Founding member of a civil society movement campaign against high-stake assessment in Chile.
<b>EA1</b>	Education advisor	Former ministry officer. In 2013 worked for a NGO involved in supporting early childhood education.
<b>EA2</b>	Education advisor	Former head of a department at the Ministry of Education. In 2014 worked for an NGO that runs private-subsidised schools.
<b>MO1</b>	Ministry officer	In 2013 worked for the curriculum department at the Ministry of Education.
<b>MO2</b>	Ministry officer	In 2013 worked for the research centre at the Ministry of Education.
<b>MO3</b>	Ministry officer	In 2013 worked for the research centre at the Ministry of Education.
<b>LO1</b>	Local authority officer	Former university researcher. In 2013 worked at a municipal local authority.

The first group of informants, UR1 and UR2, are both university researchers with very different professional trajectories. In the case of UR1, he had previous experience working as an education advisor in the private sector and at the time of the interview he was an advisor for a government agency. Meanwhile UR2 has developed her career as researcher and activist at university and in schools, co-founding with academics, teachers and students an advocacy movement campaigning against high-stakes, standardised testing. Their different professional trajectories offer interesting counterpoints to how they think about and act on policies for school improvement.

The second group of informants, EA1 and EA2, are education advisors for different non-profit organisations linked with early childhood and primary education. As with the university researchers, both EA1 and EA2 show different professional trajectories. For instance, EA2 advised a foundation which runs three private-subsidised schools in disadvantaged districts in Santiago, with a marked Catholic mission and a vision of social

justice, and that also offers training courses and materials for other municipal and private-subsidised schools. Conversely, EA1 worked for a foundation related to promoting innovation in underdeveloped areas of the educational system, such as early childhood education and English language teaching, by implementing and evaluating pilot programmes in several nurseries and schools across the country, often in partnership with other organisations.

A third group of informants is that of ministry officers. MO1 has worked for several years in the Ministry in different posts related to standards setting and improvement initiatives. On the other hand, MO2 and MO3 have worked for several years in the same department at the Ministry, acting as Ministry counterpart for evaluation and research projects commissioned to external organisations. At the time of the interview in 2013, they were in the process of gathering information regarding previous school improvement initiatives.

Finally, the fourth type of informant was LO1, who works as a pedagogical leader at a municipal local authority. This local authority is a municipal corporation and it administers 15 schools, primary and secondary, in a mid-size urban district. LO1 came to this position as a former university academic and researcher, but with extensive experience of working with teachers and head teachers in schools. His role as pedagogical leader involved supporting senior management teams in schools to develop their school improvement plans (PME) and coordinate internal and external technical support services.

### **School improvement policy in Chile**

The interviews with these eight informants provided me with an interesting range of perspectives on the current policy framework for school improvement in Chile. Undoubtedly, the personal accounts of each of the informants differ in their positions regarding this issue given their professional trajectories, but I consider these nuanced perspectives as constitutive of the complex and intricate education policy landscape in Chile.

Taking into consideration this complexity and diversity, I worked my way through the analysis of the interview transcripts in the search for common themes that cut across the informants' perspectives. The analysis deals with issues that were explicitly espoused by the informants as critical to understand the configuration of the current policy framework, but I also take note of those issues that were obscured or silenced as a result. What I present here are three main themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews, as key issues related to school improvement policy in Chile: (i) political orientation and ideology; (ii) policy text production; and (iii) transiting from policy to practice.

### *Political orientation and ideology*

In several interviews, political orientation and political ideology were offered as an explanation for certain controversial decisions made in recent years regarding the design and implementation of policies linked to school improvement. Moreover, some informants cite political ideology as the broad reason behind the current configuration of Chile's school system as a market, and for the privatisation of State education. Similarly, political orientation is considered by the informants as critical to understanding specific decisions and emphases of recent governments. For instance, during the interview with two ministry officers, we discussed the importance of political orientation for the definition of education policies in the context of the presidential election in 2013.

[...] it depends on who wins the elections. And it depends... if the elections turn out as the polls predict, it will depend on how the future government of Bachelet *flesh it out*. Because today, not only Bachelet, but all candidates, including right-wing candidates, despite having included in the headlines of their programmes the education, though pointing in different directions, obviously with different rationales and such, none of them have a specific proposal for school improvement (MO3)

The notion of *fleshing out* certain policies is very interesting, as it illustrates the idea of political orientation as a general direction of travel rather than a fixed set of measures and decisions. That is to say, political orientation can suggest a range of options that will be considered, for instance, regarding how to approach school improvement policy, but then government officials will move within this range in order to give specific content and intent to policy decisions (i.e. *flesh out*). Therefore, the ministry officer indicated that there is no specific proposal for school improvement, as these sorts of decisions are taken once a new government comes into office and people in key positions are appointed.

Nevertheless, this does leave the door open for more negotiations or adjustments – and sometimes, confrontation – within the government when it comes down to making decisions regarding specific policies. This can be observed in the following description made by an education advisor in his interview, regarding how the decision to implement the Shared Support Plan (PAC) was taken during the right-wing government of President Sebastian Piñera in 2011.

[PAC] was a whim of Veronica Abud [head of general education division at MINEDUC], and Fernando Rojas [undersecretary of education] never wanted to go ahead, never wanted to do it. Verónica Abud negotiated this thing directly

with the minister because she was well connected, you see? She insisted, insisted, insisted; at that time, it was Joaquín Lavín [minister of education] and Lavín, who is a *crafty old fox*, he could see... he is very skilful guy who knows where he can score a triumph... a quick win, a win-win [situation] (EA1)

In the episode described above, I would argue that we are no longer talking about how the political orientation of a government is influencing policy decisions; rather, this refers to the politics behind such decisions. The head of the general education division of the ministry, a high government official, lobbied the minister of education, a high profile political position, to obtain his backing for the launch of the Shared Support Plan (PAC). The story narrated by the education advisor indicates that it is due to political reasons that the minister of education decided to go ahead with the programme, despite the initial resistance from the undersecretary of education, second-in-command to the minister. Apparently, the expectation of achieving a *quick win* – likely, in terms of giving a strong signal to the public that things are being dealt with in terms of tackling underperformance in schools – was reason enough to comply with the *whim* of the head of division.

Nevertheless, what seem to be silenced in this episode are the reasons behind the insistence of the head of division and the resistance from the undersecretary. I think this is where political orientation and politics could be intersecting to configure an important element of the political culture and context of Chilean education policy: the negotiation and adjustment of policy decisions to the range permitted by a given political orientation (for simplicity, left- or right-wing) and the expectation of securing political gains in the eyes of public opinion. For example, one of the ministry officers declared that the Shared Support Programme (PAC) ‘emerges from the political need to show achievement and effectiveness... and show progress’ (MO2).

However, these policy decisions also carry some controversy and even confrontation; as one of the university researchers clearly asserted, ‘there are many people against PAC within the ministry... the UDI [the Independent Democratic Union, a right-wing political party] hardliners. Even they are opposing this thing because it never made sense to them’ (UR1). This illustrates that, in the Chilean context, right-wing politicians do not advocate education policies that involve direct intervention of the State in schools, and were troubled by the fact that the Shared Support Plan (PAC) was doing exactly that. In fact, one ministry officer declared that the emphasis of the right-wing government at the time was on controlling schools rather than providing orientation or support (MO1); however, another ministry officer believed that, regardless of the political orientation of a given government, education

policy in Chile tends to be fairly conservative (MO2).

This last point about Chilean education policy being described as conservative, links to the general features of the educational model and its normative and institutional framework, operating as a market where the State acts as a regulator and schools compete for the preference of parents. In the context of the conversation with the informants, the marketisation of the school system was often mentioned as an entrenched feature of the school system. For instance, one of the advisors believed that marketisation accurately represents the political orientation of the right-wing Piñera government by stating that ‘it is in the DNA of the current administration... to never go against the market, never put regulations to the market’ (EA1).

The marketisation of education in Chile since the dictatorship in the 1980s opened the door for the privatisation of the State-public school system with the incorporation of private institutions and individuals as administrators of publicly funded schools with little to no regulation. This is without a doubt a controversial issue, and even more so as recent reforms have opened new spaces for privatisation. However, the reliance on market forces to mobilise the Chilean education system is not exclusive to right-wing governments and it is a feature that has been maintained and enhanced by previous centre-left governments as well. One example, directly related to my study, is the creation of an External Technical Assistance (ATE) market to provide external support to schools within the context of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP). According to one of the researchers, ‘the problem with this [the privatisation of external support] is that once again a substantive issue for the improvement of the system is given away to the market’ (UR1). One of the advisors recalled his role during the implementation of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP), between 2007 and 2008, when Michelle Bachelet served her first term as president.

[...] when [the Preferential School Subsidy law] was being designed I did, during the initial discussions on these issues, I was very cautious of opening a market in an abrupt manner, because in reality you were putting incentives for the creation of a market [of external technical assistance], because deep down you were putting out there a huge bag of cash available for this market. But it was a non-existent market, I mean, there was nothing (EA1)

Some informants were critical of the policies developed by the right-wing government in office between 2010 and 2014 but are less judgemental about the previous centre-left governments’ policies between 1990 and 2009. In contrast, other informants drew a line to differentiate between political orientation and ideology to explain how policymaking has

been different among recent governments in Chile, and would describe current policy for school improvement as eminently ideological, rather than political.

Look, I do not think it is... well, I do not know if I should say... if it is convenient to speak of political colours, I think it is more of an ideological thing strongly associated with those at the top of the... like at the top of the creation, when the idea of the Quality Agency was first outlined and its different functions during the Piñera government (MO1)

Even though the political orientation of left and right coalitions in Chile seems to be quite similar, as exemplified in their reliance on marketisation and privatisation, the informants suggested that ideological elements would differentiate their policy options. However, ideology was used by the informants as a way of describing the decisions and emphases of individual policymakers and politicians, in contrast to the general political orientation of coalitions, although these two can be compatible. In a sense, the informants were talking about subtle differences inspired in policymaking by what here is called ideology, over a broadly agreed base of marketisation of education. I would argue, then, that what is silenced and obscured in this discussion between political orientation and ideology is the problematic but largely uncontested marketisation and privatisation of State-public education in Chile, as illustrated earlier with the examples of the Shared Support Plan (PAC) and the creation of an Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) market.

#### *Policy text production*

As shown above, political orientation and ideology have a role to play in the development of the current policy framework for school improvement in Chile, particularly on the decisions made by governments and their officials that strengthened the marketisation and privatisation of the school system. Similarly, another theme that emerged from the interviews was how these features became part of specific texts associated with school improvement policy and their subsequent enactment.

From the interviews, two main policy texts were identified as relevant for outlining what constitutes school improvement in Chile. The first is the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) that was passed in 2008 during the first government of president Michelle Bachelet, backed by a centre-left political coalition called Concertación. As one education advisor declared, this was a very important policy text for president Bachelet's government at the time.

Bachelet stepped on the accelerator because [...] any president wants to have an



important landmark in their government programme and SEP is, I believe, effectively the most important education policy in the past 20 years [...] it is a policy that has been discussed since the year 2000, I think. And well, the World Bank was very much involved too, you know?, advising. [The government] decided to implement SEP, and there was a political debate about it, without having a tried and tested implementation design and, basically, a fail proof design [...] schools have had to learn as they go. (EA1)

As the education advisor explained, the Preferential School Subsidy law represents an important milestone in recent education policy in Chile. One university researcher shared this opinion, indicating that the Preferential School Subsidy law ‘changes the notion of improvement from the school [and represents] a paradigmatic change’ (UR1). However, and despite being discussed for several years by policymakers supported by the World Bank, the Preferential School Subsidy law was fast-tracked between mid-2007 and early 2008, due to pressure from secondary students’ demonstrations (see chapter four). The process of producing this policy text involved negotiations between different political groups to get it swiftly approved by parliament. This process was hurried to the point that the ministry itself, and the local authorities and schools had to quickly adapt to the new rules at the start of the 2008 school year.

In contrast, the other main policy text related to school improvement in Chile, the national System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC), is part of a larger legal reform in education. This quality assurance system was put forward in the General Law of Education (LGE) from 2009, where it establishes that the Ministry of Education will create a law to develop such a system. This law was then sent to parliament and passed in 2011, but it was only enacted in 2012. It was discussed over two years, and then has taken many more years to put into practice; as one of the educational advisors commented,

Eh, the thing is that this [the System of Quality Assurance of Education] was very much discussed. It took several years to articulate it as a law. And it was a law that had to be implemented and it has been implemented slowly. There was a lot of work within the ministry to... because it meant a restructuring of the ministry itself. (EA2)

The System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) has a very different implementation history than the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP), possibly because it was part of a larger legal reform, which provided a type of blueprint for policymakers to design the quality assurance system. Additionally, the fact that this policy text modified significantly the role of

the Ministry and the National Council of Education (CNED), due to the introduction of the Quality Agency and Superintendence of Education, meant that it had to be carefully discussed and negotiated before its enactment. In my opinion, pacing the design and implementation of this quality assurance system allowed policymakers, local authority officers and professionals in schools to have time to adapt to the changes in their contexts. At the moment of writing this thesis, between 2015 and 2016, some features of the quality assurance system were still in a trial period and substantial discussion has taken place to solve certain problems related to the role of the Quality Agency in the evaluation and inspection of schools and local authorities.

Despite the different histories of these two key policy texts, they represent a specific trajectory or orientation with regards to how improvement is conceptualised in the context of the longstanding reform of the Chilean school system. As one ministry officer stated,

I think it is a, eh, a reform based on standards that utilises elements of accountability, as a form of control, as mechanism of control [...] It is the school that needs to give account, the system of inspection is absolutely focused on that... (MO1)

Both policy texts have a strong emphasis on the issue of control, and particularly on controlling schools and, to a certain extent, local authorities, by their results. In fact, the text of the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) indicates that both schools and local authorities need to be evaluated against performance standards. However, as a ministry officer (MO1) declared, neither the Ministry of Education nor the Quality Agency had developed specific standards for local authorities.

Consequently, standardisation and accountability are heavily emphasised in both policy texts, suggesting a concern with evaluating school improvement. As one of the university researchers explained, '[the] new institutional framework must be an institutional framework for improving the school system and not to evaluate the improvement, which is not a minor distinction' (UR1). In other words, the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) and the System for Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) set up a policy framework less concerned with the development of capacities for school and system improvement, and instead give more attention to the evaluation of schools' and local authorities' performance as a measure of improvement.

As these two key policy texts mark a trajectory generally oriented towards control and evaluation, their implementation has been difficult, according to some of the informants. For instance, a ministry officer explained that changes introduced by this new institutional

framework have produced inconsistencies and tensions.

Also, making all of this [SEP law] fit in with the functioning of the new law of quality assurance [SAC]. There have been clashes and tensions at different levels. There is at the level of design, there is at the level of implementation in the practice of DEPROV [ministry's provincial departments], but there is also the clash with the internal rationale of SAC, which is a different thing. So, there are inconsistencies, all the time inconsistencies, there are tensions. (MO3)

I think it is interesting to note that the ministry officer referred to three specific tensions. The first is in relation to the mechanism to evaluate schools' performance that the Preferential School Subsidy (SEP) law had established, by introducing the sorting and classification process headed by the Quality Agency. The second relates to the supervisory role of the ministry's provincial departments (DEPROV) over schools, by converting supervisors as Technical Pedagogical Advisors (ATP), and positioning the Superintendence as the only supervisory agency in the school system.

The third tension is less clear and relates to the ministry officer's claim that there were inconsistencies with SAC's internal rationale. Going back to the university researcher's (UR1) comment that the new institutional framework should focus on improving the system rather than evaluating improvement, it might seem as if the design and implementation of SAC is more concerned with establishing evaluation rules for the school system rather than offering a vision for the improvement of the system. In support of this, the local authority officer expressed his opinion about this framework.

The policy itself, I do not know if it is possible to read it as a framework, you know? So, I do not know if there is a clear intention, but rather there are norms, a demand, a law, you know? I do not know if it presents itself as a... which are the elements that make this [system improvement] move forward. Therefore, there is not a clear intention beyond the obligation, let us say, of getting all children to learn, of quality and equity. Those are elements of policy, of principle, of social intention of constructing a society or constructing a system; no, no... there is not a construction of a system. There is a guideline of how we are going to invest resources instead, you know? (LO1)

Thus, it appears as if the policy framework is explicit about the issue of how the school system is evaluated, but less so on how the school system would be further developed and improved. Nevertheless, the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) and the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) lay out two key elements in relation to school and

system improvement: performance-based accountability and school autonomy. Interestingly, these two elements – in addition to market and choice policies – constitute the core of the global education reform movement (GERM) and the reform agenda of international agencies.

Standards are particularly relevant in both policy texts. The Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) determines the evaluation of schools' performance based on their achievement of learning standards measured by SIMCE. Later the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) took charge of the evaluation of schools based on learning standards and introduced a set of non-compulsory, indicative performance standards associated with management and administration processes in schools.

In the current policy framework for school improvement, then, learning standards are the keystone to evaluating schools' performance. As a ministry officer explained, 'with the learning standards a high-stakes classification is produced, which can lead up to school closure' (MO1). The classification to which the ministry officer is referring to is the annual sorting and classification of schools into performance categories, made by the Quality Agency. As explained in chapter four, this sorting process has high-stakes consequences for school classified as Insufficient for four consecutive years, as they can eventually face closure.

Meanwhile, indicative performance standards 'are used for two things: one is to help school leaders to develop an institutional diagnosis, determine goals and management strategies; and are also the framework for the Quality Agency visits and to do a management evaluation [of schools]' (EA2). Moreover, these indicative performance standards are 'guidelines that are used to evaluate, support and orientate schools' (MO1), particularly those classified in the Medium-Low and Insufficient performance categories.

These two sets of standards are written into the policy texts as crucial elements to evaluate the outcomes (learning standards) and processes (performance standards) of schools, but it is not clear how they would go beyond this evaluative and self-evaluative exercise and promote improvement. Furthermore, by linking this evaluation to the measurement of learning outcomes through Chile's national examination (SIMCE), school improvement is reduced to improved test scores; as one researcher declared,

I think... I would say that it has got to do with the issue of measurement more than anything. I mean, starting with these policies, I would say, the measurement in schools has increased to know how are they doing with their learning outcomes and based on that see what goals should be set to improve learning [achievement.] (UR2)

To meet these improvement goals, that is, to improve students' achievement in SIMCE, the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) and the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) give emphasis to a second key element in these policy texts: school autonomy. According to the informants, autonomy is expressed in ambiguous terms in these policy texts. For instance, some informants declared that the intention of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) 'was that schools would have more autonomy to determine their improvement lines [strategies]' (UR2), but despite this 'the normative structure of [the Chilean system], in the legal structure, is the local authority who makes the decisions' (EA1). Similarly, the operation of the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) based on the previously described standards seems to encourage schools to take charge of their own improvement strategy. In other words, school autonomy is presented in SEP and SAC as the devolution of control over the improvement process to the local level (schools and local authorities), albeit with certain restrictions; as one ministry officer explained,

Then, if the local power [local authorities and schools] had real power; as long as local power does not have real power, that [school autonomy] is never going to happen and the only ones who would be able to make more decisions and be effectively autonomous are those [schools] with good educational outcomes, because they are not going to have the [Quality] Agency on top of them, they are not going to have the ministry on top of them, they will not have anyone on top of them. That means, those [schools] showing progress and getting the results will be able to make decisions about what [external technical support programmes] to let in and what not, and will have much more freedom. And those [schools] with bad results, *they are toast*. (MO3)

I think the expression used by ministry officer (*están fritos / they are toast*) to describe what would happen to schools with low performance is quite telling; these schools would feel the increasing pressure of the sanctions enforced by SEP and SAC and see their autonomy restricted until they find a way to improve. It appears as if this notion of autonomy introduced in these policy texts is subject to specific conditions. Once again, the main condition seems to be providing evidence of the school's effectiveness in terms of student achievement in SIMCE. If schools cannot provide such evidence, it appears as if their autonomy to make decisions about their internal operation would be restricted by the Quality Agency and the Ministry. Another ministry officer, who was directly involved in the design and implementation of the System for Quality Assurance of Education (SAC), reaffirmed this view about autonomy,

Myself being inside the system and in the design of the whole quality assurance system [SAC], I see very clearly this false autonomy that I was telling you about, I mean, deep down this is about, sure, giving you the freedom, I mean the autonomy not the freedom, to... I mean, I tell you where you are [regarding performance] but you see how to improve... but that is super, it is super ambiguous. So, I think it is... I think it is super idealistic to think, regarding this, that we have an opportunity to change the, the... the focus, to take more seriously that autonomy. To give it more... to make it more certain, make it effectively real, and that schools can effectively progress a little bit more according to their specific context. (MO1)

Interestingly, for the ministry officer, what the policy texts portray is a *false autonomy* in the sense that it appears as if schools can make their decisions about improvement in an independent way, although it is not clear what capacities and conditions schools have to make such decisions. One of the advisors espoused a similar idea when commenting on the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP).

The spirit of the [SEP] law was that the school had autonomy, you know? But the spirit of the law is a cloud, I mean, right? A great deal of policies implemented in Chile fail because of that, because the law has a spirit and anticipates certain things, you know? But reality is completely different, you know? (EA1)

The difference between the *spirit* of the law – or its intention – and the practical conditions where the law is implemented is what accounts for policy failure, in the opinion of this advisor. This argument follows a similar rationale to what the ministry officers above expressed regarding the difference between *intended* and *real* school autonomy within the policy framework for school improvement. However, an issue that is not explicitly – or even implicitly – questioned by the informants is the fact that *real* autonomy might not be enough for schools to produce the improvement that is demanded of them. In other words, I would argue that, by emphasising what counts as autonomy in the policy texts and policy framework is *false* autonomy, the informants are discursively transforming *real* autonomy into an unproblematic issue for school improvement purposes; if schools have *real* autonomy then improvement will happen. This assumption seems to be sustained by the belief that autonomy would enable schools to engage with the opportunities and demands of their social context, thus producing meaningful improvement. However, there is also the policy context to consider, which in the case of Chile is heavily influenced by the presence of standards and accountability.

Now, in the case of the two policy texts that I have explored here, SEP and SAC, the informants do not address this issue of how *real* autonomy would foster improvement within the Chilean policy context. Instead, they concentrate on the fact that, in the current policy framework, school autonomy is restricted by accountability mechanisms; as a researcher reflected,

[...] the other mistake that we are making as a country is siding completely, I think, [with the move] towards the accountability of schools [...] deep down the accountability for the educational process or for the improvement of it goes far broader than just the head teacher and the school, you know? (UR1)

The worry of the researcher was that, instead of facilitating the conditions for schools to develop their autonomy, the current policy framework emphasises accountability as driver for improvement. Moreover, the researcher saw this as a mistake and warned against holding head teachers and schools exclusively accountable for improvement, (or lack thereof). In the same line, a ministry officer declared,

I mean, the strongest critics of this accountability system that is being developed in Chile and of the whole quality assurance law [SAC], eh, are those who observe that all of this is, deep down, transformed into a tremendous emphasis on control... on control, sanctions to the school, auditing, control, inspection, evaluation of the school. (MO1)

#### *Transiting from policy to practice*

Chile's policy framework for school improvement appears to be caught between two opposites, systemic control and school autonomy, suggesting that within the policy framework there is no clear notion of what improvement is and how it is produced. In this sense, according to a researcher, 'in Chile there needs to be a serious discussion about our school improvement model' (UR1) because the emphasis of the Chilean policy framework is skewed towards standardisation and accountability despite claiming that '[t]he system is based on respect and promotion of the autonomy of schools' (General Law of Education N° 20.370, Art. 3, letter d). Many informants were concerned about the effects that this way of approaching school improvement is producing at the local level, that is, in the transition from the policy framework's intention to the practical dimension of school improvement in Chile.

Standards play a key role in the policy framework as drivers of improvement, by signposting the goals schools need to reach (learning standards) and the aspects schools can influence

(performance standards) to reach such goals; as an advisor explained,

The rationale for [performance standards] to be indicative is as follows, if you set up a system with accountability, where the school is responsible for its outcomes, you cannot boss it around because then you do not leave any space of freedom... they [the school] might say, well I did everything you told me and I still got bad results. Either you control by results or you control the processes. And in Chile we are controlling by results. (EA2)

This quotation addresses how the standards and accountability mechanisms written into the policy texts are expected to play out in practice, suggesting that a choice was made to *control* by results to balance accountability and autonomy. The same advisor explained that accountability mechanisms, ‘based on data that the school itself collected in their self-evaluation plus the conversation during the visit [of the Quality Agency]’ (EA1), would show schools where they should focus their improvement strategy. The advisor added that, ‘[schools] need to look for support afterwards because resources have been given for schools to look for who can support them. They can choose for it to be from the ministry or private’ (EA1).

Thus, in practice, school autonomy is exercised by using especially allocated funding and resources from the Preferential School Subsidy (SEP) law to develop a school improvement plan (PME), with the option of hiring external technical support to help them design and implement their plan. As explained in chapter four, external technical support to schools is usually provided by Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) agencies, and the provincial department’s Technical Pedagogical Advisors (ATP). In both cases, but especially regarding ATE agencies, external technical support seems to be functional to the idea of giving schools the autonomy to determine their own improvement strategy, to fulfil the demands of national accountability mechanisms. But as schools’ improvement needs tend to be diverse, so are the types of support that are offered to them. For instance, a researcher explained,

I think that the offer that the ATE have is very heterogeneous, there is everything. There are institutions with a certain reputation in the area [advising schools], then you have teams of people who knew something about ATEs but did not have any reputation as institutions, and even a school teacher who knows some literacy method and he sells it. So, I believe that in this sense the offer is very heterogeneous. (UR2)

Although the diversity of external support services offered to schools might be considered positive in principle, produces a complex issue when put into practice. For instance, schools



have little to no guidelines to decide whether a specific educational technical assistance (ATE) programme or strategy is better than others; as the local authority officer explained ‘many [ATE] services are offered to schools, and there is no clarity regarding which is better, so everything is left to the customer, so to speak’ (LO1). In this case, the school and its local authority are the *customers*, and the *offeror* is the ATE agency. Nevertheless, this is far from a horizontal relationship; as one advisor explained,

I think that here, as I was telling you, the ball is on the offeror’s court, the offeror is the one who knows... the offeror in many cases knows better about what he does than the school [...] in fact, many times it is an unequal relationship and... and it is complicated, it is unequal, they can fool you, you know? Or in fact, an offeror might not feel like he needs to make a, let’s say, costly adaptation of its [advisory] model, and rather ends up imposing a model that is not necessarily what... what was required, you know? (EA1)

In summary, the improvement model that the policy framework is putting forward is, in practice, closely linked to the relationship – or perhaps, tension – between national accountability mechanisms and local school autonomy. The way the policy framework aims to resolve this relationship is by allocating resources that would enable schools to exercise their autonomy to meet the performance outcomes that are demanded of them. Among other things, these resources can be used for hiring external technical support, mainly from private providers. This configures a model of improvement that was described by a researcher as *self-improving*.

In a self-improving model, in the sense of an improvement model where the school is empowered to make decisions regarding how to improve, I think it [external support] is key. I think it is consistent with an autonomous improvement model, and with societies, with states with weak support policies. (UR1)

I would argue that taking the self-improving school as the model of improvement in Chile rests on the assumption that schools can improve if they set themselves to do so. By contrast, this would mean that those schools not improving have simply decided not to. One of the advisors further explained this idea,

Look, I think that there are self-motivated schools and they are improving, and they are looking at themselves and they are in an improvement path; but there are schools that are enclosed and do not have much conscience of change and there needs to be something that would induce them to change [...] there needs

to be a trigger [...] things are much more complex, it cannot be one thing. On one side, there needs to be pressure and on other there needs to be support, but if there is too much support and there is no interest from within [the school] the support is wasted, nothing happens with the support. (EA2)

This advisor illustrated her view on how the policy framework should be put into practice, emphasising the importance of *inducing* change in those schools that are stagnant through a mixture of (accountability) pressure and (external) support, despite other informants mistrusting this policy orientation or model for school improvement and warning against its undesired consequences, such as placing incentives for good performance and penalties for poor performance. This resonates with what a ministry officer described when talking about school autonomy in relation to schools' performance in SIMCE; '[schools] showing progress and getting the results will be able to make decisions [...], and will have much more freedom. And those [schools] with bad results, *they are toast.*' (MO3).

Furthermore, considering that schools would be interested in getting good SIMCE scores, external technical support is expected and will continue to be expected to contribute to what a researcher described as tactical improvement: 'in the end, what is known as tactical improvement, it is like a feature of the [Chilean] system, because all incentives are moving in that direction. And there is no reason for external support not to move there too' (UR1).

### **Theory of change: How does the policy framework promote improvement?**

The design and implementation of the Chilean policy framework for school improvement represents an intricate and complex phenomenon that can be read both as a text and as a discourse (Ball, 1993). As a *text* in the sense of written policies that are produced within specific agendas that aim to exert a certain degree of control regarding how the policy should be read, and as a *discourse* in the sense that policies, by themselves and in conjunction with other policies, produce knowledge and truth (Ball, 1994; Taylor, 1997). The study of the Chilean policy framework sheds some light into how texts and discourses represent and constitute what school improvement is and how it is produced. However, this is rarely a straightforward analytical exercise, as Ball (2015, p. 311) clearly states,

policies are 'contested', mediated and differentially represented by different actors in different contexts (policy as text), but on the other hand, at the same time produced and formed by taken-for-granted and implicit knowledges and assumptions about the world and ourselves (policy as discourse).

Regarding this way of approaching the study of education policy, it is important to indicate

that this case suggests that policy texts and discourses about school improvement are closely linked to political issues that are specific of the Chilean context. In this sense, the notion of *political culture* is useful to explore the long-standing features of the Chilean school system that underpin the decision to introduce certain elements into school improvement policies. Political culture is understood as long-standing political values, attitudes and behaviours that are characteristic of groups that live in a specific geographical context, which describe how and why certain issues dominate the policy agenda (Louis and van Velzen, 2012).

In the studied case, political culture can be described in terms of the marketisation and privatisation of the school system in Chile, which is crucial to make sense of the elements that the informants highlighted regarding the production of policy texts, as well as those issues that were silenced. Marketisation and privatisation constitute the broadly agreed base where governments of the past 25 years in Chile have anchored their education policies, and it is usually associated in international literature with neoliberal and neoconservative discourses (Apple, 2006). The introduction of marketisation and privatisation in mass education systems aims to promote autonomy by devolving decision-making powers to the local level, blurring the lines between state-public and private education to make schools more responsive to the market (Whitty and Power, 2000). To do so, these education quasi-markets atomise the control of schools to the local level, provide incentives for private participation in different areas of schooling, promote and foster parental choice of schools, and introduce accountability mechanisms to steer the system at arm's length (Gordon and Whitty, 1997; Whitty, 1997).

Interestingly, the Chilean school system reflects these elements associated with quasi-markets in education in other parts of the world (Bellei and Vanni, 2015) configuring a global education reform movement (Sahlberg, 2006). In this sense, the case of the Chilean policy framework for school improvement shows a stable political culture, and differences arise when nuanced decisions are made in relation to introduce more or less regulation to the educational market. Furthermore, the presence of two of the three inspirational elements of the global education reform movement described by Sahlberg (2006), namely the introduction of learning standards and consequential accountability, is notable in the Chilean case. In addition, the policy framework for school improvement also claims to promote school autonomy as a way of mobilising schools towards taking up the responsibility for their improvement process.

Thus, it seems as if the rationale for school improvement produced by these two key policy texts that make up the policy framework is in a constant tension between two opposite

trajectories. One trajectory seems to point towards evaluation and control based on learning and performance standards and accountability. The other seems to point towards school autonomy and suggests a less standardised way of addressing the process of improvement in schools. What the informants suggested in their interviews is that this tension is unbalanced and skewed towards evaluation and control, which would be generating effects at the school and local authority levels, such as tactical improvement and increased disadvantage. Furthermore, while accountability mechanisms are clearly written into and explained in policy texts, it is less clear how autonomy is expected to be taken up by schools and local authorities. In fact, it appears as if school autonomy is used as a rhetorical argument to validate that schools should be accountable for educational outcomes.

This issue is explored critically by several authors in terms of the process of *fabrication* that schools engage in, and the reductive representation of schools as successful/failing, or good/bad, produced by an effective school improvement approach (Ball, 1997a; Maguire *et al.*, 2011; Perryman, 2009; Tomlinson, 1997; Wrigley, 2004). For instance, schools subject to evaluation processes, such as the one described in this case study, tend to fabricate a representation of themselves according to accountability mechanisms that operate as disciplinary technologies (Ball, 1997a), making sure that 'it can be seen to be performing well across a range of different measures and indicators' (Maguire *et al.*, 2011, p. 4). However, as Perryman (2009, p. 629) argues, '[l]earning to perform the good school can be damaging' as schools are encouraged to hide their problems and avoid being labelled as a bad or failing school within a performative regime. This clearly echoes what some informants identified as a problematic effect of the current policy model of school improvement in Chile: tactical improvement.

The notion of failing schools that emerges from this performative regime is also a contentious issue within the school improvement community (Fink, 1999; Lodge, 1998; Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2005; Stoll and Myers, 1998). In response, the literature on school improvement has emphasised the need to provide support to schools for them to build the necessary capacity for improvement (Earl and Lee, 2000; Harris, 2001a; King and Newmann, 2001). In the case of Chile, both the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) and the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) attempt to promote capacity building by providing support consisting of professional, material and financial resources that are allocated to schools for the design and implementation of their own improvement strategies, advancing the notion of a self-improving school.

Interestingly, the notion of a self-improving school is usually paired, within the literature on

effective school improvement, with ideas of a self-managing school (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; Greany, 2014; Hargreaves, 2010). The self-managing school is one that has the devolved administrative authority to make decisions about the allocation of resources within a framework of national policies and guidelines (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988). To become self-improving, though, a school needs to reach an adequate level of self-management, built upon strong school leadership and professional capacity, that would assist schools in devising local solutions to local problems (Caldwell, 2008; Hargreaves, 2010). This pass from self-managing to self-improving has been taken even further with the notion of a self-transforming school, which is projected as one that is free from external control, in return for its good performance, seeking promising innovations in a proactive way (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013). Nevertheless, this approach has been strongly criticised for promoting the privatisation of school education, introducing and enhancing a competitive culture among schools, and for holding schools accountable for educational outcomes in disregard of the social and political conditions of the education system (Angus, 1994; Smyth, 2011).

Summarising, what the case study of the policy framework for school improvement in Chile shows is a decisive turn towards an accountability-based, autonomy-driven self-improving school system as a theory of change. The theory of change rests on the assumption that an appropriate framework of performance-based accountability and an administrative devolution of decision-making powers about resource allocation to schools would suffice, within the context of marketisation and privatisation of education. Furthermore, this theory of change considers that improvement consists of meeting national learning and performance standards, and it is produced when schools develop local solutions to local problems with the help of specialised external technical support. The following three chapters offer case studies of external technical support programmes that, from three different theoretical approaches, attempt to help schools improve within the rationale of this theory of change.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CASE STUDY ONE: SCHOOLS NETWORK PROJECT (PROYECTO REDES)

The Schools Network project was an initiative developed by a renowned university in central Chile. The university is known for its involvement in initial teacher education, continuous professional development and postgraduate programmes, and in educational research, which is central to its mission as a higher education institution. In this context, the university established a multidisciplinary department dedicated to providing external technical support services to schools, local authorities and education professionals in general. This department functioned between 2008 and 2013 providing consultancy services as an Educational Technical Assistance (ATE) agency. However, due to changes in the internal policies of the university regarding consultancy and knowledge transference, this department was dissolved and some of its permanent staff were relocated into different academic departments.

The department consisted of a small team of academics and professionals mainly from the Psychology and Education programmes at the university. According to the specific needs of expertise to carry out certain projects, the department would hire other professionals from within and outside the university on temporary contracts. After graduating from Psychology at this university, I joined the department's permanent staff in 2008, as an advisor for schools first, and project manager later. I interrupted my work between 2009 and 2010 while studying a master programme at the Institute of Education. I then re-joined the team in 2011 until I started my doctoral studies at the Institute in 2012.

Most of the work done by the department involved providing external technical support to municipal schools and local authorities funded with the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP), but it was also involved in government-led initiatives, such as school leadership preparation programmes and science teaching in early childhood education. An example of the type of external technical support projects run by the department was the topic of my master's dissertation (González, 2010), where I studied a professional development and individual support project for primary teachers to implement assessment for learning strategies in Spanish and Mathematics in two municipal primary schools. I did a focused case study of one of these schools, inquiring how did the relationship between external advisors and school staff influenced the school's internal organisational processes.

The case study showed that the department's external technical support approach was characterised by providing on-site support and advice, and adapting its intervention to the needs of the school and teachers. In fact, the project design was continuously negotiated and

re-negotiated with school leaders and teachers during its implementation. This approach created several tensions between external advisors and school staff, in response to the expectation of developing teachers' individual competencies (in this case, regarding assessment for learning), while aiming to change organisational conditions to initiate a process of improvement. Finally, teachers, school leaders and local authority officers remarked that the department's approach was different from other providers of educational technical assistance (ATE) in that its professionals were available to negotiate and be flexible, allowing space for them to exercise autonomy over their improvement process. Nevertheless, no assurances were made regarding the impact of this project in terms of improved practice and outcomes in the school.

These findings illustrate the department's approach to providing external technical support, which they developed in similar projects. This contributed to gain a positive reputation among schools and local authorities in their region, which motivated the local authority of the case analysed in this chapter to contact the department in 2012 to develop a network of schools. According to the interview with the local authority officer, the idea of setting up a network came up as they had tried other strategies but none had succeeded as expected. As a result, they decided to hire the department, also knowing about their involvement in a similar network initiative in another district, which I describe in the next section.

The district where this case takes place is a large urban city in central Chile and its local authority is a municipal corporation, which operates independently from other municipal departments. This municipal corporation is responsible for the administration of 41 primary and secondary schools, four special needs schools, and four early childhood centres. Given that municipal corporations are not subject to the internal bureaucracy of municipal governments, they have autonomy to hire support staff when necessary, facilitating the development of district-wide initiatives such as the network. At the time of the implementation of the network initiative, this local authority had a small team of professionals who liaised with schools for specific programmes (school meals, psychosocial interventions, special education needs) or other more general issues (enrolment, administrative support). There was not a specific initiative related to school improvement, but the local authority provided guidance to head teachers and their leadership teams regarding the design and implementation of improvement plans (PME) and the hiring of external technical support from ATE agencies with the resources from the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP).

## Programme design

The Schools Network project was first developed by the university department in the city of Lebu, southern Chile, in 2011. The department was hired by the local authority, a Municipal Department of Education Administration (DAEM), to develop skills in head teachers to support professional development through learning conversations in their schools. During this intervention, both external advisors and head teachers realised that there were several issues that could be tackled collaboratively across schools rather than individually within schools.

The experience of developing this first network is documented in the work of Campos, Salinas and Werner (2012), who were active members of this initiative. They acknowledge the influence of evidence about networking from international comparative studies of countries with good performance in international tests (Barber, Whelan and Clark, 2010) and specialised literature that proposes networking and collaboration as a new phase of school improvement (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006; Katz and Earl, 2010; Muijs, 2010; Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003).

According to Campos, Salinas and Werner (2012) six schools met on a monthly-basis during 2011 to identify a common focus to approach as a group. During these meetings, head teachers, curriculum leaders, teachers, local authority officers and external advisors worked together analysing data, reaching conclusions and making decisions, in what the authors called the *professionalisation* of the network. However, there were certain social and emotional aspects that had to be approached before moving to professionalisation, acting as a kind of cathartic process for participants, offloading their frustrations with their work conditions. Once those issues were addressed, the network was ready to move on to discuss how to improve practice in their schools, gathering evidence and sharing professional knowledge. Finally, the authors suggest that the process of collaborative inquiry developed facilitated the access to the professional knowledge of each of the participants in the network

In 2012, the local authority of the case analysed in this chapter, a Municipal Corporation, contacted the university department to replicate the Lebu network initiative in their district. The local authority decided to set up a pilot experience with a group of primary schools working in a network with the assistance of the department, and initially assigned two professionals to coordinate this initiative; eventually, only one of them continued working with the network due to internal re-organisation within the local authority.

The initiative consisted, then, of a network of schools that aimed to develop a collective



improvement strategy based on a common focus. The local authority sent an open invitation to many primary schools from the district to participate in this initiative, to which six schools responded positively. Some of the people interviewed said that this invitation was made to all primary schools in the district, while others indicate that it was only to a specific number. The local authority officer indicated that they invited around 10 schools that met specific criteria: recent low performance in SIMCE (but not necessarily historical), low number of external interventions (such as Ministry or district programmes), and school leaders who seemed 'keen to be more flexible, not so normalising' (Local Authority Officer). The selection of schools for the project came across as controversial considering that the reasons for being considered part of this project were not made explicit to schools in the beginning, which might have influenced the decision of these schools to participate and set different expectations about the network.

The university department role was to provide support in setting up the network, based on its previous experience in Lebu. In the first stage, they held a series of monthly workshop sessions where at least three representatives from each school – typically the head teacher, curriculum leader and a classroom teacher – met with the professionals from the department and two local authority professionals. This stage went on from July to December 2012.

According to a university advisor, during these workshops, they helped the six schools to identify a common improvement focus. This was through a process of data gathering, collective data analysis, and shared decision-making between schools. The schools brought to these sessions data such as enrolment and attendance, SIMCE scores and achievement levels, analyses of lesson plans, students' work and assessment instruments, among others. During the first workshop sessions, advisors facilitated the organisation of evidence from schools, and guided them through the analysis process. One of the main challenges reported by one of the advisors at this stage was to develop sufficient trust among school teams to show and share their data and expose their challenges, to find common improvement needs.

The leadership of these workshop was intended to progressively pass from the advisors to school leaders and teachers, who organised themselves into three task-groups to cover the functions of the network: the leadership team, in charge of coordination and communication within the network, consisting of mostly head teachers; the research team, in charge of collecting data and bringing information and other inputs, consisting mostly of curriculum leaders; and the resource team, in charge of the necessary logistics of the network activities, consisting of mostly teachers. It is striking the way people were grouped in these teams, replicating the way they are organised in their own schools. Interestingly, by the second year

of the network, only head teachers and some curriculum leaders were actively participating in network meetings.

After six sessions, in December 2012, the group defined and agreed on a shared focus for improvement: the development of higher-order cognitive skills in mathematics for children in second and fourth grades. Students in these grades are tested annually in SIMCE for reading, writing, and mathematics. The network also agreed to develop a training programme and provide classroom support for mathematics teachers in second and fourth grades during the 2013 school year, starting in March. As it was originally planned, for this second stage, the university advisors withdrew almost completely from the initiative and representatives of the six schools began to lead the network, supported only by one local authority officer. In January 2013, the schools initiated periodic meetings to implement their work plan. The meetings addressed operational and organisational issues, mainly related to the linkage of the network's collective improvement strategy with the schools' improvement plans (PME), the requirements from the Ministry of Education, and the expectations of the municipal corporation.

In summary, this initiative represents a networking and collaboration approach to external support, as described in chapter five, where a group of schools are summoned to exchange practice and work together towards improvement. In this case, the Schools Network project aimed for schools to expand their individual capacity by working together towards a common aim and implementing a collective improvement strategy. Additionally, this group of schools received support from university advisors as external agents in the first stage of the process, and then were expected to develop ownership of the network initiative.

### **Researching the programme**

My initial contact with the network was through former colleagues from the university department. I first learned about the idea of developing this initiative while I was preparing for my fieldwork in late 2012. I contacted the project manager and asked him to help me get permission from the local authority and schools to study their network during the first semester of 2013.

Between December 2012 and January 2013, and later in March 2013, I had several online and face-to-face meetings with the Head of Education and support professionals from the local authority, accompanied by the project manager from the university department, to explain the aim and research strategy of my study. After obtaining clearance from the local authority, one of the university advisors got me in contact with the six schools participating

in the network. I met with the head teachers of these schools in late March 2013 and invited them to participate in the study. Three of the six schools showed interest in the research and were willing to be interviewed and observed; the other three head teachers agreed to collaborate with me but argued that they could not afford the time for interviews or observations in their schools. This polite response was perhaps related to the fact that they were not interested in the study but since I accessed the network through my colleagues from the university department and the local authority, these head teachers did not want to seem uncooperative. I acknowledged the power issues involved in this episode and made clear to the head teachers that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point.

Between April and June 2013, I studied the activities of the network, inquiring into the perspective and practices of the three self-selected schools in relation to the collective aim of the network and their individual challenges and needs. The data collection was made on-site in these schools, and consisted of interviews and observations.

I interviewed head teachers, curriculum leaders and teachers involved in the training programme run by the network individually in their own schools, usually in the head teacher's office, teachers' lounge or in classrooms after children had gone home. In addition, I interviewed one university advisor and a local authority officer, both directly involved in the implementation of the network. These interviews aimed to obtain information on how the first stage of the project (2012) was carried out, and their perception on the way the schools were implementing the second stage in 2013.

Similarly, in each school I observed one teachers' meeting led by the senior management team, to get an understanding of their internal context and obtain information about their improvement challenges and needs. Also, I observed two network meetings attended by head teachers and curriculum leaders, and two training sessions attended by teachers. The aim of these observations was to obtain data about the collective action of the network and implementation of the training plan. Unfortunately, training sessions turned out to be less informative about the network than anticipated given their focus (strategies to develop higher-order cognitive skills in mathematics) and organisation of the sessions (individual and groups-by-school work).

### **Participant schools**

The six schools involved in the network were primary municipal schools, offering K-8 courses in disadvantaged urban areas of the district. These schools showed average or below-

average recent performance in SIMCE, compared to national and district results; however, there was not a clear pattern of decline or improvement for this group of schools. Additionally, these schools had low enrolment, with the lowest number of students being 132 and the highest 400 in 2013.

From these six schools, I studied the programme with a sample of three schools that voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. In each of these schools, I requested the participation of the head teacher, curriculum leader, and asked them to suggest one mathematics teacher involved in the training programme to be interviewed by me. Table 4 summarises general characteristics of these schools and the participants involved in the study.

*Table 4. Sample of Schools, their characteristics and participants interviewed – Schools Network Project*

<b>School Pseudonym</b>	<b>School Characteristics (school year 2013)</b>	<b>Participants (interviewed)</b>
<b>Eastern Primary School (EP)</b>	15 teachers, three school leaders, and 208 students.	- Head Teacher - Curriculum Leader - First Grade Teacher - Mathematics Teacher (third, fifth and eighth grade) - Special Needs Teacher
<b>Central Primary School (CP)</b>	18 teachers, two school leaders, and 215 students.	- Head Teacher - Fourth Grade Teacher/ Curriculum Leader (part time)- Second Grade Teacher
<b>Western Primary School (WP)</b>	17 teachers, two school leaders, and 132 students.	- Head Teacher - Curriculum Leader - Second Grade Teacher - Fourth Grade Teacher

The first school is Eastern Primary School (EP), located in a disadvantaged neighbourhood to the east of the district, which is somewhat isolated from the rest of the city. In Eastern Primary worked 15 teachers, and the senior management team consisted of three people: the head teacher, curriculum leader and discipline leader. The school's performance in SIMCE had been inconsistent over the years, but often below or close to the national average. In 2013, the school had 208 students attending grades K-8 but the school building was big enough to have at least twice the number of children. The school's enrolment had been gradually declining for several years, in part due to its location and the fact that families from

surrounding neighbourhoods do not know about the school. The head teacher had tried to tackle this situation with information campaigns about services offered by the school (school meals, special needs education, and extracurricular activities) but mostly by offering free transportation for students.

The second school is Central Primary School (CP), located near the city centre in a neighbourhood of middle-income families, although few of those families had school-age children. In this school worked 18 teachers and two school leaders: a head teacher and a curriculum leader. Central Primary had a very good reputation among the community and it was recognised as one of the best schools in the district; however, the head teacher recognised that in the past few years the school's performance in SIMCE had stagnated around the national average and that its enrolment had reduced. In 2013, the school had 215 students, whereas two years before it was close to 250. The people interviewed in the school indicated that the shortage of school-age children living in the area and the incorporation of students from other neighbourhoods, some of whom come from low-income families, had affected their results. This brought some internal conflicts between teachers and parents, and a general concern for students' behaviour in the school.

The third school is Western Primary School (WP), located in a highly-populated neighbourhood to the west of the district, where there were several other municipal and private-subsidised primary and secondary schools. There were 17 teachers in Western Primary, in addition to the head teacher and the curriculum leader. Interestingly, in a period of five to six years before the study, there had been three changes of head teacher in the school, all of them appointed as interim by the local authority. This was the school with one of the lowest enrolments in the district. In 2013, there were 132 students in the school but often during the school year some students moved to schools in the same area, while others sporadically moved in. This situation had an impact on class-sizes in Western Primary, which were small, from 12 students in fourth grade to as few as nine in eighth grade. In addition, the performance of the school in SIMCE had varied greatly over the years but it had consistently been on or below national and district averages. Class-sizes and the withdrawal and late enrolment of students during the school year could have explained the variation and low results. As SIMCE is reported as the average score of students in each grade, small class sizes lead to greater statistical variation. Moreover, the late enrolment of students in grades being tested in SIMCE means that most of the class did not have the chance to see some of the curriculum contents for the relevant grade by the time they sit for the test.

## **Programme implementation in schools**

During the three months of data collection in schools, and during network meetings and activities, I concentrated on learning about the schools' internal needs and the network's collective challenges. Through the interviews with school leaders, teachers and external agents (local authority and university), I familiarised myself with the main characteristics and pressing issues of these schools, and how those characteristics and pressing issues were – or were not – related to their participation in the network. Similarly, when I observed network meetings and activities, I focused on the topics they covered and how these were addressed. Therefore, the research process was intended to reflect how a school would be supported in its need for improvement by this network initiative. I purposefully decided to concentrate the study on the process by which the network offered – or not – alternative ways for individual schools to address their needs, with less emphasis on investigating the process of setting up the network.

The themes that follow in this section emerged from the data produced from these two sites: schools and the network. These themes address how the three schools that agreed to be part of the study defined their challenges and formulated their needs for improvement, in what ways they expected to be supported by the network, and in what ways the network activities did or did not attend to their needs. Thus, the themes that follow deal with (i) schools' internal strengths and challenges; (ii) the external pressure points over schools and the local authority; and how this group developed a practice of (iii) networking at a distance.

### *Schools' internal strengths and challenges*

The three schools that participated in the study presented specific challenges, some of which prompted the invitation from the local authority to participate in the network initiative. Although the criteria for this invitation were clear for the local authority officer, people in schools declared other reasons for their involvement in the network, in relation to their specific improvement needs. I will elaborate on these differences in the section about *networking at a distance*, but now I want to explore some ideas expressed by the participants about schools' internal strengths and challenges.

An element that was common among these schools was the perception of a positive internal climate and good relationships with their colleagues. They described their schools as welcoming places and this was a positive motivation to work there.

When I got here [the school], the human quality of the group that I found was very good. So, in a week I already felt as if I had been here for ten years

(Mathematics Teacher, EP).

This school has always been recognised for having good interpersonal relationships among teachers. We get along, since we are so few. There is a good relationship between teachers. School leaders too (Second Grade Teacher, CP)

However, this is not necessarily the case for all municipal schools in Chile. Usually, municipal schools are considered difficult places to work in, with many conflictive relationships between students, parents, teachers and leaders. Teachers from these three schools were aware of this and that made them value even more the positive climate of their schools.

Look, before coming as substitute teacher to this school I was in other [municipal] schools and if I compare it is very different... bigger schools, different types of children, but not here, here is excellent, I love this school [...] I like the environment with the children and the working environment with teachers too, because there is few of us but we are very close [...] in other schools I have been at is not like this. There are 20, 25 teachers, and they make groups by affinity. Here, we are all united. (Second Grade Teacher, WP)

It seemed like the small number of teachers – and students, as well – in these three schools contributed to this positive perception about their internal relationship and environment, despite low enrolment being linked to school failure in the Chilean education market. Moreover, no one explicitly addressed the fact that small class sizes can have an important influence on the fluctuation of performance in standardised tests, such as SIMCE, which might affect how the school is perceived within this market.

For some people, the positive environment and relationship among teachers could be extended to their relationship with students. In Eastern Primary, for example, the perceived relationship with students was positive because, as one teacher put it, ‘there is a different type of child here [in the school]. I think they still respect the teacher, much more than in other schools’ (SEN Teacher, EP). Similarly, the curriculum leader at the same school explained:

I have noticed that the way of communicating with children is very close, it is not like “boys, get in line...!” No... it is very familial, I liked that a lot [...] in fact, the violence among children here is nothing compared with children from other schools. There are disruptive children but I have not seen violent and aggressive children (Curriculum Leader, EP)

Again, it seemed that people working in Eastern Primary believed that they could be working

in far worse places, where there is conflict with colleagues and students. Nevertheless, most leaders and teachers had a negative perception of students' behaviour in the other two schools. This situation was fuelled by the generalised problem of decreasing student enrolment in the municipal sector, to which I will return in the section on *external pressure points*. Central Primary, for instance, used to be oversubscribed and could implement certain selection mechanisms, but it was now in a position where they could not refuse any applicants, including those with behavioural problems.

So, in that sense the situation has changed, but that is the way it is; we cannot reject [refuse] a child due to behaviour, because some children have come to the school with less-than-good behaviour, and you know that spoils, it spoils the group... and parents, some of them take their child away because they say "look, this child is causing trouble" And, what can we do about it? We cannot expel him, so there we have a problem too (Second Grade Teacher, CP)

Students' behaviour was perceived as a critical issue not only for the individual child but also for the rest of the group and, eventually, for parents' satisfaction with the school. At this point, I think it is relevant to note that the Superintendence of Education began monitoring expulsion and selection processes in schools in 2011. The Superintendence applies administrative sanctions and fines to schools and local authorities if they do not follow the approved procedure for dealing with these issues, which should be agreed with the school community. Similarly, since 2008, municipal primary schools cannot refuse applicants, unless oversubscribed, or use any type of academic selection criteria up to sixth grade. These regulations seemed to go against the wishes of teachers like the one quoted above, who would like to see more thorough selection processes for children in her school and stronger sanctions for those who misbehave.

Although these behavioural problems were predominately stressed by participants from Central Primary, the other two schools also considered it a relevant issue. However, they expressed a rather different position regarding the reasons for students' misbehaviour.

I would say that some children lack emotional control; anger above all, rage. But we try to look to the positive, the cheerful, the optimistic [...] I think in the end, if one pushes them so much with mathematics and Spanish, history, etc., they end up getting tired. I think, for these kids, the happier they are we will get more out of them. For example, I think the violence issue goes away if we make them play or if they participate more through play. (Head Teacher, WP)

In comparison, both positions about students' behaviour saw it as a problem in their schools



but they point at different approaches to address this problematic issue. While the teacher assumed a more radical position towards sanctioning misbehaviour, the head teacher puts emphasis on the emotional conditions of students to address this issue. However, student behaviour was not the only source of conflict in these schools. The relationship with parents was problematic as well, and it sparked differences between teachers and school leaders. For instance, the second grade teacher at Central Primary declared that ‘parents are always difficult’ and they cannot count on them, while her head teacher said:

Now, if we do have the support from parents, fantastic if they can help us but if we do not have it we cannot sit and cry because parents will not help us, if we are the teacher it is us who are responsible for getting results with the children  
(Head Teacher, CP)

The relationship with both parents and students represented a critical challenge for these three schools. Additionally, some of the participants acknowledged that working in municipal schools under somewhat precarious conditions has scared some teachers and students from these places. Those teachers who work and remain in municipal schools are thought to be ‘tired’ and ‘unmotivated to innovate’; while students in municipal schools are considered more demanding in comparison to the ‘normal children’ who attend private-subsidised schools (Fourth Grade Teacher, WP).

Here, school leaders saw their role as supporting and challenging those teachers who need guidance or motivation to do their work, although teachers themselves did not always pick this up. For example, the curriculum leader at Western Primary declared, ‘what interests me is that my interventions [monitoring instruction in classrooms] have a bigger impact [for teachers] and are not only to comply’; meanwhile, the fourth grade teacher of the same school stated, ‘I think the curriculum leader is too relaxed. I feel he has to be better at putting pressure on people, in the good sense’. Conversely, the curriculum leader at Eastern Primary said, ‘I have said to teachers that here, although I am the “curriculum leader”, I feel more like a curriculum “collaborator” rather than “leader”’; meanwhile, the first grade teacher of the same school explained that ‘the curriculum leader has given me all of her support [...] the colleague, the curriculum leader, is an expert [...] and she has a very affable, kind way of helping me’.

Interestingly, these two examples represent how, despite the good nature of the intentions, the relationship between school leaders and teachers can result in very different outcomes depending on the challenges teachers face in their work. Within this context, it seemed reasonable to ask about the chances for these teachers and schools to change and improve.

For the local authority officer, the expectation was that teachers could visualise a change in ‘what goes on inside the classroom’ although he acknowledged that this can be ‘complicated for them, because there is a traditional way of teaching’. In this sense, there was a certain scepticism from the people interviewed regarding the process of change in their schools.

Well, yes, I think you can work on it [change of practice] but it must be done drastically. People do not change from one day to the other, and the way we work does not change from one day to another, either [...] because we are used to a system and the people above us [school leaders] who make demands to us are used to demand only so much from us, and themselves too (Fourth Grade Teacher, WP)

There were also practical issues that made it difficult for teachers to change or innovate in the way they do their work in classrooms. Many teachers declared that the working conditions in schools forced them to take work back home:

It is incredible [the workload]. We always talk about the same but it is true; there is no time. You need to work at home, continue working there. Yesterday evening I got home to continue working. If I do not, I would never have the marking ready, the tests, because here [at the school] there is no time to mark tests (Second Grade Teacher, CP)

For Chilean school teachers, due to contractual conditions, a high proportion of their working hours must be dedicated to teaching in classrooms, leaving only a marginal number of hours a month for planning, marking, meeting with parents and participating in school or department meetings, among other.

But now, I must have a day by day [lesson plan] for Spanish, day by day for mathematics, day by day... I do not have the time it is not enough. And I tell you, this is the first time in my life... and I am fascinated with my job... but this is the first time in my life that I feel I am collapsing. I cannot sleep... I am thinking that tomorrow I do not forget to take this or that [to school]... it is crazy (First Grade Teacher, EP)

In summary, the three schools shared the perception that the positive environment in their schools was their main strength. They also shared the perception that the relationship with students and parents, and their working conditions were their main challenges.

#### *External pressure points*

As it can be understood from the previous section, schools’ challenges were often linked

with what I call *external pressure points*. These pressure points were the triggers for many of these internal challenges, inasmuch as they influenced the decisions and practices of teachers and leaders – and arguably, external agents too – in schools. The pressure points correspond, roughly, to two indicators of schools' performance: students' learning outcomes measured by SIMCE, and student enrolment. These two indicators, in turn, encompass other relevant issues related to the organisational and policy conditions where schools are immersed. In this section, I will develop understandings of these pressure points and associated issues.

SIMCE was a strong presence in these schools, and it was usually behind every decision made by leaders and, often, teachers. Similarly, the local authority considered the performance of schools in SIMCE as a pressing issue, which led them to try a network strategy in the first place. Although all three schools identified other reasons to get interested in the network initiative apart from their performance in SIMCE – for example the importance of sharing practice, learning from others and changing people's attitude and motivation – it was always looming over the network's activities. Overtly or covertly, SIMCE influenced the decisions made during the first year of the network.

[Interviewer]: What motivated you to continue [working with the network]? You could have chosen to stay out, you could have said, “no, this is not for us”.

[Teacher]: I think it was the great challenge of SIMCE. The focus [of the network] was difficult to agree with the others... getting to the focus of improving higher-order cognitive skills in mathematics, and it had to be a focus that represented the common needs of all schools... it was very complicated to make the decision [...] Well, the thing is, this network with the six schools was created to improve SIMCE scores (Fourth Grade Teacher, CP)

[Interviewer]: So, in your opinion, what is the main challenge for your school now and for the future?

[Teacher]: First, maintaining our SIMCE scores; if not raising our scores, maintaining. (Fourth Grade Teacher, WP)

Here, clearly participants considered the pressing need to improve their SIMCE scores as an important drive to engage in networked activities. This was especially relevant for the chosen focus on developing higher-order skills in mathematics in second and fourth grade students, who must sit for SIMCE in reading, writing and mathematics every year.

The three schools had problems sustaining their performance in SIMCE in the years before the network initiative, usually showing irregular patterns on or below the national average. It proved difficult for the people interviewed to explain this instability and low performance,

and they usually listed several reasons to explain it.

I assume that the working environment [before his arrival to the school] also could have influenced – I am assuming in this case, though – and might have played a part in the [SIMCE] scores. I also think that sick leave, absenteeism, administrative leaves could have played a role in these results... I am talking about the last one, which is the lowest of all [schools in the district], in fourth grade at least. Last year in fourth grade there was a teacher who did not miss any days the whole year and maybe things will be different. (Head Teacher, WP)

Although teachers' absenteeism could possibly be connected to schools' performance in SIMCE, I think it is unlikely that it could explain their unstable and low scores. For instance, the head teacher at Western Primary concentrated only on in-school factors to explain their low and unstable performance, and did not acknowledge factors associated with students' lives, such as their socioeconomic background. Based on this rationale, these three schools – both previously and in parallel to the network initiative – developed specific strategies aimed at in-school factors to reverse their performance in SIMCE. Some of these strategies included modifying their curriculum, taking lesson time from subjects not tested in SIMCE – such as music, arts or technology – for children to have additional time for Spanish (reading, writing) and mathematics. For example, one teacher suggested that:

Here, this school had an orientation towards arts and technology; we had an orchestra, a fantastic music teacher and a marching band. But then it was like 'there are no hours available for that anymore'; everything was for Spanish, for reading... (First Grade Teacher, EP)

Additionally, this strategy was aligned with another that was often mentioned in the interviews: offering children specific preparation for the test. These instances took many forms, such as passing mock tests in after-school workshops or during lesson time, and they targeted specific students or the whole group.

[Teacher]: If I had Spanish and mathematics three times [a week], then I did it [test preparation] three times a week. If I had three hours on Monday morning, for example, I did two and the other hour I dedicated to do mock SIMCE tests, and the same for mathematics and history.

[Interviewer]: So deep down they [the students] were highly trained for the test...

[Teacher]: Yes, and consider that I did not have time to do a workshop for this, I did it during lesson time... I took half hour or 15 minutes. (Second Grade Teacher, WP)

I gathered that this was a common practice in these three schools. School leaders either actively facilitated copies of mock tests and additional hours for teachers, or passively allowed teachers to organise their own classroom time and materials, endorsing this test preparation. Teachers, students and parents, often assumed this strategy without resistance but there were some critical voices that rose from time to time. For example, one teacher argued that SIMCE was not relevant for her students' learning.

[Teacher]: I do not give too much importance to SIMCE. For me is not, if you do not mind me saying...

[Interviewer]: No, go ahead.

[Teacher]: I think you get results in other ways. Not pressuring with tests, tests, tests and those kids having to stay in the classroom to do mock tests. No, that is not the way... is not the best way, in my opinion. (First Grade Teacher, EP)

Similarly, parents also showed a critical stance towards preparing their children for this test, according to one head teacher.

[Parents] did not like it when we had children taking SIMCE preparation workshops, they did not want the kids to come to school for it... the school is using them, they said, "what do the kids get for taking SIMCE?" And then we had these [bad] results. That is why I am telling you, why the results are appalling... (Head Teacher, CP)

Finally, students also questioned the rationale of high stakes for schools that is implied in SIMCE, and asked what is in it for them.

This is how eighth graders think: "miss, why do we have to do mock tests if we are already leaving [primary school]?" It is like they do not care, but they are the face of the school, what they have learned in fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades, but they do not see it that way (Second Grade Teacher, WP).

It seemed that the strong focus on SIMCE in these three schools, to the point of decisively changing their internal organisation and practice, and having time and resources allocated to test preparation, was in response to the perceived central role of this test to portray an image of a *good/bad* school. Therefore, SIMCE becomes high stakes for schools, as it is critical for their reputation in terms of performance, in a context where parental choice and competition make the school system operate as a quasi-market.

In addition to SIMCE, student enrolment was also a concern for these three schools. This reflected a national trend for municipal schools, which have lost parental preference to

private-subsidised schools in the last decade in Chile. It has become a constant struggle for the municipal sector, as the Central Primary head teacher explained, ‘you know you have to be always fighting, and especially in the municipal sector, for enrolment; you have to try not to decrease it’.

The situation became critical for some schools, such as Western Primary, where there was only one class group in each grade. There was an explicit threat of closure if enrolment numbers kept dropping, as a teacher explained:

Look, in first grade there is nine [students]. In second grade, nine. In third grade, ten. In fourth grade, 19. In fifth grade, 22, and there sort of goes... in sixth grade is 20, in seventh is 15, and in eighth grade there is eight [...] Sure, we have to increase enrolment or maintaining it but never decrease it because, what is the danger? To close the school [...] every end of year we are there, in December; are we up or are we down [for next year]? (Second Grade Teacher, WP)

The threat of school closure by losing children from one year to the other was even more realistic than being closed for poor SIMCE results; although, I would argue that for these schools both SIMCE and enrolment seemed to be linked given its relevance for parental preference. The pressure and strategies to deal with this problem and attract more children to the school had some side effects for teachers’ classroom practice. One of the teachers at Central Primary explained,

I think that lately, in the past year even, the biggest challenge has been to bring enrolment to the school, and having to accept children totally descended [i.e. with low levels of performance], and it has been difficult to get them up to the level of the children already here, in the school, because we worry about one and neglect the other, so it is hard. That has been a major challenge, but only in recent times, it did not happen before. (Fourth Grade Teacher, CP)

The issue of enrolment was also a source of concern for the local authority. Given that the government provides funding for municipal schools through the per-pupil voucher, enrolment was critical for the financial sustainability of the district. The local authority officer acknowledged that not losing students to the private-subsidised system or neighbouring districts ‘resonates even more than results’ for them, and they have made this message clear to head teachers in their schools.

The local authority has managed to reduce the proportion of enrolment loss. Years ago, we were losing 1000 to 1500 students every year. Last year we had a

halt in that tendency; we lost 478, and this year we lost only 178 students. Next year we hope to get near zero [losses], and the following year we hope to increase it. So, the issue of enrolment, the head teachers know it is a concern, because that [enrolment] keeps jobs, keeps salaries... keeps the jobs for the schools.  
(Local Authority Officer)

Both SIMCE and enrolment were relevant external pressure points for schools and the local authority in this case and, arguably, in any other similar contexts. The sense of urgency to address both issues seems to be helpful to understand the decision of the local authority to set-up the network, and indeed the decision of the three schools to join in.

### *Networking at a distance*

Setting-up a network was a new experience for these schools and the local authority, and less so for the university department staff, and presented a set of challenges for everyone involved. Given the different expectations and experience of the participants, this network was considered as a pilot for possibly scaling-up to other schools in the district. The rationale of the local authority was that their previous interventions had not changed schools' performance, mainly in SIMCE, and therefore they needed to do things differently to get different results. The local authority officer explained:

[In 2011, the department] was doing this pilot experience in Lebu, designing the process of networking so the schools themselves could pick an improvement focus and work. We thought it was an interesting idea, because in our district it has always been the local authority determining the policies at the top and instructing schools for implementation at the bottom, in a cascade. But here the approach is different, and we are looking for innovation, because we are stuck in some SIMCE scores, mainly in mathematics. (Local Authority Officer)

The local authority and the university department invited a group of schools to learn about the network project and see if they were interested in participating. Among participants, however, there were different versions of how many schools had been considered for this project and why were these schools invited. For instance, the fourth grade teacher from Central Primary said that all primary and secondary schools in the district were invited, while the head teacher at the same school said it was about 20 schools that received the invitation. Similarly, the Western Primary head teacher indicated that they were invited because of their low SIMCE scores, while the local authority officer explained that they invited 'schools not so intervened – schools with time' and with 'directive teams [school leaders] keener to be

more flexible'. The different perceptions about the invitation to join the network – the number of schools invited and the reasons for being considered – suggests that the focalisation criteria used by the local authority was not made clear to the schools. Conversely, there seemed to be an agreement among participants that both the local authority and university advisors considered that schools' participation in the network should be voluntary and that only a small number should join.

Mr. [name] was there, who is the chief of education from the local authority, and the people from [the department]. We had this meeting but it was not imposed; those who wanted to participate could join the project, but it was always said that it had to be a small number of schools for the network to work. (Fourth Grade Teacher, CP)

A total of six schools joined the network and the initial stage of the project consisted of a series of six workshop meetings at the university. These meetings extended for six months and aimed for schools to define a common focus for the network activities, facilitated by the university advisors. A difficulty at this stage was the schools' lack of time to attend and systematically engage in these network meetings.

Additionally, the other weakness that I saw in these network meetings was that there was too much absenteeism from colleagues. If we commit from the first moment, then we were one of the schools that was always there (Fourth Grade Teacher, CP)

Defining a common focus to orientate the network's activities and internal organisation proved difficult as well. The university advisor declared, 'it was really hard to define a common focus, get an agreement and that all schools could make sense of it and find it useful'. In her view, this was because this group of schools was just getting to know each other and 'they had never worked together, there was no trust'. This produced an initial setting where the discussions around the definition of a common focus became difficult and participants did not know what the point of it all was. Similarly, one of the head teachers explained:

Look, at the beginning it was a little vague, I think, because there was, or at least we did not have the clarity where we were going to, and after some time, organising and working, it was still vague the administrative part of this. I did not know very well where to and how to fit into this, but then things started to clear up, and towards the end of the year we had a clearer concept, where we wanted to get to, and we started to look at topics with times and dates. (Head



Teacher, WP)

As these meetings progressed, the group began to get a sense of direction and purpose, maybe due to the regularity of the work and the time spent working together. In parallel, the university advisors had the expectation of getting everyone involved in the development of the network, for schools to take charge of the it by the end of this stage, supported by the local authority. The university advisor explained that ‘our idea as a team was that the network had to progressively be more autonomous’ and to achieve that, she believed that the role of the local authority was key:

Evidence shows that it is super important that the local authority or whoever supports financially the schools, participates of these meetings as a critical friend... that is what the literature says is the role of the local authority  
(University Advisor)

Despite the university advisors’ efforts, local authority officers kept to an external observer role for much of the initial meetings of the network. In fact, the local authority officer declared that they wanted to ‘observe the process, learn from the process’ and they decided to ‘support the logistics but not the technical [issues]’ related to the network. Nevertheless, towards the end of the first year working together, and once the network’s action plan was defined by the schools, the university advisor acknowledged that, ‘the local authority had much to say because funding is their responsibility, so then they assumed a super active role’.

At the end of this stage, the network agreed to focus their work in developing higher-order cognitive skills in mathematics for second and fourth grade students. For that purpose, schools decided to develop a training course and a classroom observation strategy for teachers working in these grades, supported by an expert mathematics teacher. The university advisors suggested that schools needed to organise internally in groups to facilitate the implementation of the network’s action plan, as one head teacher explained:

We set up groups, the necessary expenses, and times and how we were going to work... well, we set up a leadership group, a research group, a resource group and maybe another one that I cannot recall now. Within those groups each of us had a role. One programmed the calendar, the resource group saw the finance, how much to spend in payments and other stuff... in a point it was agreed to call two people who can run a course, I mean, see who could run the course, and we got together in January [2013] to interview two people (Head Teacher, WP)

The head teacher, curriculum leaders and teachers from each of the six schools could

participate of any of these groups, but their composition was uniform and not very mixed: head teachers preferred to be part of the leadership group, while curriculum leaders were mostly included in the research group, and teachers in the resources group. Despite the initial intention of involving several people from schools in this initiative – at least people other than school leaders – the way groups were set up seems to have pushed teachers to the margins.

When the network started, I was invited. The head teacher invited me and another colleague, but you know? I got to go to two sessions because they organised in groups. I signed up for resources. There are like four groups. When I got there, by the first time, the second time, the third time, I realised that it was all done. It was all organised already and I felt I had nothing to contribute, to be honest. In the group where I signed, resources, was [name of teacher] who is super-efficient, she had everything organised. So, I felt like, “what do I do?” so for the next session I did not go, because we have loads to do here [at the school], and I did not go, did not go and I just stayed (Second Grade Teacher, CP)

By the end of the first year, people actively participating in the network meetings were mostly head teachers and curriculum leaders, with one or two teachers filling in from time to time when school leaders could not attend. Once the focus of the network for the second year was decided, and the training course and classroom observation for mathematics teachers began to be implemented, the participation of teachers in network meetings ceased completely. I think the mathematics intervention went against teachers’ more active involvement in the network.

The training course was planned for the first semester of the 2013 school year, starting March, while classroom observations was scheduled for the second semester, starting August. Second and fourth grade teachers were informed that they had to take part in these activities, which seems to have been interpreted as an invitation to a generic training course rather than a network activity.

I do not know about the other schools, but here for example, teachers still feel it is just another training course, they have not grasped that this is something that came out of the needs from each school. They believe it is just another training they need to comply with. (Special Needs Teacher, EP)

Although most teachers I talked to declared they found the course very useful, taking good lessons for their classroom practice in mathematics, there was some discomfort with using time from work to attend these sessions. Possibly, as one curriculum leader explained in his

criticism of the network initiative, the fact that ‘it was decided to set a purpose and approach it through a sort of training for second and fourth grade teachers; as training and not as collaborative work’ (Curriculum Leader, WP) prevented teachers from engaging in the idea of a networked activity.

Rather than stimulate collaborative work, the network served to channel a pool of resources to set-up this training course for all schools, something that would have been very difficult to achieve working individually. One of the head teachers remarked that for this first network activity ‘there had to be an external expert, the whole point was to get an external expert [to run the training course] but from next year [2014] we can start doing self-training’ (Head Teacher, EP). She explained that showing what teachers at one school do to colleagues in other schools, providing support to each other, having a space to share practice, and give and receive feedback, would help them achieve this goal.

However, it is not clear whether other participants of the network shared the head teacher’s expectation. In practice, the second year of the network was more about monitoring the progress of the training course, and it was not an easy task. From the local authority officer’s perspective, the network lacked ‘a leader, someone who articulates technically and logistically the network; or even a team to take charge of this’, possibly suggesting that this should have been the role of the external advisor or one of the more experienced head teachers. Similarly, the university advisor was concerned about the capacity of the network members to act and make decisions, a worry that came up during the first session of the training course.

When we were at the training session I was quite nervous [...] I did not know if it was going to work, because there were many things to do and I did not see anyone taking the role of organising everything; I thought, no, this is not going to work. But in the end I was quite relieved, so of speak [...] the head teachers went outside for a while to organise what was going to happen next (University Advisor)

For both the university advisor and local authority officer it was critical to have someone constantly reiterating the orientation of the network from within. However, in this case, it seemed that only in these brief moments of coordination and organisation did schools – or at least, head teachers – came together to collaborate. On the contrary, while observing two sessions of the training course, I saw teachers sitting in tables with people from their own schools. When I shared this observation with teachers, they claimed that there was little time to interact during the training activities; although one teacher suggested that ‘maybe we should try talking to others [teachers from other schools]’ (Second Grade Teacher, CP).

At this point, the failure or success of the network increasingly depended on the level of internal commitment of each school with the network activities. This networking-at-a-distance type of relationship, where the actual interaction between the different groups involved is minimal but schools are nevertheless formally engaged in a common initiative, produced a scenario where the future of the network depended on the actions of individual school leaders.

I think each should lead their school. I mean, honestly, if a school does not make it is because there was a bad coordination or the work was not taken seriously, but I expect that all schools achieve that change. I think there are schools that can do it, according to their profile of head teachers and curriculum leaders [...] they are the ones who should lead this change, and I think there are schools that are going to make it and those who will not. (Head Teacher, EP)

This raises another question about the intention by the local authority to scale this initiative to other schools, depending on the outcomes of this pilot experience. Although there was a concern about learning how this process develops, most of the responsibility for its success and failure was, again, placed at the level of schools and their leaders.

[Interviewer]: The expansion of the network, depends of them [schools] as much as your [local authority] possibilities to support such expansion, right?  
[Local Authority Officer]: I think it depends more on them, because I think that if they see themselves getting results, changing pedagogic practice... and even if they do not get the results, because this might not be a bet of one year, but of two, three or four years [...] so we have to be calm and patience because it is a complex innovation. But we do expect to get results (Local Authority Officer)

What I take from the local authority officer's statement is that there was space for innovation but there was also a pressing need to get results, such as SIMCE gains or increased enrolment. It was not clear how these results would come about from this network of schools, or what needed to happen within a network to achieve success. In this sense, and during the interview with the university advisor, I reflected that there needed to be at least three conditions to develop a network of schools.

So, this is something like – before I lose this thought – it has to do with three elements: one is a social relations foundation. Another is the capacity already installed in schools, which is diverse. And the third is the individual capacities during the work in network. So, my impression is that it has to do a little with how the facilitators of the process, in this case you [university advisors], are able

to recognise these three elements and start adjusting the model to these three variables. Is this right?

In talking with the university advisor, and after some reflection on my own statement and the statements of the people I interviewed, I would describe these three elements as the political, social and technical aspects of networking. The political corresponds to the contextual conditions and power relationships; the social corresponds to internal relationships and trust; and the technical refers to the capacities, knowledge and abilities of individuals to collaborate. I will develop a fuller explanation of these elements in the following section to outline a possible theory of change underpinning this case. However, I would argue that this network was still working on those elements, possibly because schools and individuals were distant from each other, and the focus on achieving results in terms of SIMCE and enrolment trumped any chance of developing a collaborative relationship between schools.

### **Theory of change: How does the Schools Network promote improvement?**

Networking as an approach to external support is closely connected with empirical evidence and literature on school improvement from the last decade (Muijs, 2010), which places collaboration over competition among schools as a driver for improvement (Glatter, 2003; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003). However, some authors believe that these two processes are not mutually exclusive and collaboration can be incentivised in a competitive environment, under appropriate conditions and with benefits for schools in challenging circumstances (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006; Wallace, 1998). According to Evans *et al.* (2005), these conditions usually relate to policy frameworks that promote partnerships, federations and networks as models for school improvement, where more successful schools support unsuccessful ones, in contrast to school systems led by choice and market policies which can be detrimental for collaboration. Nevertheless, many educational systems have adopted formal networks, based on collaborative practices, as a key policy to raise standards (Chapman, 2008).

Current characteristics of the school system in Chile do not foster collaboration between schools; nor within schools, arguably. Competition and school choice in an educational market are longstanding features of the Chilean school system's normative and institutional framework (Burton, 2012; Gauri, 1998; OECD, 2004; Raczynski and Muñoz, 2007). Moreover, as noted in the case study of the policy framework for school improvement in chapter seven, the adoption of what an education advisor described as a *control by results* approach (EA2) – mostly through indicators such as SIMCE and enrolment – usually forces

teachers and school leaders to dedicate their energies to sort their problems individually within schools rather than collaboratively between schools. This is reflected in this case where schools establish a network and engage in a common project but with few instances of interaction and collaboration.

The theory of change underpinning this case suggests that schools in a network can benefit from the circulation of knowledge, as well as the creation of new, situated knowledge to influence change (Chapman, 2008; Katz and Earl, 2010). The development of what the literature calls *collaborative inquiry* (DeLuca *et al.*, 2014; Emihovich and Battaglia, 2000; Wagner, 1998) provides the basis for that knowledge circulation and production. Collaborative inquiry makes use of the knowledge and skills of ‘teachers, principals, school district leaders and external partners’ in professional learning activities, involving them ‘in collaboratively investigating focused aspects of their professional practice’ with the aim of developing ‘new understandings and responsive actions’, and ‘improving educational outcomes for students’ (DeLuca *et al.*, 2014, p. 1).

It is worth remembering that Campos *et al.* (2012) indicated that collaborative inquiry through professional conversations was a feature of the Lebu network experience, and the university department team expected to replicate it with the group of schools from the case described here. The role of external agents in the Lebu experience was to create the conditions for those professional conversations and provide a framework for the exchange between participants. Similarly, the literature acknowledges the importance of external consultants or partners to facilitate network meetings and activities (Townsend, 2015; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003), creating conditions and opportunities for building capacity and offering support in networks (Katz and Earl, 2010). One condition for building capacity in networks is related to developing trusting relationships to promote collaboration and mutual learning (Daly and Finnigan, 2012); in fact, DeLuca *et al.* (2014) stresses that collaborative inquiry requires building trust amongst participants.

However, the lack of trust among participant in the Schools Network project, as expressed by the university advisor, worked against external agents’ efforts to develop collaborative inquiry. As I described in the previous section, there were explicit references to the distance between participants of the network, both in symbolic and physical terms. Symbolically, teachers felt they had little to offer to the network and in fact did not feel identified with it; in physical terms, I observed training sessions where teachers sat and worked with colleagues from their own schools, and network meetings where head teachers mostly sat and discussed with curriculum leaders from their own schools. Similarly, the local authority kept its distance

from the network, and acted as an external observer, while the university advisors failed to communicate the relevance of developing a trustful, cohesive relationship between the participants for the success of the network.

Another aspect of the theory of change for a network approach to external support is the cohesiveness of the relationship or ties between participants of a network. Daly (2010, p. 4) defines a network 'as a group of actors who are connected to one another through a set of different relations or ties', where 'strong ties (...) may be instrumental in developing the depth of interaction and trust building necessary for exchanging tacit information and innovation related to improvement' (ibid., p. 267). From this perspective, the quality and strength of the relations or ties between individuals and subgroups is critical to understanding and appraising the flow and exchange of expertise, knowledge and skills in a network. Similarly, Chapman (2008) points out that, in schools facing challenging circumstances, positive relationships based on mutual trust and support is an underpinning principle for networking and a key lever for improvement. Additionally, international literature has highlighted the importance of a culture of trust, cooperation and responsibility as a lever for educational change and improvement in countries regarded as high performing (see Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

The case of the Schools Network, in turn, shows that there was a distanced interaction between participants. Although this initiative intended to actively involve teachers, curriculum leaders, head teachers, local authority officers, and to a lesser extent external agents (local authority and university), the participation of several actors was progressively reduced throughout the project. Particularly, teachers felt marginalised when the network was organised in different task-groups or teams. Later, teachers assumed a passive role for the network's intervention in mathematics (training sessions and classroom observation), with curriculum leaders also progressively losing prominence in network conversations and, in some cases, assuming a role of field coordinator. Head teachers, then, occupied an oversight and monitoring role but with low levels of involvement with teachers and curriculum leaders from schools other than their own. However, there was an expectation among some participants that this situation would change for the third year of the network, where some school leaders and classroom teachers expressed an interest in developing more interaction with colleagues from other schools, sharing practice and knowledge. Some teachers expected to see what others were doing in their classrooms, curriculum leaders looked forward to sharing pedagogical strategies, and head teachers hoped to foster alternative professional development approaches.

Finally, the viability of this project depended significantly on the satisfaction of the local authority with the changes in SIMCE scores for the participant schools. The local authority recognised that this is a medium- to long-term process, which provided some time and space for schools to attempt developing a collaborative relationship internally and with other schools, but this case shows that it is not an easy task. Amanda Datnow, in an article commenting on the relevance of Andy Hargreaves' 1994 book *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers' Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age* for the educational reform movement in the US, addressed the issues of collaboration and collegiality in light of their contribution to school improvement. She suggested that:

Decades of research have revealed that collaboration and collegiality are essential for school improvement. However, Hargreaves' research taught us that despite having lofty goals around collaboration, many efforts at productive collaborative work among teachers have gone awry because they underestimate the micropolitics of schools (Datnow, 2011, p. 148)

The issues I have tried to highlight regarding the theory of change that emerged from this case broadly follow the three elements I outlined at the end of the previous section, namely, the political, technical and social elements of a network. After revisiting some of the literature to develop this analysis further, I would redefine these elements as:

- Political: corresponds to both the internal context of schools and the external organisational context (district and national level); it is linked to the power relations at institutional level, where policy plays a key role.
- Technical: corresponds to the capacity and abilities of individual members of the network to develop collaborative inquiry, which would lead to the circulation and creation of knowledge in the network.
- Social: corresponds to the ties and relationship within the network, and the levels of trust and support between members of the network that will lead to cooperation and collective responsibility in network activities.

In summary, I would argue that the theory of change underpinning this case points to the development of collaborative inquiry practice among educators, who have a close working relationship orientated by a common need to respond to the needs and demands of their school and policy contexts. However, as Datnow (2011) expressed in the quote above, initiatives seeking to promote collaboration without considering the micro-politics of schools might end up in failure, which is a serious possibility in the case of the Schools Network. For this reason, I argue that a micro-political perspective of schools and their process of change and improvement (Ball, 1987; Blase, 2005; Busher, 2001) offers a sound foundation for this



theory of change, calling our attention to the political, technical and social aspects of networking. Micro-politics enables the observation and critical analysis of relationships between schools and individuals to understand the process by which trust is developed and collaborative inquiry takes place. This perspective would facilitate the analysis of power relations within and between schools, offering an action framework for networks to operate in any given context.

## CHAPTER IX

### CASE STUDY TWO. LEADING HEAD TEACHERS (DIRECTORES LÍDERES)

Leading Head Teachers was a project from the Educación 2020 foundation, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), involved in advocating and lobbying for educational reform in Chile<sup>9</sup>. The origins of Educación 2020 go back to the massive secondary students' protests in 2006 that mobilised civil society movements to show their discontent with the Chilean educational model (see Bellei and Cabalin, 2013; Bellei, Contreras and Valenzuela, 2010; Hernández-Santibañez, 2013).

In August 2008, the founder of Educación 2020, Mario Waissbluth, wrote an opinion column on the problem of the teaching profession in Chile and the restrictions embedded in the Teaching Statute (Waissbluth, 2008). After that column, which echoed the general public's concern with the quality of teaching and learning in schools, several university students and academics joined Waissbluth and launched Educación 2020 as a civil society movement. From that moment, they have been actively involved in public forums and parliamentary discussions pushing for education reform in Chile, rallying increasing numbers of supporters and a fair number of critics, as well. Educación 2020 has been criticised for blaming teachers for the low performance of students in national and international standardised assessments, and their intense lobbying with government officials and parliament members, displacing other stakeholder groups, such as teachers and students, in reform discussions.

In early 2009, Educación 2020 launched a manifesto proposing a *roadmap* to achieve system change by the year 2020. This manifesto covered key issues for the school system, such as: increasing the requirements to obtain a teaching degree and incorporating certification and accreditation exit exams; encouraging the retirement of ageing head teachers and developing a national policy for training and accreditation of school leaders; and promoting parental participation and involvement by making school performance information (SIMCE) easily available to them (Educación 2020, 2009). Later, in 2014, they updated their roadmap extending their proposals to early childhood education, vocational and technical education, and higher education. This new roadmap highlighted issues such as quality, equity, inclusion and State-public education, adding to issues previously addressed, such as reforming the teaching profession and school leadership (Educación 2020, 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.educacion2020.cl> (in Spanish).

In 2011, Educación 2020 launched the Leading Head Teachers project, sponsored by a bottling company, Embotelladora Andina, through its area of corporate social responsibility. The project was markedly influenced by research evidence quoting school leadership as the second school-related factor with the highest impact on student learning after classroom instruction (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004b; Mulford and Silins, 2003). Thus, the project aim was to attract excellent school leaders to work in vulnerable schools to sustainably improve their education quality (Educación 2020, 2011). The empirical evidence claiming that leadership is a critical factor for improving student learning has been largely uncontested, although its assumptions and consequences have been criticised (see Gunter, Hall and Bragg, 2013 for a discussion of the knowledge base for the concept of distributed leadership).

Within Educación 2020, the Centre of School Leadership (CLE) was created to run the Leading Head Teachers project. The Centre of School Leadership is described in Educación 2020 website as a strategic area to extend the work of the foundation towards the school system, linking with private companies' corporate social responsibility areas. It aims to provide systematic support for school leadership and management and, in partnership with other institutions, provide other services to schools and local authorities (school improvement plans, interventions to increase municipal enrolment, and campaigns to strengthen the link between communities and schools). For that purpose, the Centre of School Leadership was registered as an External Technical Assistance (ATE) agency, to provide external technical support within the context of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP).

The initial implementation of the Leading Head Teachers project relied on the collaboration between the Centre of School Leadership and three other ATE agencies. Each of these ATE was responsible for working with a small number of head teachers from one of three districts in central Chile. In 2013, a fourth district joined the project and the Centre of School Leadership hired professionals to lead the implementation of the project in two of the four districts. Professionals from both the ATE agencies and the Centre of School Leadership worked directly with head teachers developing a diagnosis of the management conditions of his or her school, before signing a Performance Contract (Convenio de Desempeño – CDD). This contract consisted of a set of goals and targets related to processes such as managing people and teams, institutional planning and developing internal procedures and structures. According to the general manager at the Centre of School Leadership, the project's initial design had to be adapted to the local realities of districts and schools. For instance, the

integration of senior management teams (including curriculum and discipline leaders, heads of early years, primary and secondary key stages, among others) to the intervention in the second year of the project was in response to the perceived isolation of head teachers in schools.

Similarly, the approach of the ATE agencies supporting head teachers was also a concern. For instance, in the third year of the project, one ATE agency was dismissed due to differences with the Centre of School Leadership regarding the best way to work with head teachers. As a result, the Centre of School Leadership took over the schools that were supported by the dismissed ATE. The Centre of School Leadership considered that this ATE was imposing a model of leadership and management to the head teachers, when the project's mandate was to concentrate only on developing the potential and competencies of individual head teachers without imposing specific models. I would consider this as a positive feature of the project, since it facilitates the development of the personal characteristics of the head teachers rather than fitting them into a fixed model. However, I am aware that this might contradict what the dominant literature on school leadership suggests to ensure the development of effective leaders (Bush, 2009; Chapman, 2004; Hallinger, 2003).

Regarding the results of the project, I did not have access to the yearly evaluations of the Performance Contracts (CDD) for all head teachers in all districts. Nevertheless, I did have access to the 2012 evaluation of the three head teachers working in the district where I did this case study. All of them had achieved 90% or more of the goals they agreed in their performance contracts. Additionally, all three head teachers put forward goals for students' attendance and retention of enrolment. They failed to meet their attendance goals (increasing mean attendance on average by 5% over the 2012 school year), while two of them failed to meet their retention of enrolment goals (preventing any student from leaving for another school) and the third retained all students in the school and managed to increase the school's enrolment from 305 to 316 pupils (CLE Presentation – March 2013).

The Leading Head Teachers project officially concluded in January 2015 after four years of implementation in four districts and 13 schools; apparently, one year prior to its original end date. Educación 2020 published a brief press release on their website<sup>10</sup>, stressing the practical

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<sup>10</sup> Educación 2020. 'Concluye "Directivos Líderes", el proyecto que inició el trabajo en terreno de Educación 2020 [Concludes "Leading Head Teachers", the project that started the fieldwork of Educación 2020]'. January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015. Available at: <http://www.educacion2020.cl/noticia/concluye-directivos-lideres-el-proyecto-que-inicio-el-trabajo-en-terreno-de-educacion-2020> (in Spanish).

nature of the project and the evidence it provided to the foundation's proposals for reforming Chilean education. Moreover, the press release featured the opinion of three head teachers that participated in the project and attended its closing ceremony; they highlighted the impact of the project on the improvement of the internal processes and SIMCE scores of their schools.

### **Programme design**

Leading Head Teachers project provided support to selected head teachers working in municipal schools in four districts of central Chile. This work was underpinned by the assumption that effective school leadership is a key element to initiate and sustain educational improvement in disadvantaged contexts (Harris, 2001a; Heck and Hallinger, 2010; Muijs *et al.*, 2004; Potter, Reynolds and Chapman, 2002). According to its official design document, the aim of Leading Head Teachers was to attract and develop excellent school leaders to work in vulnerable schools to sustainably improve their education quality (Leading Head Teachers in Vulnerable Schools Project 2011). The strategy of the project consisted of implementing a customised leadership development plan of generic and technical competencies to improve head teachers' capacity for effective management of teaching and learning. These competencies were not listed in any of the official documents of the project and they were determined specifically for each of the participant head teachers. For instance, some technical competencies reported by informants were: strategic planning, managing change, and setting direction; while some generic competencies were: effective communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution.

Initially, in 2011, three districts joined the project for its first year of implementation, with a fourth district joining in 2013. The requirements for the districts and head teachers to participate were:

- This project is destined for head teachers but **NOT** any head. As noted, the quality of the head teacher is a variable that determines the improvement of a school. Therefore, the benefits of the project will be obtained only by a group of head teachers that has certain capacities and conditions to make him/her a leading head.
- The head teacher must develop and negotiate with his/her local authority a performance contract, which leads to develop and implement a set of actions that will allow him/her to achieve the pledged goals. This aspect strengthens responsibility.

- The head teachers who benefit from the project will receive permanent advice during five years, time considered as adequate to foster cultural change. (Leading Head Teachers in Vulnerable Schools Project 2011 p.5; emphasis in the original)

Parallel to recruiting districts and head teachers, the Centre of School Leadership chose three ATE agencies to advise and provide on-site support to head teachers. According to the project manager at the Centre of School Leadership, these ATE agencies were chosen because they had experience in similar interventions and enjoyed a good reputation in the school system. All of them nominated a team of advisors who would work one-to-one with chosen head teachers, developing and implementing a yearly advisory plan. Thus, the Centre of School Leadership operated as the *mandating* institution, managing and supervising the rolling-out of the project in all three districts, while the ATE agencies occupied the role of *executive* institutions, linking with the local authority and schools, and providing on-site support to head teachers. Interestingly, this arrangement between the Centre of School Leadership and the ATE agencies resembled the way the Chilean school system is organised to provide external technical support for school improvement (see chapters two and four).

The Centre for School Leadership defined four general stages for this project: diagnostic self-evaluation; development of the performance contract (CDD); development and implementation of an annual advisory plan; and annual evaluation.

In the first stage of self-evaluation, diagnostic information available in schools was collected and systematised by the external advisors from the ATE agencies. The information considered in this stage drew, for example, on the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) institutional self-evaluation, and the school's improvement plan (PME) and the pedagogical project (PEI) to assess the level of development of school management processes. When relevant information (such as parents' satisfaction with school services) was not available, external advisors would produce this information through questionnaires and interviews with relevant stakeholders. Additionally, external advisors conducted individual interviews with head teachers to diagnose the level of development of individual leadership competencies, both technical and generic.

At the end of the self-evaluation stage, head teachers met with external advisors to discuss the results of this exercise and outline their performance contracts (CDD). The development of performance contracts was the second stage, and consisted of setting annual goals in terms of key institutional processes (monitoring teaching, school climate, and students' learning) and results (external outcome measures such as SIMCE, or internal outcome measures such

as community satisfaction, attendance and enrolment), suggested by the leadership and effectiveness literature (Kyriakides *et al.*, 2010; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; Reynolds, Teddlie and Pol, 2000). The performance contract was the pivotal intervention device for the Leading Head Teachers project and it was intended to link with other planning instruments, such as schools' PME and PEI, and the municipality's education plan (PADEM). The intention was to assist head teachers in focusing their work on a limited number of goals that account for internal needs and external demands, and achieve measurable improvement in what the project consider key areas for all schools involved. The head teachers developed the performance contract with support from the external advisors, and then negotiated its approval with the municipal local authority and the project manager at the Centre of School Leadership.

In the third stage, the goals and activities included in the performance contract were the bases for the yearly advisory plan, negotiated between advisors and head teachers. Both head teachers and advisors engaged in designing and implementing this plan to facilitate the achievement of the goals in the performance contract, while simultaneously strengthening and developing head teachers' leadership competencies. The Centre of School Leadership expected head teachers and advisors to work together for a minimum of three hours per week, and the advisory plan considered both individual and group sessions with other heads from the same district. When working individually, advisors looked at the actions undertaken by the head teacher to meet the goals of the performance contract, minding its link with the school's improvement (PME) and pedagogical (PEI) plans, while also promoting the development of leadership competencies through coaching strategies. At group sessions, all head teachers from the same district and their advisors met to discuss the link between their performance contracts, the municipality's education plan (PADEM), and their school's improvement plan (PME). Thus, the advisory plan worked as a monitoring strategy for the performance contract and as a space of professional development for the head teachers. These advisory plans were reformulated in 2013 to include the professional development of senior management teams, although this was being piloted during the time I did the fieldwork in schools.

In the final stage, the performance contract was used to evaluate project outcomes in terms of the goals achieved within the school year. Each head teacher had to report on their goals, which should be informed by constant monitoring of the external advisors. The head teachers presented their annual evaluation with all supporting evidence to the Centre of School Leadership for review and to determine the level of achievement of the performance contract. Also, the Centre of School Leadership suggested that head teachers informed the

school community about their goals, together with their challenges and commitments for the following year, as a way of involving them in the process of improvement. Here, the advisors assisted head teachers in outlining and presenting ambitious but realistic goals.

Moreover, the Centre of School Leadership, as a way of recognising that head teachers' participation necessarily implied additional tasks and responsibilities, decided that the performance contract would be tied to a trimestral bonus in each head teacher's salary, according to their level of achievement. The bonus was conceived as an incentive to and recognition of the head teachers' work, reinforcing good performance. This bonus was paid directly by the Centre of School Leadership to head teachers, using funds provided by the bottling company sponsoring the project. It was difficult to tell if this monetary incentive had some influence on the head teachers' intrinsic motivation to participate in the project or in the exercise of their role in schools. However, the issue of the bonus rarely came up during interviews and observations, and when it did, the head teachers suggested that it was a significant amount of money for them.

The design and stages of the project resemble what I described in chapter five as a target-setting and resource-based approach to external support. The Leading Head Teachers project negotiated a set of effectiveness indicators that head teachers needed to achieve and provided professional and material resources to assist them in this task, and a financial incentive to motivate them.

### **Researching the programme**

The initial contact with people involved in this project was through a colleague who used to work for one of the ATE agencies that was involved as executive institution in one of the districts where the project was being implemented in 2013. I met with the head of this ATE and we discussed the general characteristics of the project and how it could fit my research interest. She described the project implementation in schools and gave me a brief overview of the work they did with head teachers. I explained the purpose and research design of my study, emphasising my interest in the perspective of both head teachers and external advisors. She helped me arrange another meeting with the general manager of the project and with the head of the Centre of School Leadership at Educación 2020. I explained them the details of my study and they talked me through the background of the project.

Both the ATE agency and the Centre of School Leadership provided access to the schools by talking to the Education Director at the municipal local authority, and the three head teachers involved in the project in this district. I started the follow-up process by joining one



coordination meeting in March 2013 between the ATE advisors and the project manager, where they discussed the evaluation of the 2012 school year and the plan for 2013. During this first meeting I asked for relevant documents, outlining the project design, implementation plan and outcomes for previous years, which form the basis of what I outlined in previous sections of this chapter.

Then, between April and early May I joined each external advisor in one of their weekly visits to the schools as a participant observer, to get acquainted with the head teachers and members of the senior management team, and to learn about the routine and activities advisors developed with them. I also participated as an observer in two group sessions where all head teachers met with the advisors to discuss the outcomes of the 2012 school year and develop their performance contracts for 2013.

Finally, between late May and June I interviewed each of the head teachers, two of the three external advisors and the general manager of the project. The interviews were individual and semi-structured, covering general issues such as the general context of the school and/or its role, the perception about the implementation of the project, and their impressions about the policy framework for school improvement. In some cases, with head teachers and advisors, I had the chance to return after the interview and get feedback from them about my first impressions about the implementation of the project.

### **Participant schools and external agents**

In 2011, Educación 2020 signed an agreement with three districts (municipalities) in central Chile to implement Leading Head Teachers. The agreement considered support from the Centre of School Leadership to open a public tender for new head teachers in each district, who would be part the project once appointed. In the district where I did my study, the public tender was open for three schools that shared certain characteristics: they were all primary schools<sup>11</sup>, with a record of below average performance in SIMCE, low levels of attendance and decreasing enrolment. Table 5 summarises the characteristics of this sample of schools and the participants interviewed.

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<sup>11</sup> Except for WB Yeats Comprehensive, which was turned into a K-12 school in late 2011.

*Table 5. Sample of Schools, their characteristics and participants interviewed – Leading Head Teachers Project*

<b>School Pseudonym</b>	<b>School Characteristics (school year 2013)</b>	<b>Participants (interviewed)</b>
<b>WB Yeats Comprehensive (WBY)</b>	40 teachers, four school leaders, and 585 students.	- Head Teacher - External Advisor
<b>Gladys Marin Primary (GM)</b>	25 teachers, four school leaders, and 329 students.	- Head Teacher - External Advisor
<b>Mayflower Primary (MF)</b>	34 teachers, four school leaders, and 504 students.	- Head Teacher
<b>Centre of School Leadership (CLE)</b>	/	- Project Manager

The largest school was WB Yeats Comprehensive (WBY), located in the south side of the district, in between two big social housing estates. For many years, it operated as a primary school but after the earthquake in 2010 destroyed the building of a secondary school in the same area, the local authority decided to transfer secondary students to this school. Most of the pupils in primary levels at WB Yeats came from low-income families living in the neighbouring area, but in secondary levels there were students from surrounding districts as well. In 2013, there were 585 students from K-12, and attendance and retention were a problem, although there was a general sense that the school was starting to have a more positive image in the community (WBY Head Teacher). There were approximately 40 teachers and teaching assistants in the school, while the senior management team consisted of four people. The newly appointed head teacher had experience in similar contexts as a secondary science teacher in another district and as a teacher trainer in a private university, but no experience in primary education, or in formal leadership roles in schools – this lack of experience is common in terms of leadership recruitment in Chile (Weinstein and Muñoz, 2012; Weinstein and Muñoz, 2013). He was also actively involved in politics having worked in the National Environmental Commission coordinating educational programmes for the capital region; at the end of the 2013 school year, he eventually left his post as head teacher and ran for a seat on the Regional Council.

The second school was Gladys Marin Primary (GM), a K-8, mid-size school located in one of the main avenues of the district. The school occupied a large building that was recently

renovated but that had not attracted many pupils, struggling to keep enrolment above 300 students. The school intake was very diverse, with pupils coming from all over the district and only a small number living in the same area. There were 25 teachers and four people were part of the senior management team. According to the advisor appointed to the school (GM Advisor), Gladys Marin primary was picking up from a run of successive leadership rotation that left the school in a state of internal disorganisation with factions among teachers. The newly appointed head teacher had experience in the same post but in a different context: in a private-subsidised school administered by a Catholic foundation in a middle-class district. He decided to apply for this position 'to gain experience in public [state] education', as he believed that he could 'contribute to make a difference' (GM Head Teacher).

The third school, Mayflower Primary (MF), also a K-8, mid-size school like Gladys Marin, was in the centre of the district in the middle of the old part of town. The neighbourhood was established in the late 1940s and the original school building was built in the 1960s, as a temporary emergency solution after an earthquake destroyed several smaller schools. More than forty years later, the old emergency building was demolished and Mayflower moved to an abandoned school building left unoccupied when two other schools merged in 2008 due to low enrolment. Mayflower has kept a good relationship with its families over the years, which was evidenced by the fact that former students returned to enrol their children here, even coming from neighbouring districts; there were 504 students in 2013. The school had 34 teachers and four people in the senior management team. The appointed head teacher had arrived as a temporary head one year prior to the project starting, and had to re-apply for the position in 2011 when Leading Head Teachers started. His background was as teacher in a private fee-paying school and later as a deputy head in a private-subsidised school in an upper-middle class neighbourhood.

Support for these schools and head teachers was provided by three external advisors from a ATE agency hired by the Centre of School Leadership to work in this district. This ATE was a non-governmental organisation (NGO), recognised by its interdisciplinary focus on educational research and development. The ATE provided consultancy services to individual schools, local authorities, the Ministry of Education and private organisations involved in education, in topics such as management, professional development, youth culture, civics and citizenship, among others. This ATE implemented the Leading Head Teachers under the supervision of the project manager at the Centre of School Leadership, as I explained before.

The external advisors working with head teachers from this district were all female professionals with at least 20 years of experience in educational settings; two of them were psychologists and the third was a teacher. Their expertise was school management, professional development and coaching. According to the WB Yeats advisor, in the first year of the project each of the external agents spent time in all three schools to gather information about the contextual and organisational conditions where the head teachers worked. Then, from the second year, they began to work with one specific school and head teacher on a weekly basis.

### **Programme implementation in schools**

The information from this case study is representative of how Leading Head Teachers was implemented in the district and schools described in the previous section. Nevertheless, there can be some consistency in terms of the shared orientation and characteristics of the project implementation in the other districts involved.

I made the decision to prioritise the analysis of the interviews and leave my field notes and official documents as secondary sources of data to support or contrast information from interviews. This decision refers to my interest in developing an account of the implementation of the project from the voices and perspective of those directly involved, rather than from official documents or external observers.

From the data produced and collected during the interviews with head teachers and external agents, I have drawn three main themes that describe the implementation of Leading Head Teachers in this district: (i) the leadership/effectiveness assumption; (ii) normalisation, disciplining and innovation; and (iii) achieving and sustaining ‘success’. After addressing these themes, I will discuss the theory of change that underlines the implementation of this project, assisted by the literature reviewed in previous chapters.

#### *The leadership/effectiveness assumption*

Leading Head Teachers had an explicit focus on the role of school leaders, and a fundamental assumption in its rationale was that leadership is the key to turn ineffective schools around. For instance, in the official design document it reads: ‘to improve the educational outcomes of a school, research indicates that the head teacher’s role is fundamental and it is a factor only surpassed by the classroom teachers’ quality’ (Leading Head Teachers in Vulnerable Schools Project 2011, p.4), however this document offered no further details. Similarly, the advisor for Gladys Marin acknowledged that the project rationale was ‘evidently related to the practices, to what the literature and research have said regarding which types of practices

leading head teachers have', and the project manager describes the interest of Educación 2020 in developing this project by saying:

This project began to take shape, to be designed [...] by the [Educación 2020] foundation [...] to, more than anything else, gather evidence that if you work with good quality head teachers, excellent or with good technical competencies, the quality of education would effectively improve and, certainly, the learning outcomes as well. (Project Manager)

This reflects the underpinning theoretical framework of the project, which stemmed from the literature on effective school leadership and focused strongly on the individual characteristics of the leader (Blase and Blase, 2000; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2008). Interestingly, however, there were no references to specific literature in the official documents and none was mentioned during the interviews. This apparently uncritical treatment of the leadership assumption and its influence on the implementation of the project is what I briefly explore in this section.

The evident implication of this assumption is that the project strategy to generate change and improvement in schools, rests in strengthening the personal characteristics of head teachers. However, to do so, there are important considerations regarding who is going to occupy this position. The project manager stressed that they were looking to work with 'good candidates [for headship], because with good candidates we get, we can be sure, excellent head teachers'. In fact, once the district had decided to join the project in 2011, the Centre of School Leadership staff helped local authority officers in developing and implementing a public tender to appoint three new head teachers, based on a candidate profile. The head teacher of Mayflower described the process as 'complicated' and 'demanding':

[...] everything was externalised, I mean, the psychologist was external, the people who administered certain tests came from outside [the district], it was a new experience. And you could see how those, how people were dropped in the process; I mean, the number of people applying for the tender was not small, it was like 60 people (MF Head Teacher)

In two of the three schools involved, Gladys Marin and WB Yeats, a new head teacher was appointed. In the third school, Mayflower, the incumbent head teacher applied and was confirmed for the position. All of them were chosen based on a profile developed by the Centre of School Leadership. When discussing this profile in our interview, the project manager did not make explicit reference to specific literature but she did explain that there are relevant personal characteristics to determine whether a professional can succeed and

thrive as head teacher in disadvantaged schools. From her perspective, these characteristics were not related to professional or technical abilities but rather to personal attitudes or disposition:

[...] this is a project where we work with good heads that have this thing that is, like this wonderful profile, that is all you could aspire a candidate to have, more than that, they have this spark in their eyes, there is commitment, yes, they get emotional, are innovative, they don't know what they have, no, eh, eh, it's very impressive how they talk about literally doing four things at the same time and think of it as so normal, so obvious. (Project Manager)

The project manager recognised that candidates who met this profile – which I think seemed to be more a hunch than a profile – could be ‘a vehicle [...] to promote a situated cultural change’ in schools. In her opinion, this situated cultural change should be facilitated by the personal and professional characteristics of these head teachers, who are convinced of the relevance of promoting learning in schools above all else. However, the project manager also assumed that these professionals needed help to develop generic and technical competencies that would enable them to produce such change.

Once the three head teachers were appointed, the project provided them with on-site, expert support from a specially appointed ATE agency. The ATE arranged for experienced advisors to work one-to-one with the head teachers in their own schools: ‘you need permanent advisors [...] very skilful in looking at the other and capable of actively listening’ (Project Manager). In addition, the adviser for WB Yeats explained that they were expected ‘to know about some pure, hard technical things, what is an indicator, how to formulate it’, to develop technical and generic leadership competencies with head teachers.

Thus, the leadership assumption that was configured in *Leading Head Teachers* pointed towards a strong, charismatic leadership figure. This leader was expected to turn the school around based on his or her positive attitude towards learning, and supported by external expertise. However, I see an important caveat to this leadership assumption because of its uncritical stance. Head teachers in Chile are responsible for many administrative tasks, they work in precarious organisational environments with restricted resources (time, financial, staff), and they are expected to carry the responsibility for improving schools by themselves. In this sense, the adviser for WB Yeats declared ‘you cannot play all your cards on the head teacher’. For this reason, the ATE supporting the head teachers decided to work with the schools’ senior management teams as well.

There was always a dedicated work with the head teachers, but you cannot see

[...] a head teacher's competencies if you don't see them in action, and where there is more action is with their directive [senior management] teams. (WBY Advisor)

This decision to include not only the role of head teachers but also the role of those who are members of the senior management team was picked up by the project manager at the Centre of School Leadership at the end of the second year of implementation and scaled to the other districts where the project was being implemented. The advisor for Gladys Marin said that 'in its third year, the project [...] integrates, right?, more a logic of distributed leadership', which was aimed at integrating the senior management teams as subjects of the intervention, but also was a setting where school leaders interact and where an intervention to their practice and technical competences could prove more fruitful.

However, most of the advisory work with head teachers was skewed towards strengthening attitudes and dispositions, in other words, generic competencies. In this sense, the development of generic competencies in individual head teachers or members of senior teams did not seem to be enough to guarantee that a school would improve and sustain that improvement over time. To address this issue, the project introduced what I would describe as an implicit effectiveness assumption. This implicit assumption can be found in the design of the different stages of the project, namely: diagnostic self-evaluation; development of a performance contract (planning document with goals and performance indicators in different management areas); and the evaluation of outcomes (using management indicators). These stages represented what the literature on school effectiveness and improvement proposes regarding the management of internal processes in schools that will produce positive outcomes (e.g., see Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1994; Reynolds *et al.*, 2006).

Similarly, the development of an advisory plan to assist head teachers and their teams in implementing and evaluating their performance contract (CDD) in their school was also underpinned by the effectiveness and improvement literature. For example, the Gladys Marin advisor explained her approach to provide support to the head teacher, management team and school as follows:

I mean, eh, the way of looking and categorising the type of school and needs is... strongly influenced, more by effective school [literature] and the... the processes... by school... by the school improvement movement from Spanish [literature]; I mean, that is an implicit view all the time. It is not declared, but it is linked to our [professional] background... (GM Advisor)

Looking at the leadership and effectiveness assumptions together, then the rationale

promoted by Leading Head Teachers suggests that school leaders need to ensure internal conditions to develop good quality teaching and learning in their schools. In fact, towards the end of my interview with the project manager, she declared that:

Finally, the hallmark of the project is related [...] with generating horizontal relationships where you push a cultural change [...] because the bet has got nothing to do with the head teacher, the bet has to do with institutionalising processes and changing the culture, the way things are done towards improvement. (Project Manager)

This is very interesting as it presents a critical knot in the rationale of the project: the focus on leadership seems to be a way of introducing what is known as *good practice* in schools to transform its institutional culture and produce improvement through innovation (Hargreaves, 1995b; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Reynolds and Stoll, 1996). Nevertheless, introducing good practice in schools is often in line with the approaches of standardised and *one-size-fits-all* reform, which could result in quick fixes and provisional or small gains (Harris, 2002; Harris and Chapman, 2004). I argue that this seemed to be the case in this project, given the interest in promoting the institutionalisation of certain practices and the focus on a handful of performance indicators to define improvement. I will discuss these ideas in the following two sections.

#### *Normalisation, disciplining and innovation*

Despite the potential homogenising effect of institutionalising good practice, one feature of Leading Head Teachers was the flexibility in the processes and procedures chosen by each ATE to implement the project with head teachers and schools. The project implementation had some central features that were non-negotiable – i.e. working one-to-one with head teachers, spending time weekly in schools, developing leadership competencies – but the approach to providing this support varied depending on the ATE work approach and expertise; the project manager at the Centre of School Leadership supervised all this.

I transmitted what are certain relevant emphases for us [at CLE], the direct work with head teachers, three hours per week minimum, and this in relation to the development of generic or functional competencies, and others that are more technical [...] my role was to coordinate that this worked and look after the advisors so they don't stray from our minimum. (Project Manager)

So, there was a degree of freedom or autonomy for the ATE to organise its work, as long as they kept a close check on the project emphases. Nonetheless, the project manager indicated



that she was open to learn from the field experience of the ATE agencies during the project. In the case of the three schools that participated in this study, for example, the ATE supporting them prompted the decision to incorporate senior management teams into the project scope of action, which was subsequently escalated to other participant districts.

The work of the advisors in schools, though, was less structured and not defined beforehand by the project. The only guideline provided by the project manager was that advisors needed to develop horizontal relations with schools, where they ‘accompany a process, [and] the expert is the head teacher’. In the studied schools, the process of developing an advisory plan began with all three advisors visiting and spending time in each of the three schools, to familiarise themselves with these communities and gather different perspectives to assess and diagnose the conditions, needs and demands of each school and head teacher. After this initial stage, each advisor began working only with one head teacher, developing a specific support strategy based on the initial diagnostic assessment; as the WB Yeats advisor explained:

[...] because there we wove, we built, we wove a vision about them and their competencies, about them and their wishes for their school, and [a view] about the school as well, since they were just coming in, two out of three [head teachers], and we did that process together. (WBY Advisor)

However, while the intention was not to impose a leadership model on head teachers, the emphases of Leading Head Teachers implementation fashioned head teachers’ practice to concentrate on specific management issues in their schools. These management issues were often incorporated as indicators in head teachers’ performance contracts (CDD), in relation to attainment, attendance and enrolment. Similarly, the development of leadership competencies with head teachers was intended to help them enhance their management capacities: ‘we need a head teacher with a clearer management map [...] a head teacher of a municipal school needs to be *an ace* for strategic planning, so to speak’ (GM Advisor).

Apparently, not only the role of head teachers was restricted in this sense, but also the role of advisors supporting them. The Gladys Marin advisor, when asked to describe her work supporting the head teacher and his team, explained that schools’ routine *disciplines* or controls head teachers and advisors alike. This was identified as problematic in terms of its detrimental effect on the possibility of innovation and exploring creativity in schools. For instance, regarding the work of developing competencies in head teachers, she noticed that:

[...] here enters a sort of individual variable, regarding that these head teachers have to become leading head teachers [...] And the leadership of [WBY Head

Teacher] is not the same as that of [MF Head Teacher] and... I think we have homogenised them, we have done well regarding their competencies, but now we should help them tap into their personal qualities. (GM Adviser)

The issue of developing technical and generic competencies with head teachers was problematic because it homogenised their practice at the expense of their personal qualities. Interestingly, these qualities were the very reason why they were chosen for the head teacher position and as participants of Leading Head Teachers in the first place, suggesting an inconsistency with the project rationale. Moreover, the disciplining effect of the school routine on head teachers pushed them to centre their work on indicators such as learning outcomes (measured by SIMCE), attendance rates and enrolment numbers, which is what the school system's normative and institutional framework considered as improvement indicators. I will return to this issue in the following section.

Regarding this disciplining effect, during one of the interviews I made the following observation about the role of external support, prompted by the account of the WB Yeats advisor about the time spent and dedication devoted to the work in schools.

Well, but that is also, in a way, responsive to how school improvement policy has, so to speak, positioned the technical assistance [external support] in relation to schools, it positions them from the point where they come in, do their activity and then leave, provide support for specific issues and leave, and that responds to a certain rationale of how improvement should happen in schools [in Chile].

In response to this, the WB Yeats advisor acknowledged that Leading Head Teachers was attractive to them as an ATE because it looked at the school 'in its totality'. However, I would dispute this idea, since the project had a marked emphasis on school leadership, and particularly headship, as a lever for improvement, rather than embracing a whole-school approach. Thus, the notion of disciplining was perceived to be affecting the practice of advisors as well, as they needed to make sure head teachers responded to these external demands prior to exploring other approaches to improving the school. For instance, the Gladys Marin advisor recognised the need to help head teachers 'shake things up' in schools but only after certain basic issues related to the functioning of schools – e.g. students arriving to school on time, teachers are in the classroom teaching – were covered.

I would like to stress that I do not think there is something wrong with having an orderly, functional school. However, I would question the notion that there is only one right way of doing this, echoing the issue with *one-size-fits-all* interventions. In this sense, during the conversation with head teachers, it became evident that there were not many options

available for them – and arguably, for advisors as well – to do things differently, but efforts were being made to innovate within their schools.

[...] here there are spaces for innovation. Not all that we would like, but there are and... and the advisory in that sense, through the PME [school's improvement plan], what we are looking for with the skimpy resources we have, with the scant resources we have, is to be able to maximise those resources and, eh, try and cover the most pressing needs (WBY Head Teacher)

In Chile, particularly the municipal sector, the lack of resources, such as funding but essentially people and time, is arguably a barrier to address the internal needs of school communities. In the three studied schools, resources were devoted to answer and comply with demands external to the school, in terms of administrative and management tasks defined by the normative and institutional framework. Nevertheless, advisors supported head teachers and their teams in dealing with these issues while at the same time attempted to push them into thinking and projecting their work beyond those tasks.

The other day I had a conversation with the curriculum leader and the discipline leader, and... I think it illustrates well this tension; so, in this conversation I think we were talking about feedback, I don't remember clearly, and the discipline leader says, 'well I'm certain that we need to update our School Behaviour Handbook... the behaviour handbook, the discipline and we have to discuss it, blah, blah, blah'. And I said, 'very appropriate', I mean, we were very good, 'that is what we need to do and urgently; but leave that for a moment... What do you want to happen with this school? What do you want to do? What is preventing your from doing it?' (GM Advisor)

In this case, the assumption from the advisors and head teachers was that the tension between disciplining and innovating could be relieved if there is a sound *normalisation* of processes in place. For participants, normalisation was a recurrent concept that pointed to ensure that a limited number of management processes were implemented systematically in schools, resembling the intention of previous school improvement initiatives, such as the P900 (see chapter four). This is closely related to the previous section about the leadership/effectiveness assumption: every change needs to go through the head teacher; as an advisor suggested:

Deep down, having a leadership that is more distributed, that identifies in a clearer way the areas of institutional management, that allows to normalise more precisely the key routines in each area (GM Advisor)

This normalisation was adopted, then, as a vital element of the support provided by advisors to head teachers and their teams. All those involved in this process also conceived it as a way of sharing the responsibility for the functioning of the school. The advisors identified it as a key condition for contributing to the performance contract and, subsequently, to the improvement of schools. Similarly, head teachers recognised their responsibility and that of their teams in normalising school routines for similar purposes, considering this normalisation as a necessary step towards improvement.

Eh, so when we were with the advisor and we started with this performance contract there were some academic emphases, so we had to look for an academic strategy together with the academic coordinator or the curriculum leader to achieve some degree of normalisation. (WBY Head Teacher)

[...] this year our focus is on the normalisation and... and the normalisation of school routines from the initiation of classroom lessons to the implementation of the lesson itself, with structure and all that. (GM Head Teacher)

In the last quote, referring particularly to the different moments of a lesson, it is important to note that the structure that the head teacher was referring to is determined by a national teaching framework called Good Teaching Framework (*Marco de la Buena Enseñanza* – MBE), developed by the Ministry of Education. Most instances when head teachers and advisors referred to topics such as lesson planning and structure, or discipline and behaviour control as issues to be normalised, these were often linked, in one way or another, with a national policy or framework. Once again, it seemed that normalisation tended to answer to external demands instead of caring for the school's internal needs or interests. Therefore, normalisation consisted of modelling certain behaviours and practices that were expected from teachers.

For me in the first year it was key; in the first year I did... what I did the most was modelling too. I planned [lessons] with the teachers, I did lessons with teachers... eh, when we had to reprimand [a student], also with teachers. Talking too... with teachers, parents also with me... I told them 'look, eh, this is the dynamic, this is the conversation that has to happen... ok?' (GM Head Teacher)

In summary, I would argue that the role assigned by the policy framework to external technical support programmes, such as Leading Head Teachers, seems to be orientated to promote this normalisation through disciplining. However, the Leading Head Teachers project also expected external advisors to help head teachers and their teams to release their potential as innovative school leaders. This expectation was toned-down by the

circumstances in which these professionals worked, expecting to achieve improvement through assuring that external demands were met first. This expectation about schools moving forward in terms of building on what was achieved during their participation in the project, came from the strategic leadership at Educación 2020 foundation.

It is Mario Weissbluth [president of Educación 2020] who has given us this perspective, it is not a makeshift idea, no, this is a tremendously strategic perspective that he is pushing, saying ‘well, ok, this helped us to normalise schools, this helped us to create, generate routines, to make things work, now that all schools work, so now we need to make the jump’. (Project Manager)

Educación 2020 foundation expected this project to provide them with exemplars of how good quality, excellent head teachers deliver quality education in schools. The question remains, though, about the potential of this project to improve the quality of schooling; in other words, how successful it was.

#### *Achieving and sustaining ‘success’*

From an external perspective, it is possible to argue that the Leading Head Teachers project was a successful one. By 2013, the third year of implementation, most schools across all participant districts showed progress in areas such as enrolment and attendance. Similarly, the schools from the specific district I studied demonstrated positive results in their respective performance contracts (CDD) in relation to these and other indicators (e.g., number of lesson plans checked by the curriculum leader, or number of teachers’ medical leave days). Both attendance and enrolment, but mainly enrolment, are critical in the current Chilean school system context, considering that school funding (voucher) depends on the number of students enrolled in the school and their monthly average attendance.

According to the project manager, Leading Head Teachers had an immediate positive influence on the critical issue of enrolment. Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing if the new students came from other municipal schools or from some of the several private-subsidised schools in the district. According to the project manager, increasing the number of students enrolled in these schools was only a first step.

[...] what do I expect, that enrolment stabilises, definitively, I would dare to say, I do not have the exact number here, but I would dare say fifty per cent of schools [involved in the Project] have improved their enrolment, and that has been super relevant for us, those hard indicators [...] But what worries me the most, the high expectations have to do with the children, I mean, that there

should be an impact on learning outcomes, and if that does not happen, we have to worry. (Project Manager)

As the project manager suggested, although the progress in ‘hard indicators’ such as enrolment are positive, more needed to be achieved to meet the expectation of raising the quality of education. The focus turned to learning outcomes in schools, and how to translate the work done with head teachers and their teams into gains for students’ learning. The project manager declared that, in all the districts involved with the project, about half of the schools had improved their learning outcomes by the second year of implementation, although she did not make clear if this is the same group of schools that had increased their enrolment. She suggested that ‘our bet was [improving learning outcomes] the following year [2013], I mean at least we thought it would take three years of work before it reflected in SIMCE’.

SIMCE, Chile’s national examination for primary and secondary schools, appeared strongly in the narrative of the project as a key element to determine what improvement is. With regards to *normalisation, disciplining and innovation*, the argument was that schools, particularly municipal ones, need to survive in an environment that is highly demanding in terms of effectiveness indicators; enrolment, attendance and learning outcomes measured by SIMCE. In fact, the WBY advisor acknowledged that, even though it might not be the best test to measure education quality, schools cannot say ‘I don’t care about SIMCE, “it is indifferent to us”; that is destructive, ok?’. Chilean schools are often ranked by news media in terms of their SIMCE outcomes, and SIMCE scores are thought to be a vital element to explain parental preference in Chile’s school choice system. Nevertheless, SIMCE is not the only measure of students’ learning in schools; in fact, as I described in chapter two, Chilean students are assessed by and grade promotion depends on teachers’ evaluation of their learning. It follows that SIMCE is a high-stakes test for schools and – slightly less – for teachers, but it represents no stakes for students whatsoever. Considering this, when I asked the project manager about how to assess the impact of the project, she declared:

[...] how am I going to look at it [project impact]? With SIMCE 2013; year 2014, how am I going to look at it? With [SIMCE’s] achievement levels and other assessments, likely to be external, all districts have external assessments. Ok, look, I still do not give credit to the grades teachers give [to students], but in most schools, we are generating, the senior management teams are generating different formulas to improve the assessment systems of teachers, but as verification it has to be SIMCE, it has to be external assessments of reading

comprehension, of certain mathematical skills, problem solving and, obviously, the achievement levels. (Project Manager)

Interestingly then, the approach of the project seemed to put emphasis on developing sound internal processes that respond to external demands. These processes I addressed in the previous section when talking about the emphasis on school management. Here, I would like to go deeper into the external demands, which consist of indicators of school quality and effectiveness, or as one of the head teachers put it, of success.

[...] if you compare me from 2007 to now, I have more children now than when I got the school. When all municipal schools had losses of enrolment, I have more; I mean, I can stand as a successful guy in the municipal sector anywhere you like. But that is super dangerous, it is super dangerous. Therefore, you must take care of those results, but you need to strengthen them and... and one does not strengthen only by improving SIMCE outcomes, but rather putting new things into action (MF Head Teacher)

The notion of being ‘successful’ was closely related, then, to demonstrating a good performance with these undoubtedly important indicators. But the Mayflower head teacher added an interesting reflection regarding this issue: it is a dangerous thing to consider himself successful. He then moved on to say that they needed to consider these indicators but also should add other things. Question is, what are those?

[Interviewer]: Do you know, with more or less clarity, why you have had such a good run?

[Head Teacher]: Because we have... we have systematised some processes. For example, the last three years’ results, they are not because there is a specific teacher working in fourth grade [one of the grades that sits for SIMCE], in fact we have changed them. But we have systematised certain processes and... and big part of that is related with teachers being able to take responsibility for their own [students’ learning] goals; so, here, for example, in the diagnostic evaluation we did not decide their goals for them, they decided themselves [...] some of them we had to lower their goals because they were challenging themselves too much. So, eh, there is an element that I think is valuable. (MF Head Teacher)

The Mayflower head teacher’s answer did not represent with clarity what is that additional thing they needed to look at to complement the effectiveness indicators I have been talking about here. He mainly referred to the systematisation of processes, which resembles the notion of normalisation that I addressed previously, but he also addressed the fact that

teachers assumed responsibility for their students' learning goals. This process of *responsibilisation* might result stressful for teachers (Kelly and Colquhoun, 2003), as they take on the responsibility to meet these external demands regardless of the internal conditions of the school and the social conditions of students' families. Certainly, this is an important idea but I think it does not present a clear account of how those results were achieved, or even more, can be sustained. Another perspective from the Gladys Marin head teacher addressed this issue:

It has improved but it has been fluctuating, this of going up and down... lately we went up again [in SIMCE], but our task, I mean I still would not dare say it is due, eh, to a more systematic and rigorous work. And...I think there has been focus of attention and competency from some of the teachers, more than a whole-school work. Although yes, as leaders we put or intend to orientate the work. (GM Head Teacher)

Here, it is easier to appreciate the uncertainty of how these good results came about in schools. Whereas in the narrative of the Mayflower head teacher there was a hint of explanation at how some teachers take responsibility for students' learning, in the Gladys Marin head teacher's account there was an acknowledgement that it was not a whole-school effort. I think this relates to the fact that focusing on SIMCE is pushing schools to concentrate on those grades assessed by SIMCE. Primary schools usually concentrate on fourth grade results because those are the results used to evaluate their performance at national level, according to policy arrangements, with second and eighth grade SIMCE having a lesser impact.

Explaining the positive results of schools became something of a puzzle for external advisors as well, although they acknowledged that the work they did had influenced those outcomes. The main question was how head teachers made sense of what happened during the first three years of project implementation in their schools and how advisors supported them going forward in terms of sustaining that improvement.

What might happen is that schools will consolidate [their performance] in the upcoming years and we are all convinced that this is an inflection point to influence, now and for the coming years, in those results. Eh... and they have not explained yet, because they still cannot get the variables that influence [students'] learning; identify them [...] so far is more of a conversation, a pick and mix, all the time... a little of accompaniment, a little of conversation with teachers, a little of lesson planning, a little of the evaluation. (GM Advisor)



The strategies described here are, as I noted in the section above, what advisors modelled with head teachers so they could use them to work their teachers. Being close, having conversations and keeping lesson planning and evaluation in check, seemed to be key strategies to change practice in schools. However, it was not clear how these strategies worked together or were part of a larger, whole-school strategy to promote improvement. The rationale of Leading Head Teachers was based on the idea of an excellent, successful head teacher who would generate cultural change in schools; but is it all about the head teacher? The WB Yeats advisor offered some clarification regarding how success would come about in schools:

We have developed a model, over time, in which we install, strengthen and install structure, strengthen and install processes and strengthen or help the development of competencies, and that, at least, those three conditions, basically the first two allow you to install the frame that allows continuous improvement, beyond you or me being the head teacher. A school that regularly has teachers' meetings, in which there is a technical discussion and all, is a school that has more conditions to move forward than a school with a super head teacher who then moves elsewhere and well... (WBY Advisor)

Once again, the role of the head teacher was highlighted as someone who would make things happen, install and strengthen processes and structures, a vehicle, as the project manager described earlier. However, the key issue for improvement apparently went beyond the 'super head teacher' and the key for success, or 'continuous improvement' as the WB Yeats advisor described, was to develop a set of practices that would ensure that the school would perform, regardless of the person in charge.

### **Theory of change: How does the Leading Head Teachers promote improvement?**

As already mentioned, Leading Head Teachers drew its principles and key assumptions significantly from the literature on leadership and management in schools (Bush, 2003; Bush, 2008; Chapman, 2004; Firestone and Riehl, 2005; Harris, 2001a; Jackson, 2000; Leithwood, 2010; Spillane, 2009; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004). Since the early 2000s, the relevance of these topics for global education reform, particularly leadership, has been highlighted by policymakers and researchers as they try to find evidence of an direct or indirect influence on teaching and learning in schools (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004b; Mulford and Silins, 2003; Thoonen *et al.*, 2012).

For example, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), using data from an evaluation of the English

National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, tested the effect of transformational leadership on teachers' motivation, capacity and work settings, on classroom practice, and on gains in student achievement in Key Stage 2 tests. Their analysis offers evidence of strong effects on teachers' work settings and motivation, moderate effect on teachers' capacity, and weak but significant effects on classroom practice; conversely, only a weak effect was found on student achievement for numeracy.

In another example, a longitudinal study by Hallinger and Heck (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Heck and Hallinger, 2010) offers evidence of a reciprocal, moderated effect between school improvement capacity, learning achievement and what they call collaborative leadership, which focuses on school-wide actions and structures, and is shared among teachers, local authorities and leadership teams. The authors suggest that leadership can be an initial driver for changes in school improvement capacity, understood as schools' internal processes; in addition, leadership mediates the effect of school improvement capacity on learning outcomes, measured by standardised mathematics tests. They also indicate that changes to the initial levels of school improvement capacity and learning outcomes have a reciprocal influence on leadership.

Similar evidence has been disseminated far and wide over the past decade, prompting international agencies and a host of international education consultants to use it to convince governments to adopt school leadership as a key driver for education reform (e.g., see Barber, Whelan and Clark, 2010; Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008). However, I would argue that Educación 2020, although aware of this evidence, opted to develop its own approach to find evidence of leadership influence on the improvement of schools in the Chilean context. During the conversation with the project manager and the advisors, they emphatically asserted that they did not want to impose a specific leadership style or model on head teachers. In fact, this was the reason for dismissing one of the ATE agencies that was collaborating with the project in a district different to the one I studied. They attempted to implement a set model for leadership and management and the project manager intervened, resulting in the end of the contract with this agency.

Conversely, the ATE agency that worked with head teachers in the district where I did this study assumed a different approach. Very much in line with what Educación 2020 expected, the external advisors emphasised the development of individual technical and personal competencies in head teachers, and later with members of school leadership teams. These competencies were aimed, as described in previous sections, to help head teachers influence cultural change in their schools. At the same time, the project was aimed at helping head

teachers learn and develop personal competencies to effectively influence other members of the school community, teachers mainly, and drive the school towards more effective practices.

Both leadership and effectiveness were very closely linked in the project rationale as its key assumptions. Similarly, the literature stresses this close relationship, asserting that the study of educational leadership, in its various conceptualisations (e.g., instructional, transformational, distributed), began in the 1980s drawing from research on effective schools (Hallinger, 2003). This link between leadership and effectiveness has not passed unnoticed for critics, who have observed how leadership has been used as a vehicle to incorporate the effectiveness knowledge-base into schools' daily routines.

Many authorities in the school effectiveness field have identified 'leadership' as occupying a critical position in the development of effective schools (...) This constituency has remained centre-stage (...) with the training, re-skilling, re-orientation, managerialization and certification of heads occupying a key place (Hextall and Mahony, 1998, p. 132).

It is important to note that the relationship between leadership and effectiveness is not simply one where a given concept is subordinated to the other. Rather, the fact that these concepts are so closely related calls into question the knowledge production process that provides the foundation for such relationship. For instance, Gunter, Hall and Bragg (2013) map and analyse the knowledge production associated with the concept of distributed leadership, classified into functional (descriptive and normative), critical and socially critical positions. They find that the functional position is prevalent in scholarship about distributed leadership, at the expense of the others, offering descriptions of everyday practice in schools and organisational routines associated with leadership, while also providing rationales and models for practitioners as imperatives that reduce empirical research outcomes to short descriptions. Moreover, the authors link the functional knowledge production position to what they call the epistemic network of school effectiveness and school improvement.

The argument developed by Gunter and colleagues resonates with how Educación 2020 approached the implementation of the Leading Head Teachers project, and my analysis of such implementation. The development of leadership competencies on head teachers as a requisite to promote improvement in schools is – at least implicitly – informed by effectiveness and improvement literature, and the functional knowledge production position about leadership. The external advisors and the project manager were also operating under this knowledge production position, concentrating on helping head teachers develop best

(leadership) practice and prioritise certain internal management processes to address external demands. External advisors, encouraged by the project manager, provided on-site support to head teachers through a flexible approach based on what they learned from an extended period of familiarisation with each school context. The constant presence of external advisors in schools allowed them to gain in credibility with school leaders and, to some extent teachers, and their activities influenced decision-making in schools, fostering an emphasis on the normalisation of certain key internal processes.

This notion of normalisation stems, once again, from the effectiveness and improvement literature. For example, Gray and colleagues (1999), building upon case studies of improvement trajectories in schools, describe three approaches to achieve such improvement: tactical, strategic and capacity-building. The authors claimed that most schools in their study showed a tactical approach to improvement, engaging on a small number of short-term, *obvious* pedagogical and organisational practices or processes (e.g., test preparation workshops, monitoring students' and teachers' performance, reviewing codes of conduct, etc.), as a way 'to respond to the dictates of what more than one head called "the improvement game"' (Gray *et al.*, 1999, p. 145). These processes, interestingly described as *obvious* by the authors, resemble what head teachers in the case study called *normalisation of school routines*, considered by head teachers and external advisors as minimum elements to improve teaching and learning conditions in schools.

External advisors are supposed to play a key role in this process, providing the necessary expertise to guide and orientate the efforts of head teachers and schools (Chapman, 2005; Harris, 2002; Muijs *et al.*, 2004; Newmann and Sconzert, 2000). The role of these external change agents is to assist schools in the process of building internal capacity, both at individual (skills and competencies) and organisational (processes and practices) levels, to initiate and sustain a change process (Tajik, 2008). However, capacity building is not a simple, universal process, and in fact is context- and time-dependent with unique characteristics according to specific school settings (Stringer, 2009). Also important, is how external change agents enact their role (e.g., as technical experts, facilitators or critical friends), the relationship that they establish with teachers, what position they have in the overall improvement initiative, and whether they hold some form of formal authority in schools (Craig, 2001; Lieberman, 2001; Tajik, 2008).

This overall positive portrayal notwithstanding, effectiveness and improvement literature indicates several caveats regarding the action of external agents in school change and improvement initiatives, such as lack of trust and empathy with school staff, narrowly

defined areas of intervention or outcomes, and top-down approaches that generate resistance (Chapman, 2005; Finnigan and O'Day, 2003; García and Donmoyer, 2005; MacBeath, 1998; Swaffield, 2005). Another lesson from research relevant for Leading Head Teachers is that, by attempting to provide support to schools' staff and change their practice, external agents can extend the reach of institutional control over teachers' and leaders' actions in schools (Cameron, 2010; Tajik, 2008). This notion of external agents as control agents can be linked back to the idea of disciplining that was expressed by one of the external advisors during the interviews; by focusing head teachers' work towards a handful of management processes and outcomes, they were standardising their personal characteristics and professional practice. Thus, although the role of external advisors was not prescribed in the Leading Head Teachers project, it was strongly influenced by the rationale of the Chilean policy framework, providing much needed help to schools while at the same time acting as institutional control, surveillance and disciplining mechanisms. This type of relationship between school leaders and external agents has been documented in other contexts, as well (MacBeath, 2006; Swaffield, 2015).

These elements, the emphasis on school leadership, the reliance on the effectiveness knowledge-base, and the role of external change agents, are part of the theory of change in this case. The general assumption seems to point to developing a blend of transformative and instructional leadership, able to deliver a back-to-basics approach to turn schools around. The theory of change in this case is underpinned by notions of professionalism and professionalisation (Ball, 2003b; Popkewitz, 1994; Popkewitz, 1998; Whitty, 2000), and particularly in relation to the role of head teachers as key actors in the process of disciplining and normalising schools. Although improvement was reached, in accordance with several effectiveness indicators, there is no clarity how *success* was achieved and consequently no clue of how to sustain it, very much in line with a tactical approach to school improvement.

## CHAPTER X

### CASE STUDY THREE: SHARED SUPPORT PLAN (PLAN APOYO COMPARTIDO – PAC)

As I outlined in chapter four, the Shared Support Plan (PAC) was a policy intervention in schools, put in place by the right-wing government of Sebastian Piñera between 2011 and 2014. According to an interview in 2011 with Verónica Abud, who was head of the general education division at the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) at the time, education in Chile was in crisis, given that a large proportion of students failed to meet national literacy standards for fourth grade, meaning that they could not read and write properly (Chernin, 2011). To tackle this crisis, Abud declared in the interview that PAC was developed as a ‘shock doctrine’ programme that would intervene in over 1000 primary schools in Chile. This decision produced intense resistance within MINEDUC given that it meant direct intervention from central government on schools’ instructional practice, which went against the approach that characterised right-wing politics and an education policy trajectory in Chile since 1990 of reduced State intervention, and reliance on market forces and competition among schools to improve system performance to eliminate poor quality schools (Burton, 2012; Donoso, 2005; OECD, 2004).

The interview describes how Abud managed to convince the education minister at the time, Joaquín Lavín, of the benefits of this type of intervention with the help and consultancy of Paul Vallas, a well-known figure in school reform in the US, particularly for his work in Chicago, Philadelphia and New Orleans after hurricane Katrina (Useem, 2009). Additionally, according to official documents from the programme, similar intervention experiences in England, South Africa, Brazil and India were taken as evidence to support the development of PAC in Chile. Unfortunately, there are no documents publicly available describing these international experiences and what elements were considered in the design of PAC.

PAC was launched as a national programme in the 2011 school year, and by 2013 it was being implemented in approximately 1300 primary schools, municipal and private-subsidised, making it one of the largest external technical support programmes in Chile. The programme operated normally until the 2014 school year, when the new centre-left government of Michelle Bachelet took office. The Bachelet administration decided that PAC would not incorporate any new schools that year, and those schools already participating were unofficially informed by provincial departments (DEPROV) that the programme would be discontinued.

The programme outlined ambitious goals in 2011. It aimed to increase SIMCE national

average by 10 points and reduce the gap between the poorest and richest deciles in the fourth grade test (Spanish and mathematics) by 2013 in all primary schools in the country, not only in intervention schools. An evaluation report was due at end of the 2013 school year but it was not published or made available. Nevertheless, programme documents quoted a preliminary evaluation by MINEDUC's Research Centre, based on 2011 SIMCE scores, comparing the average score of 700 schools participating in PAC with non-participant schools. This evaluation reported gains of 5.4 and 5.34 points in mathematics and Spanish, respectively, after roughly eight months of programme implementation. No information was made available regarding the gap between the poorest and richest deciles in this preliminary evaluation.

According to my own calculations based on official SIMCE data that MINEDUC made public in June 2014, the national average for fourth grade in Spanish went down from 267 points in 2011 to 264 in 2013, and in mathematics went down from 259 to 256 points for the same period. In the specific case of the primary school that participated in my study, its average SIMCE score for fourth grade registered gains of 13 and 29 points in Spanish and mathematics, respectively, in the 2011-2013 period. This is highly exceptional for municipal schools, which saw their national average decrease by four points in Spanish and three points in mathematics for the same period. Although the experience of this school is not sufficient to evaluate the impact of PAC as a national intervention, it would offer important insights into the PAC's implementation nevertheless.

Finally, to understand PAC's impact on SIMCE's national average, it is necessary to consider two additional issues: first, that the programme was implemented in approximately 1000 primary schools, with unknown levels of attrition and replacement over the four years of implementation. Second, that this group of schools represented one eighth of the total number of primaries in Chile (8573 in 2013). This means that the programme expected to raise SIMCE's national average by intervening in a low percentage of the lowest performing schools, which could opt-out and be replaced by others at any point, complicating the reliability of any impact evaluation.

### **Programme design**

PAC focused on Pre-K to fourth grade, delivering specific standardised pedagogical materials and resources (year, unit and lesson plans; student textbooks; and assessment instruments) to schools. Initially, PAC covered Spanish and mathematics, but later included social studies (history and geography) and science. According to Astudillo and Imbarack (2013), the

purpose of this programme was to deliver support to low performing schools to build autonomous capacity for improvement. Although participation was voluntary, the programme targeted schools that met the following criteria:

- Have a raw average SIMCE score lower than national average for five years, although it was not specified how much lower or if it had to be consistently lower over that period. This comparison with the national average was made regardless of any contextual factors like the schools' administrative dependency, students' socioeconomic background or proportion of students with special education needs (SEN). If a school had average scores lower than the national average, then the programme targeted it.
- Have at least 20 students in each grade level targeted by the programme (Pre-K to fourth grade). It was not clearly explained in any document why this is relevant, but it might be possible that the instructional scripts (lesson plans, assessment) and other resources (booklets, readings) had been designed for that minimum number of students per classroom.
- That the local authority (municipal or private-subsidised) of the school had not been subject to sanctions for infringement of administrative regulations. This is a specific issue of Chile's school system, where local authorities receive public funds to run schools and are audited by the Superintendence of Education for the proper use of those resources.

Considering that all schools in Chile would eventually take part in the classification and sorting system by the Quality Agency according to their performance, PAC official documents indicated that those schools assigned to the two lower performance categories (Medium-Low and Insufficient) would be invited to participate in PAC. It was not clear as to whether this invitation would be welcomed by all schools assigned to these categories, although I think it would have been strongly suggested to them by ministry officials as a way of fast tracking to a higher performance category. In the end, PAC was discontinued before the trial period of the classification and sorting of schools took place in 2015.

According to PAC's website<sup>12</sup>, to improve, schools need support to develop effective practice in five areas: effective curriculum implementation; developing a favourable environment for learning; effective use of instruction time; monitoring student achievement; and teachers'

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<sup>12</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.apoyocompartido.cl> (in Spanish).



professional development. In addition, school leadership was considered as a key element to facilitate the development of these five areas and the transference of instructional materials and activities to classrooms. According to PAC's Strategic Manual, these five areas were all important to achieve the main goal of the programme, which was 'to improve students' learning outcomes strengthening curricular and institutional management capacities in participant schools' (PAC Strategic Manual 2013, page 6). These areas of improvement are very familiar to system-wide reform initiatives, which are generally promoted by international agencies and informed by school effectiveness research (Ball, 1998a; Scheeners, 2014).

PAC offered schools a pedagogical programme for the first four years of primary, consisting of a series of learning units or 'cycles' (four to six, depending on the subject and grade) that encompassed a variable number of lessons. For each lesson, PAC offered teachers' guidebooks, students' workbooks and instructional materials. At the end of a cycle, students took a standardised test, also included in the materials delivered to schools by PAC, covering the cycle's contents. Each classroom teacher, assisted by the leadership team, tallied students' responses into a web-based system, which then provided a brief report of individual students' results that was subsequently fed back to teachers for discussion. PAC also offered classroom observation schedules, which were used by school leaders to monitor lessons and feeding back to teachers about their teaching practice. In summary, PAC could be described as a data-driven support strategy focused on improving student learning in key areas (Portales, 2013).

Although the support materials and activities were centrally designed by MINEDUC, the implementation of PAC was decentralised and school-based where two teams were expected to interact. A School Leadership Team (ELE), consisting of the head teacher, curriculum leader and two teachers, was responsible for the programme's implementation in each school. They received support from a second team of Technical Pedagogical Advisors (ATP), two supervisors from the ministry's provincial department (DEPROV) who visited the school between four and six times during the school year (March to December), depending on each school's performance. These advisors assisted the leadership team (ELE) in monitoring the programme's progress and evaluate educational outcomes, using data collected from classroom observations and tests.

Schools were expected to work with PAC for four years, but they could opt-out at the end of each year. The first two years were oriented to install and improve effective pedagogical and institutional practices, through the provision of systematic support from technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) and printed instructional materials. In the third and fourth year,

the aim was for technical pedagogical advisors to assist the school leadership team (ELE) in the consolidation of effective instructional and management practices. This cycle of four years followed the pattern suggested by national (Bellei, 2013; Cristian Bellei & Gonzalez, 2013; Cristián Bellei, Osses, & Valenzuela, 2010; Sotomayor, 2006) and international (Chapman, 2005; Finnigan, Bitter, & O'Day, 2009; Finnigan, Day, & O'Day, 2003) literature regarding the characteristics and length of external technical support to have an impact on schools' performance and change in practice. Thus, PAC's design resembled a prescriptive pressure and support approach to external support, as introduced in chapter five. PAC put forward a whole-school approach to improvement, setting curricular implementation and SIMCE as targets (pressure), mediated by instructional materials and facilitated by technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) as external agents (support).

Finally, non-participant schools had access to programme's material in digital format from PAC's website, except for assessment instruments, which had to be requested through a web-based contact form. This opened the possibility for schools that did not meet the selection criteria to benefit from PAC resources, or facilitate those undecided eligible schools to try out the programme. Unfortunately, there were no available records of how many non-participant schools accessed these resources or whether some of the eligible schools decided to join the programme after trying some of its resources. However, the number of schools participating in the programme did not change considerably (1000 to 1300 schools) between 2011 and 2013, and there was no information of how many completed the four years of implementation. Thus, an undetermined number of the original 1000 schools opted out of PAC, and up to 300 new schools could have joined the programme in 2013.

### **Researching the programme**

Different from the previous two cases, the study of this external technical support programme presented some difficulties. Several schools I contacted declined to participate in my study, because they had decided to opt out from PAC for the 2013 school year, due to difficulties related to the implementation in previous years or teachers' opposition to the programme. These schools did not make their difficulties explicit but there was a general sense in other case study schools that PAC could be a controversial programme for several reasons. Informal conversations with participants working in and with schools indicated that there could be political reasons to opt out of PAC; for example, if the Mayor of a given municipality was part of the political opposition to the government, it was likely that schools administered by that municipality would reject or be impeded to accept the invitation to join this ministry programmes. I was also told that some municipal local authorities might have

signed agreements with teachers' and heads' associations not to accept intervention programmes from the ministry in their schools, and especially when these involved classroom observation<sup>13</sup>. Finally, other schools implementing PAC argued that they were afraid that, due to recent changes in teaching staff or newly appointed head teachers, the research process could result in an unnecessary distraction and declined to participate in my study.

Despite these initial difficulties, I managed to secure the participation of one school that was in its second year implementing PAC; High Forest primary. However, this happened during the last month of the fieldwork (June 2013), and it was not possible to get a grasp of all the relevant aspects of the programme's implementation in that timeframe, more specifically the perspective of classroom teachers. During that month, I managed to do three interviews with members of the school leadership team (ELE) about their perspective on the programme, and very briefly observe part of two classroom lessons. Additionally, I collected PAC's official documents and presentations from the programme's website, which give some more detail into the programme's rationale, aims and design.

Considering the restrictions that the initial data collection situation entailed, in terms of limited time and restricted access to informants, I decided to return to the school a year after the initial fieldwork period. My main target was to secure access to teachers working with and implementing PAC with their students and interview them to explore their perspective about the programme and its relationship with the process of improvement in their school. The school had continued implementing the programme and I was able to interview two primary teachers actively involved in it, a newly qualified teacher (third grade) and a more experienced teacher (fourth grade).

Finally, it is relevant to acknowledge the implications of conducting the case study in what can be rightly characterised as a *pro-PAC* school. Given the nature of the convenience sampling of schools that I applied within each of the three cases of external technical support programmes, it was possible that I could find myself in a situation where eligible schools might decline to participate. This only happened in the case study of PAC and I have noted

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<sup>13</sup> Classroom observation is not a common practice in municipal schools, and often head teachers and local authorities negotiate access to classrooms with teachers in schools. The only exception is the national Teacher Evaluation, which takes place every four years, where teachers agree to be videotaped giving a specific lesson to complement a peer and head teacher assessment, and the portfolio they submit for evaluation.

above that this could be explained by the political controversy associated with this programme and the perceived prescriptive nature of its intervention. For these reasons, some local authorities, schools and teachers seemed wary of joining PAC, and I would argue that those who did joined and later continued implementing the programme might have been supportive of this type of intervention.

Although I expect that my analysis of PAC's implementation in High Forest can illustrate how the programme provided external technical support to the school, under no circumstances do I consider it possible to generalise the experience of this case to the rest of municipal and private-subsidised schools that were eligible for the programme. Nevertheless, being a context-specific and context-bound study, the experience of PAC in High Forest can be useful for reflecting on the experience of similar schools that decided to join the programme, and offered a unique opportunity to inquire into the complexities that emerged from implementing an external technical support programme that can be characterised as a prescriptive pressure and support intervention.

### Participant school

High Forest was a medium-size, municipal school in a large urban city in central Chile. Table 6 summarises the main characteristics of High Forest and the participants interviewed.

*Table 6. Sample of school, its characteristics and participants interviewed – Shared Support Plan*

School Pseudonym	School Characteristics (school year 2013)	Participants (interviewed)
<b>High Forest Primary (HF)</b>	28 teachers, three school leaders, and 465 students.	- Head Teacher - Curriculum Leader - Discipline Leader - Fourth Grade Teacher - Third Grade Teacher

The school offered pre-K to eighth grade education, with two groups in each level. There were 465 students enrolled in 2013, which was higher than the average enrolment of similar municipal primary schools in the district. It also had 28 teachers and teaching assistants, and a senior management team that consisted of the head teacher, curriculum leader and discipline leader; these three professionals along with two classroom teachers constituted the school leadership team (ELE). The senior management team had been working together

since the appointment of the head teacher in 2009, which seemed to have given stability to the management of the school, and arguably was a relevant factor for PAC's implementation.

High Forest was in a socially disadvantaged area of the district and it catered for students living in the neighbouring area from working class families, most of them eligible for free school meals and other social benefits. Most parents' education was ten years of schooling (where the compulsory schooling is twelve years) and their income was usually the minimum wage. The people I interviewed identified several risk factors in the community, such as alcoholism and drug use, but were aware of the commitment of the families and potential of students to achieve high learning outcomes; in the words of the curriculum leader:

The children have an enormous potential. We are vulnerable but if you look at each child, they are quick, they answer, raise their hand, they come up and participate, they are well ordered. (Curriculum leader)

High Forest's performance in SIMCE reflected the school's expectations of its students. Between 2009 and 2013, the fourth grade evaluation of Spanish and mathematics showed gains of twenty and ten points, respectively, in a fairly consistent positive trend. Most of those gains happened after 2011, during the implementation of PAC. In the same period, the score for eighth grade in Spanish increased just one point, while in mathematics it reached 27 points, although the trend was not always positive for this subject. The disparity between eighth and fourth grade could have been attributed to the fact that most initiatives for school improvement concentrated on the first four grades of primary, as described in chapter four. Nevertheless, these results supported the head teacher's and discipline leader's claim that High Forest was 'the best school' in their area.

In 2011, High Forest was invited to join PAC together with several other schools from the same district. They had implemented the programme uninterruptedly since then and at the time of fieldwork they were prepared to start their last year of the four-year cycle.

### **Programme implementation in schools**

I analysed the interviews and documents with the aim of understanding how the programme's design translated into implementation in the studied school. Additionally, I decided to use the notes from observations as secondary sources, given that my aim was not to assess how well teachers were applying PAC in their lessons, but rather to study the complexities that emerged from implementing a prescriptive external technical support programme. From the data produced and analysed, I have drawn four general themes that illustrate the implementation of PAC in High Forest Primary: (i) organisational conditions;

(ii) success factors; (iii) developing practice to influence pedagogy; and (iv) sustaining improved practice. After describing these four themes I will discuss the theory of change that underlines the implementation of this programme.

### *Organisational conditions*

High Forest was perceived as a school with a different character in comparison to other municipal and private-subsidised schools in the area. The school leaders described High Forest as a school with ‘a different standard’ (Discipline Leader) and a place ‘where there is no tension’ (Head Teacher), which had helped create an environment of professional commitment that was highly valued by people working there:

I believe we have a great teaching staff, very committed. And that relates to the fact that High Forest has a different dynamic, I am sure [...] you need committed teachers that come in and give it all for the kids. Sure, we would like to have a little more but I think we passed the minimum standard a long time ago  
(Discipline Leader)

This different dynamic was closely related to the demand to professionals in the school to devote their work to children, as the head teacher declared, ‘in this school: children first, children second and children third’. This was based on the belief expressed by the curriculum leader that ‘all learning, all of it, starts with the teacher. The teacher is the key for students to reach the goals that the school wants’. This configures a culture of high expectations not only for students but for teachers too, which is an ethos that has been negotiated since the arrival of the head teacher and curriculum leader to the school in 2009. This negotiation was not free from difficulties, especially at the beginning of the head teacher’s tenure; this is how the curriculum leader described an early meeting with teachers:

Yes, it was difficult. Because we met a group of teachers [for the first time], who saw us with distance, like saying ‘who are these people that came to the school? We have this teacher profile, what profile do they bring?’ A colleague on the first day of work gave me a bad reception. She told me ‘you don’t fulfil the school profile’. ‘What profile?’ I asked ‘this is only my first day and you don’t even know my work. Let’s wait and see if I meet the profile or not.’ And in the end, we laugh about it with [head teacher] because... we are still looking for the profile!  
(Curriculum Leader)

In this episode, teachers questioned whether the newly appointed school leaders had the appropriate professional characteristics to work in that school, in other words, whether they

met the 'school profile', according to the school's culture. However, the head teacher and curriculum leader were keen to change that culture and implement changes in the way the school worked to put emphasis on students' learning. They embarked on a negotiation and, sometimes, harsh discussions with teachers to pay more attention to learning outcomes and turn the school around in terms of its performance in SIMCE. As the fourth grade teacher explained.

I remember very well that it was hard to convince me of this whole [SIMCE] business; there were lengthy discussions with the head, I am not one to stay quiet, I say things, and went in confrontation with the head and curriculum leader [...] but in the end I got involved in this, because then these rankings began to appear and the school was well below [...] the teachers and I joined this business and the school surfaced, it has good results and is the best in [neighbourhood] (Fourth Grade Teacher)

To support this turnaround effort, in 2009 the head teacher hired a well-known chain of private-subsidised schools that offered a programme of instructional intervention, which incidentally was very similar to PAC. Discussing the effect it had on the school and its teachers, the curriculum leader and head teacher labelled this experience as 'the first impact'. The implementation of this private instructional intervention involved the application of a structured method for teaching children to read and write, which was delivered as lesson plans and classroom activities, and systematic classroom observation from external agents who worked as teachers in the subsidised schools' chain. It also involved internships for the school leaders in schools from the chain. Certainly, in analysing the case of High Forest implementing PAC, it is difficult to disentangle the influence of this previous experience of instructional support, but, as I will show later in this chapter, participants were able to identify features that differentiated both experiences.

This early intervention lasted for a year, around the time when PAC was offered to the head teacher. 'Once they [ministry] explained what was PAC about, I immediately said yes because we had a similar experience [the private instructional intervention]; it was similar to what I understood could happen with PAC' (Head Teacher). There was an agreement among the people interviewed that this previous experience facilitated the adoption and implementation of PAC in the school, especially by teachers. However, this private intervention required the school to pay an annual fee and included curricular materials up to fourth grade, visits from expert advisors and internships in other schools. In comparison, PAC was free of charge for schools and included similar materials and services.

Moreover, I think that the belief that all children can learn and teachers are the key for unlocking the school's potential also contributed to the adoption of these instructional interventions. At the same time, I would argue that this is closely related to the level of professional commitment that was asked of teachers in this school. However, a question remains about the professional judgement of teachers in their decision regarding how to prepare and deliver a lesson beyond the remits of a structured instructional intervention; I will go back to this point about effective teaching when describing the third theme on *developing practice to influence pedagogy*.

#### *Success factors*

The interviewees recognised PAC as an important milestone in the improvement trajectory of the school, after the first impact that was the experience with a private instructional intervention. Nevertheless, there was an expectation that PAC would have a deeper impact not only on teachers' practice but also on the school leaders' role in the school. The head teacher described it like this:

And then PAC was offered to us, the shared support plan, as a management programme that not only considers the pedagogic aspect but also how to influence, right? Influence on pedagogic practice, the way we lead the relationships and how we can acquire a series of other elements that would help us, finally, to reach our goal!, which is to get every child to learn (Head Teacher)

In this quote, two issues were highlighted as relevant to understand the head teacher's expectations when he was approached to participate in PAC. First, PAC focused on the pedagogy, or rather the instructional practices of the school in terms of how teaching is delivered in their classrooms; and second, PAC assisted school leaders in developing strategies to influence such instructional practice. To strengthen the role of school leaders on these two issues, PAC requested them to create a school leadership team (ELE), consisting of the head teacher, curriculum leader and two teachers, which was responsible for 'motivating, orienting and supporting the school community in the planning, development and monitoring of the improvement of learning outcomes' (PAC Strategic Manual 2013, p.9). In other words, ELE was responsible for the adequate implementation of effective instructional practices in the school, which evidenced the importance of schools' leadership capacity for the implementation of the programme.

To support the school leadership team in implementing the programme, PAC promoted the involvement of two technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) from the ministry's provincial



department (DEPROV). The main aim of these advisors was to develop capacities in the leadership team (ELE) to make sure that the instructional intervention of PAC became sustainable over time in the school. Their presence in the school was relevant to understand how PAC expected school leaders to develop their role in managing and improving instruction. According to the PAC Strategic Manual, this was achieved through meetings with the leadership team to monitor the learning outcomes of students, analysing the results of the regular assessments applied to students after each learning unit or cycle to make decisions, and advising how to communicate these decisions to teachers. In addition, one of the teachers noted that in these meetings two teachers represented the opinion of the rest of the faculty members in the school leadership (ELE).

Yes, they [ATP] came here once a month, from the provincial department, the heads of education there, and there were also teachers in the group [...] two teachers nominated by us so they can sit at meetings, to make them aware of our disagreements with but also the good things about the programme (Fourth Grade Teacher)

Although the advisors (ATP) did not work directly with teachers, they received feedback from these two teacher representatives on the implementation of PAC. In general, the advisors guided the school leadership team (ELE) in planning meetings with teachers to talk them through their analysis of performance data and implement remedial actions. The use of student learning data by the school leadership team to feed teachers back about their teaching practice appears to be key to the implementation of the programme in the school. I will return to this point in the next section.

Additionally, I interpret from the PAC Strategic Manual that there is an important emphasis on externally monitor the work of school leaders and, through them, teachers. Although documents indicate that this monitoring aims to enhance school leaders' management capacity, it can also be interpreted as a strategy to establish mechanisms of control and accountability over the school and its staff. However, in the case of High Forest, the relationship between ATP and ELE seemed to be different; this is how the head teacher described the role of advisors in his school:

Sure! I was commenting on how important the ATPs [advisors] are, they are very important. But it all depends of the relationship that you have with the ATP because, all in all, everything goes through the people and how you relate to them. Because if an ATP came in with an attitude, imposing stuff, it is likely that you will find resistance and you will say 'who does he think he is?' But when you

manage to get along and work with the ATP, when you can easily communicate, of course you see the benefits (Head Teacher).

Compared to experience with the private instructional intervention programme, PAC seemed to consider, in addition to the implementation of a method of instruction, external advice on how to lead the implementation of the instructional intervention and tools for enhancing the management capacity of the school leaders. Regarding the latter, the curriculum leader declared:

The PAC programme, for us, or for me at least, it helped me visualise where we were [as a school]. So, it came with tools that we did not have, and we assumed it with the commitment of believing in this programme, and since we believed in the programme, that it would give us the results if we really meet its demands, we were going to get the results. It oriented us; it brought us tools, the classroom observation (Curriculum Leader)

From the curriculum leader's perspective, PAC had the capacity to inform about the school's outcomes and, at the same time, it offered a strategy to improve such outcomes. In addition, the curriculum leader suggested that, before the implementation of PAC in her school, they did not have certain tools that would assist them in improving the school's performance, presenting classroom observation as an example. Classroom observation is not a common practice in municipal schools, different from other school systems (e.g., learning walks). If school leaders wanted to observe a lesson to monitor teaching and learning in their school, they would need to negotiate access to classrooms with teachers. This issue of classroom observation is quite relevant to the programme's rationale for developing effective practice, which would lead to improvement.

Another relevant characteristic of PAC expressed by the curriculum leader is the acknowledgement that the programme requires adherence and commitment to get better results. In this sense, the curriculum leader described the initial stage of PAC implementation as difficult due to teachers raising doubts about the programme's pertinence to the characteristics of their students: 'they [teachers] saw that there were many activities and [PAC] did not considered the characteristics of each year group: the slower or faster group, with a few integrated [special education needs] students'. Nevertheless, it was through the instructional materials brought by the programme that teachers began to buy into it, as one teacher and the curriculum leader expressed.

The benefit of PAC, for instance, is that it comes with ready-made lessons, one does not have to invest time in planning lessons, although they need to be

checked, and one can add to it, about what is important to stress about the lesson. But it is very practical to save time, the activities are playful, they are fun (Third Grade Teacher)

We received a lot of didactic material, full books with lesson plans, for every class [...] so there were many advantages that the teachers began to realise, teachers from the first primary cycle [grades 1 to 4] started to realise that they did not need to do planning anymore! Everything is already done. The teacher script and the lesson structured day by day, for the whole month (Curriculum leader).

These instructional materials were designed by professionals in the programme's headquarters at the Ministry of Education, distributed through provincial departments (DEPROV), and delivered to participant schools. In High Forest, two teachers who participated in the school leadership team checked and organised the materials and then distributed them to each teacher. According to the head teacher, this was a positive because 'PAC gives you as a teacher the tools so you only have to deliver the lesson', which seemed to be helpful for management purposes, because it allowed school leaders to monitor what each teacher was teaching according to a known script that could be checked in the classroom at any moment. So, from the perspective of the school leaders, the reason for PAC's success in the school was that it provided teachers with tools to enhance curriculum coverage, such as lesson plans, students' workbooks and general orientations for teaching. However, from the perspective of teachers, these highly structured instructional materials presented specific drawbacks when they applied them in their classrooms. In response to these drawbacks, some adjustments were made at High Forest to the implementation of PAC, as the teachers explained.

[...] because not all grade groups are equal, and [PAC] comes with a lesson plan that is too structured for one type of group, my grade group is not the same as the one next door, the other third grade, so I adjust it to the reality of my group (Third Grade Teacher)

[Instructional materials] take you from one lesson to the other, it does not give you time. The first thing, the first year we had PAC, the first thing we said was that it [lesson sequence] does not allow for time to reinforce [the content], for instance in mathematics [...] the following year they told us, 'you have a sequence of lessons, but if in between you need to add an extra lesson, it is possible to do that' [...] And the other way we compensated this was using

[afterschool] workshop hours for mathematics (Fourth Grade Teacher)

Finally, for the curriculum leader there was another advantage of the programme; she suggested that: 'since PAC is designed by the ministry, it focuses mostly on the abilities that will be tested in SIMCE'. This statement was quite telling about the way the curriculum leader saw the contribution of PAC to the success of High Forest in SIMCE, establishing a direct relation between them. Certainly, the school achieved the results. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, within three years of programme implementation the school had gains of 13 and 29 points in Spanish and mathematics SIMCE, respectively, and these scores positioned the school as the best performing in its neighbourhood in 2013. When I asked about the reasons for this improvement, the head teacher pointed out that they were covering most, if not all, of the curriculum contents for grades one to four because of the instructional materials from PAC.

In summary, school leaders at High Forest identified several advantages to the decision of implementing PAC in their school, in relation to enhancing their management capacity and providing instructional materials for teachers, which resulted in improved SIMCE scores in fourth grade. This is consistent with the rationale of the programme, which stated that, 'learning outcomes [will improve by] strengthening curricular and institutional management in schools participating of the plan' (PAC Strategic Manual 2013, p.6). Nevertheless, as the school leaders and teachers noted, setting this programme in motion at High Forest required certain adaptations to the specific conditions of the school and its students in order to influence teaching and learning.

#### *Developing practices to influence pedagogy*

A very interesting topic that emerged about the implementation of PAC in High Forest, mostly from interviews with school leaders, was the issue of influencing pedagogy in the school, both in terms of its process (teaching) and outcome (learning). Very early on their tenure, this became a main concern for the head teacher and curriculum leader, even before the implementation of PAC in the school. In 2009, both newly appointed school leaders came into their job with the idea of doing things differently:

We had to do something different [...] because you could not see [...] inside the classroom. That little black box that meant closing the classroom door and you did not know what the teacher was doing in the in there. So, through [the previous instructional intervention programme] the door of the classroom was open to us (Head Teacher)

The head teacher considered that access to the classroom was an essential condition to get things to change in the school. This was made possible through the private instructional intervention and was further reinforced with PAC a year later in High Forest. Although both interventions shared the focus on delivering and monitoring an instructional method, PAC involved school leaders more actively in classroom observation and in the production and analysis of information about teaching and learning, hence, expanded their repertoire of leadership practices. It is relevant to note that most school leaders in Chilean primary and secondary schools do not teach at all, because most of their contract time is devoted to administrative and management responsibilities, where monitoring instruction through classroom observation or data use are not necessarily considered.

In relation to classroom observation, it was conceived as a key management tool for school leaders to dictate pedagogy in their school and to assess teaching and learning within classrooms. The PAC Strategic Manual indicated that classroom observation ‘is a fundamental input for teachers’ professional development, given that it allows them [school leaders] to see their [teachers’] performance and feedback their practice’ (PAC Strategic Manual 2013, p. 29). Thus, classroom observation seemed to be central for the school leadership team (ELE) to gather information about pedagogical practice in classrooms.

However, the question about what would school leaders do with this information had to be clarified from the beginning to convince teachers of the potential benefits for their work. There was an initial negotiation process, described by the curriculum leader in the following quote:

So, when we introduced this assessment instrument, classroom observation, that we were not doing before, and if we did it was not as structured, then the teachers got scared [...] teachers are critical and they asked me ‘is this instrument going somewhere?’ if someone from outside would know about it, because they thought if I did something wrong who is going to know. So, I told them ‘no, be confident that this is internal, just to improve our practice and see from an external point of view how you are really doing [...] And, it is based on MBE [national framework for effective teaching] (Curriculum Leader)

One key element in this initial stage was to make sure teachers did not see this as another form of external evaluation or assessment, for instance, the national Teacher Evaluation system. Similar to this national evaluation, PAC considered classroom observation and the classification of teachers’ practice according to the Good Teaching Framework (MBE), which was mentioned by the curriculum leader. Hence, it was not surprising that teachers

reacted with caution and mistrust to this additional form of evaluation. However, the curriculum leader aimed to make sure teachers saw classroom observation under PAC as a means to gather information to feed back their practice and, although it was structured as an evaluation instrument, it would not have negative consequences for them.

In High Forest, classroom observation also served to persuade school leaders to get closer to the work of their teachers and develop a supportive relationship. The head teacher, for example, declared that ‘classroom observation enables leaders to get in and provide an external view, and help teachers realise not what is wrong but what has to improve’. In this sense, the focus of classroom observation was on feeding back what teachers could do better in their classrooms, but for that to work ‘[you need to be] assertive with the teacher. That means that you cannot get to the classroom and say ‘look at this! It is all wrong!’ and get the reaction you expect, ok?’ (Head Teacher).

According to PAC Strategic Manual, the programme included two types of classroom observation: one where school leaders did daily, brief and unannounced visits to classrooms; and the other where school leaders agreed on a date for observation with each teacher. Teachers were observed four times over the school year, two planned visits and two unannounced, to check that they were working according to the corresponding lesson plan and unit, and see how students were progressing. PAC provided check-lists for both types of classroom observations, consisting of a set of indicators associated with the four key areas of the programme (i.e., effective curriculum implementation; developing a favourable environment for learning; effective use of instruction time; monitoring student achievement). School leaders registered whether teachers met or not each indicator, and then used that information to offer structured feedback to teachers.

Summarising, interviewees suggested that classroom observation was a unique effective practice in High Forest, which considered both the technical process of applying a set of criteria to assess teaching and learning, and the social relationship between the people engaged in this practice. The discipline leader described it like this:

It is always good to have an external look, to say keep this in mind. But I think we are forerunners in this sense. In some schools the issue of supervising classrooms is a taboo. Not here, here people come in and we get feedback and all that (Discipline Leader).

The second practice developed for influencing pedagogy in High Forest in the context of PAC was the use of data for decision-making. The implementation of PAC produced information about teaching through classroom observation and about students’ learning

outcomes through the application of tests as part of the instructional materials provided to the school by the programme. Data based decision-making was recognised by school leaders at High Forest as central to PAC's rationale for improving practice in schools. The head teacher outlined the difference between using and not using data for decision-making purposes:

[...] there are many things one does instinctively. Unfortunately, there is a lot of it in education, ok? [...] So, we have tried, and PAC came with this and we, as leaders, were made aware of it, of the importance of data [...] we understood that in a data culture, that data is fundamental to make decisions, and correct decisions! Meaning that you cannot make decisions, by gut feeling! You must make decisions based on data (Head Teacher).

The opposition between 'gut feeling' and 'data-based' decision-making illustrates the way school leaders in High Forest approached the implementation of PAC in their school. PAC allowed the school leadership team (ELE) to collect and analyse information from classroom observations and from students learning outcomes. In addition, they had the external support of the technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) who met with the leadership team 'to review the information on students' performance and agree on strategies appropriate to their needs' (PAC Strategic Manual 2013, p.12).

Additionally, PAC expected the leadership team to actively engage and lead the rest of the school staff in using data for pedagogical decisions. For this purpose, the leadership team planned and implemented instances of discussion with teachers to present and analyse the results they previously reviewed with the help of the advisors (ATP). However, these meetings with teachers seemed to be aimed at replicating, or rather cascading, the analyses and conclusions discussed between the advisors and the leadership team. In High Forest, this was the responsibility of the curriculum leader and this is how she described the main source of information for their workshop on data use, students' performance data:

[...] the last workshop was on data culture that we need to install [in the school]. And data culture, teachers have it already incorporated in part because they have the [web] platform where, once the period assessment is done, so many weeks of lessons and then comes the assessment of the period, and the results of the children are introduced into the platform and immediately produces a report. It gives results like the item of correct answers, it gives you the initial children [students below average performance level] (Curriculum Leader).

The curriculum leader used the reports provided by PAC's web platform to inform teachers

about their students' performance. Interestingly, the leadership team at High Forest seemed to go one step further from cascading information to teachers, and used these workshops to develop data-based discussions, analysing students' performance data. For example, the curriculum leader described how she presented data from students' assessments reports to teachers to introduce small adjustments to the lessons provided by PAC:

That report is worked in groups [of teachers], by grades. And teachers analyse students at the initial level, what strategies are we going to use to help these children to reach intermediate [level]. And then the reflections are produced around the evaluation (Curriculum leader).

The curriculum leader got teachers to work in groups by the grades they teach – reception stage; first and second grade; and third and fourth grade – and asked them to focus their analyses and discussions on those students who performed at the initial level. This classification of students' performance corresponds to the three levels defined by SIMCE in 2013: initial (below average), intermediate (average) and advanced (above average)<sup>14</sup>. Instructional resources provided by PAC were aligned with SIMCE, and that is why PAC reported students' performance in these terms. However, PAC offered individualised students' performance data, something that is not available in SIMCE, which only registers the average score of a grade group and reports the percentage of students in each of the three levels of performance.

Finally, other sources of data were used in these meetings with teachers, such as data from classroom observations that included indicators related to effective curriculum implementation, classroom climate, effective use of instruction time, and monitoring of students' learning. According to the head teacher, this information was used to supplement the discussion between teachers when they worked in groups by grades: 'they see what is going on, how are they doing this or delivering [the lesson]. You give them feedback [from the observation] and we often get their comments and give them the analyses'.

### *Sustaining improved practice*

It might seem that the case of High Forest implementing PAC was, in general, a successful and positive one. However, participants had certain concerns regarding the limitations of

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<sup>14</sup> After 2013, SIMCE changed its categories for students' performance to Insufficient, Elementary and Adequate, according to the level of curricular proficiency they demonstrate in the specific grade when they are tested.



PAC and how this affected the chances of sustaining the improved practice and outcomes in High Forest. They described the emphasis of the programme in specific subjects (Spanish and mathematics) and grades (reception stage to fourth grade), and the rumoured withdrawal of the programme in the following school year (2014), as threats to the progress made by the school. In this section, I will explore how participants from High Forest perceived this situation and what their plans were to address it.

PAC was originally developed to address a specific problem in the school system: a large proportion of fourth grade students were ranked in the initial level of performance in Spanish and mathematics according to SIMCE. Therefore, PAC aimed to support low performing municipal and private-subsidised schools, where these children are mainly concentrated, to raise their average performance in fourth grade SIMCE.

Since PAC focused almost exclusively on Spanish and mathematics – with science and social studies being introduced later in 2013 – between reception stage and fourth grade, it remained a challenge for High Forest to replicate it in other subjects and in grades five to eight. For the school leadership team (ELE), this situation was difficult to manage in terms of balancing their responsibilities towards monitoring teaching and learning across all grades and subjects, when in practice it seemed like they were ‘running two different schools’.

It is, really, like we are running two different schools because there are so many things. You cannot get distracted. PAC demands from me that I be on top of things, monitoring my colleagues in the first cycle [first to fourth grades] and I sort of leave the second cycle [fifth to eight grades] aside. So, I need to get organised in such a way that it does not have to be like that (Curriculum Leader)

The curriculum leader reflected on her responsibilities in the school and how the demands from PAC led her to spend more time working with teachers up to fourth grade. She acknowledged, however, that PAC made it easier to organise the pedagogical work that teachers did in the grades it targeted, in comparison with fifth to eight grades where she said, ‘it is more disorganised’. This disorganisation consisted mainly of teachers failing to plan for each lesson, as they did in the group targeted by PAC. Additionally, as the discipline leader pointed out, ‘the weakness in the second cycle [fifth to eighth grades] is the dynamic of specialist teachers and of islands [i.e. in isolation]’, which prevented them from working in groups as they did in the first years of primary.

Certainly, applying the same structure of PAC to the work of teachers from fifth grade upwards proved to be a challenge, but that did not stop school leaders from trying. The curriculum leader, for example, adapted the classroom observation guide to apply it in these

grades, with some worryingly results in her view, and monitored students' assessment results with an Excel sheet similar to the one provided by the PAC web platform.

The apparent familiarisation of the school leaders with these instruments became useful not only for extending PAC to all primary grades in High Forest, but it also helped school leaders and teachers to work in the same way during their fourth year of implementation. PAC's material and professional support was greatly appreciated by High Forest, and they were concerned about the programme being withdrawn, which, at the time of doing the first set of interviews, was rumoured to happen at the end of the 2014 school year.

The reasons for putting into question the continuity of PAC were twofold. Firstly, the programme considered as part of its implementation cycle that schools would be able to develop the internal capacity to continue working without material and professional support when reaching the fourth year of implementation (PAC Presentation – November 2013). In this sense, the role of the school leadership team (ELE) was key to secure the sustainability of the practices developed during the implementation of PAC. Secondly, in the particular case of High Forest, the head teacher acknowledged that political and partisan differences between the municipal and national governments resulted in PAC not being favoured by his local authority; he suggested that, 'they are not really persuaded with us implementing PAC [...] we agreed that this would be our last year with PAC. But we think we need to continue'. Similarly, during the second round of interviews in 2014, one of the teachers commented.

[Interviewer]: Now PAC is in its fourth year in this school, right?

[Teacher]: And I do not think it will continue because there is a change in government

[Interviewer]: And that...

[Teacher]: Last time it was the same, since we have a government change, we need to change *the whole orchestra*, you know?

[Interviewer]: That is what I wanted to ask. What is your take, how do you see this? Because, maybe...

[Teacher]: [Laughs] Before this we had the LEM [reading, writing and mathematics programme], which was more or less similar to PAC, and now we have PAC, and now after this I do not know what are we going to get, it all depends on the government in office. (Fourth Grade Teacher)

These technical and political reasons were perceived as threats to the progress made by High Forest. For example, the discipline leader thought that the possibility of not continuing with PAC would compromise the consolidation of the instructional practices developed.

But they should not cut [discontinue] PAC, I think if our teachers could have PAC for two or three more years; because it takes more or less one year to get used to it [...] Teachers here need to study PAC but once they get on with it they will not give it up. If PAC ends, if the government changes as it seems it will, we want to keep PAC internally because it gives you structure (Discipline Leader).

Similarly, the curriculum leader believed that losing the support systems provided by PAC meant that teachers would see an increase in their workload.

I think we are going to be in trouble if they withdraw the platform. We will be in trouble because the colleagues are going to be overwhelmed and will start to design their own tests, although they sometimes do, but now they have everything done, everything! (Curriculum Leader)

Consequently, school leaders were already thinking of ways to continue working in the way they had so far, with or without PAC. One of the key issues to address was how to replace the material support provided by the programme, which was something the head teacher expected to solve by making copies of the documents available in the programme's website and by making copies of all the material they had received in the school. It was not made clear how High Forest was planning to cover the costs of continuing with the programme, but there were some suggestions from PAC (PAC Presentation – November 2013) that schools could use funds from their school improvement plans (PME) and the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) to pay for these expenses.

Looking towards the future, and in addition to the challenges they saw in the short-term, the school leadership team (ELE) sensed the need to systematise the practices developed first with the private instructional intervention and later with PAC, to move forward and not be particularly dependant on this external support.

So, when we had the [private instructional intervention] we realised that its method for teaching literacy was [appropriate] for our children. And teachers were convinced that it was appropriate as well, they assumed it, learned it. Thus, we now have in first grade literacy lessons based on this method, ok? But we realised that PAC was also good. So we said, [literacy method] first and in workshop sessions we apply PAC for first grade. And from second to fourth grade we do PAC [...] So, in this way we try to look for this, and this and this [points in three different directions] a methodology, a High Forest system (Head Teacher).

The head teacher hoped to strengthen teachers' pedagogical practice and the leadership team's management practice, and to develop the necessary conditions for building what he called the High Forest's instructional system. This system seemed to be the response of the school leaders to the problem of sustaining the improved practice and results achieved, which started before the implementation of PAC in 2011, but that had been consolidating over the course of the programme.

### **Theory of change: How does the Shared Support Plan promote improvement?**

From the narrative of High Forest, it seemed clear that PAC was strongly influenced by the evidence base of school effectiveness and teacher effectiveness (Muijs *et al.*, 2014; Reynolds *et al.*, 2014). Particularly, this case resembled what several authors call Comprehensive School Reform (CSR), which can be considered an extension of the effectiveness and improvement literature that emphasises a whole-school approach to reform.

The effective schools literature identified specific characteristics associated with successful schools (...). A criticism of the effective schools literature, though, is that it did not prescribe the practical methods by which schools can become successful. CSR attempts to address that weakness by providing designs by which effective schools can be created. (Desimone, 2002, p. 434)

Comprehensive school reform has been developed mostly in the US, boosted both by a rich research-base on school reform and support from federal government in the late 1990s who introduced funding schemes through changes to relevant legislation (Desimone, 2002; Rowan, Barnes and Camburn, 2004). Models of comprehensive school reform provide 'a blueprint, process, and support system for school development across multiple components of school governance, teaching, and learning' (Anderson, 2010, p. 286). These include several factors that are organised within one coherent programme: curriculum materials, teaching methods, leadership and management strategies, professional development, etc.

According to Rowan and Miller (2007), comprehensive school reform models can assume two approaches to instructional change: programmed or adaptive. A programmed approach promotes conformity to a preferred teaching regime through highly explicit instructional guidance and enhanced on-site support by school leaders to teachers. Conversely, an adaptive approach promotes the creation of instructional innovations appropriate for local contexts by identifying and disseminating effective local practices, and assuring autonomy for teachers to adopt and adapt these practices to their own classrooms.

In the case of High Forest, PAC represented a programmed approach to instructional change

by supplying teachers with detailed lesson plans, activities and assessment materials, while incorporating the school leadership team (ELE) as a source of internal support. Moreover, external support was provided by two technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) whose main task was to facilitate the role of school leaders as promoters of new instructional practice among teachers. Hence, the rationale of PAC rested on the enhancement of three factors: institutional management capacity (pedagogical advisors facilitating school leaders' role), curricular management conditions (school leaders introducing a new instructional regime), and improved learning outcomes (fourth grade SIMCE scores). Evidence from the case shows that the main strategies to mobilise these three factors were the systematic observation of classroom practice and the use of teacher and student performance data to monitor the programme implementation.

Additionally, the implementation of PAC required a certain type of control operating at the school level. Similarly, Rowan and Correnti (2009) characterise comprehensive school reform as a way to approach and resolve the *principal-agent problem*, where central programme officers (principal) try to influence and control local school staff (agents) to faithfully implement a specific instructional regime. The authors describe three models of social control to resolve this problem:

- Cultural control: orienting school-based agents to an overriding set of values to constrain local decision making about the choice of instructional regimes.
- Professional control: the programme uses expert authority (principal) and socialisation of professional standards to help teachers learn new instructional regimes
- Procedural control: the programme develops a highly specified instructional routine for local agents to use, and then supervises these agents (teachers) to enforce conformity

PAC represented a model of procedural control, given that it provided specific pedagogic (lesson plans, student activities, assessments) and management (classroom observation forms, performance data) materials, and enforced school leaders – guided by technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) – to supervise teachers' change of instructional practice. In the case of High Forest, school leaders quickly supported the programme, possibly due to the previous experience with a similar instructional intervention. Teachers took longer to buy into the programme, as they initially identified specific issues with the instructional materials (particularly, lesson plans), which were quickly addressed by school leaders and teachers themselves who adjusted these materials. Possibly, teachers were convinced by the practical

advantages that the programme's resources offered to their work because, as similar experiences of comprehensive school reform demonstrated, 'there was an ideological fit about what constitutes good teaching' (Datnow and Castellano, 2000, p. 794). In addition, the organisational conditions of the school, in terms of high expectations and positive climate, also accounted for the successful introduction of the programme.

It is difficult to separate or differentiate the influence of the school organisational conditions, the previous experience with an instructional intervention, and the implementation of PAC on the improvement shown by the school in fourth grade SIMCE scores. However, as school leaders and teachers acknowledged, PAC gave them an impulse to *jump start* such improvement, particularly thanks to the material and professional support received. Nevertheless, I would still argue that PAC did have an impact in terms of changing instructional practice in High Forest by employing a programmed approach to instructional change, based on procedural control (Rowan and Correnti, 2009; Rowan and Miller, 2007).

Understandably, and picking up the warning from Rowan and Correnti (2009), changes in instructional management (classroom observation, data use) and practice (instructional materials) do not necessarily ensure effective results; it may very well be that the new mode of instruction yields similar or worse results than what schools achieved before the intervention. In the case of High Forest, it seemed that instruction changed and students' outcomes improved, based on SIMCE scores, but only for the first four years of primary. This case showed that the focus up to fourth grade did not affect the instructional practice of grades five to eight, despite attempts from school leaders to extend, on their own, the PAC approach to teachers in those grades. This provided a challenge to the argument that PAC operated as a whole-school reform, but I would support that claim as there is evidence of school leaders attempting to introduce what the head teacher called a High Forest instructional system, based on PAC, that was expected to cover all grades in the school.

Finally, I would argue that the theory of change underpinning this case relates to issues of new public management (NPM), from a liberal, functionalist approach to public policy, where the focus is on social control by the state (Hudson, 2007; Lingard, Ladwig and Luke, 1998; Morley and Rasool, 2000). Although it might seem contradictory to think about new public management in the case of a top-down, prescriptive intervention such as PAC, there is evidence from this case that supports the claim that this programme allowed central government to regulate or steer the system at a distance by delivering material and professional resources and mandating school leaders as stewards of its implementation. In other words, the central government allowed leaders and teachers to actively engage in

reform implementation but did not allow them to engage in developing the reform, resembling other Comprehensive School Reform experiences (Datnow and Castellano, 2000). The way change was conceived in this case brings about issues of power and politics as this approach to external support dictates what is considered improvement within a hierarchical structure that positions schools and their staff at the receiving end of reform (Datnow, 2000).

## CHAPTER XI

### CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

This chapter comprises a cross-case analysis that connects the case description of the policy framework for school improvement (chapter seven) and the case descriptions of the three programmes of external technical support (chapters eight, nine and ten). The structure of this cross-case analysis places the emerging themes and theories of change from each case against the research questions of the thesis:

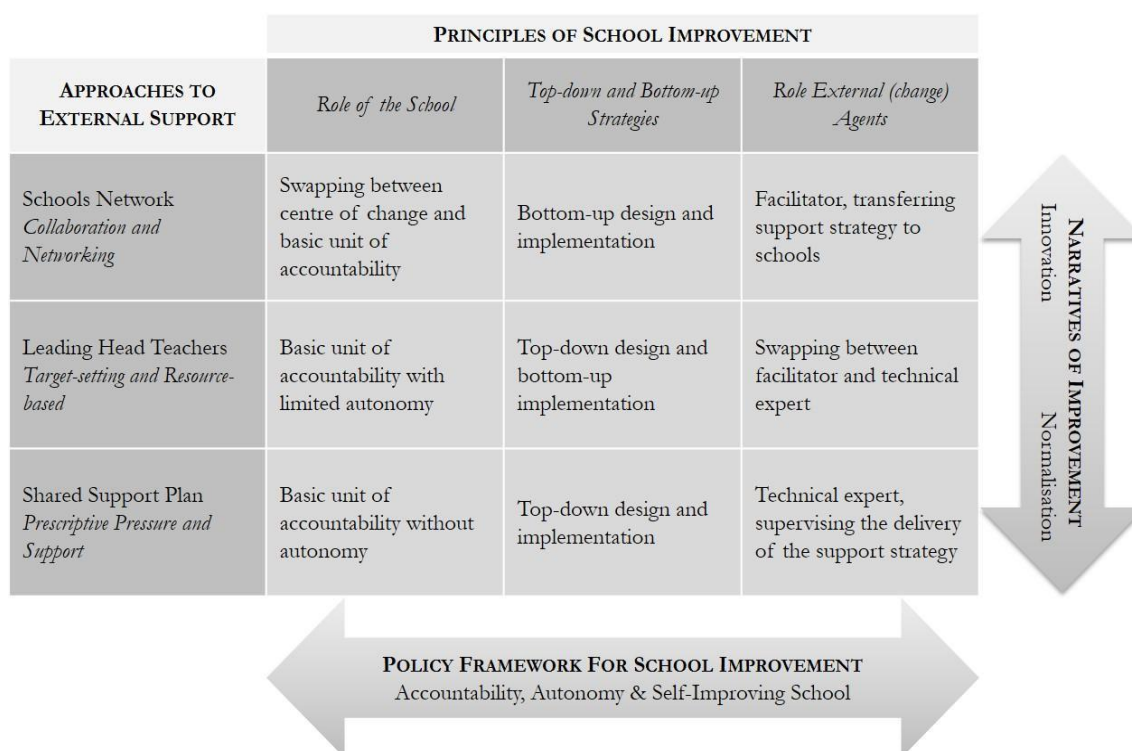
1. How are the external technical support programmes being implemented in municipal primary schools?
2. What notion or narratives of improvement are put forward by the theories of change that emerge from implementing a specific type of external technical support programme?
3. How is the policy framework for school improvement in Chile influencing the implementation of external technical support programmes in municipal primary schools and the practices of participants of the study?

First, I highlight some general findings regarding the implementation of the three programmes, introducing a discussion about the approaches to external support and principles of school improvement that served as a theoretical framework to select them as cases. Then, I outline a critical account of the different narratives of school improvement that emerged from the theories of change of the policy framework and external technical support programmes, putting emphasis on two improvement trajectories. Finally, I consider the Chilean policy framework for school improvement, the model of improvement that advances, and its influence on the implementation of the external technical support programmes

Figure 5 shows a reworked version of table 1, which was introduced in the literature review (chapter five), as a summary of this cross-case analysis. This figure displays the approaches to external support and principles of school improvement based on the findings from the case studies. To the right-hand side of the figure, I place the narratives of improvement that emerged from the theories of change put forward by the three external technical support programmes, and at the bottom are the key features of the policy framework for school improvement in Chile that underpinned and influenced the implementation of these programmes.



Figure 5. Cross case analysis: approaches to external support, principles of school improvement, narratives of improvement, and policy framework features



### Implementing external technical support: challenging theoretical assumptions

The first research question asks how the programmes of external technical support were implemented in Chilean municipal schools. For this purpose, I analyse how the three principles of school improvement initiatives (role of the school, top-down and bottom-up approaches, and role of external agents) were articulated in the implementation of the three external technical support programmes by reading across the three case studies. In other words, the analysis concentrates on how these three cases evidenced some differences with the *ideal types* or approaches to external support that I described in the literature review chapter (chapter five), challenging the theoretical assumptions that underpin these different approaches. Interestingly, the evidence from the case descriptions suggests that these three cases are not that different in the way they delivered external technical support to municipal schools.

#### *The role of the school*

In school improvement literature, the role of the school can be represented as the centre of change or as the basic unit of accountability of the system. These different representations of the school's role in improvement initiatives are very important to establish how external

support is delivered. For instance, if the school is considered the centre of change then external support would be focused on accompanying its unique process of cultural change by providing advice that is tailored to the school's needs and responsive to the demands of the school system where they are positioned (Harris and Chapman, 2004; Hopkins, 2001; Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994). Conversely, if the school is considered as the unit of accountability, then external support would focus on providing resources and preparing the school to perform according to standard measures or criteria defined at system level (O'Day, 2002; Perryman, 2006; West, Mattei and Roberts, 2011).

The role of the school in the three case studies of external technical support programmes was often skewed towards being configured as a unit of accountability rather than the centre of change. For instance, in the case of the Schools Network project, participant schools were initially invited to participate voluntarily in this initiative but this invitation was prompted by the concern of the local authority about their low performance in SIMCE and low enrolment numbers, rather than by the schools' interest in collaborating with other schools. The theoretical assumption would suggest that within a collaborative and networked approach, schools would be positioned as centres of change to attend to their individual needs rather than establishing a general goal for all participant schools, but at the same time would develop collective capacity for improvement as a network (Katz and Earl, 2010; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003). To the contrary, in the studied case, schools were aware that the network was created to improve their effectiveness indicators, such as enrolment and learning standards, which placed them in a situation where they needed to meet these external criteria and be judged by it.

In the case of the Leading Head Teachers project and the Shared Support Plan, schools were positioned as units of accountability, although with varying degrees of autonomy. In the Leading Head Teachers project, head teachers and schools participating in the programme subscribed a performance contract that established a series of goals to be achieved within the school year. These goals included indicators related to management issues, such as monitoring teachers' lesson planning, or parental satisfaction, and efficiency outcomes, such as student enrolment, attendance and achievement. This performance contract was also used as the basis for developing an advisory strategy that was adjusted to help schools meet their targets and develop certain competencies. In this case study, the theoretical assumption would indicate that external support would focus on facilitating a process of self-evaluation and diagnosis of improvement needs against an external standardised framework of indicators, to set improvement goals and design a tailor-made improvement strategy (Chapman, 2005; Finnigan, Bitter and O'Day, 2009; Harris, 2001b). Additionally, in the

Leading Head Teachers case, there was a decision to introduce cultural change and improvement in schools through the role of head teachers, in response to literature stressing the relationship between leadership and improved students' outcomes (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004b). As a result, head teachers enjoyed limited autonomy to actively engage in the design of the performance contract and the advisory strategy, ensuring that these fitted their individual characteristics and needs.

In the Shared Support Plan, this position as a basic unit of accountability was taken even further as the school had no say in the design of the support strategy and was only allowed to do minor adjustments to certain activities to facilitate the strategy's implementation. The Shared Support Plan mainly targeted schools with low performance in SIMCE implementing an instructional intervention to enhance the school's coverage of the national curriculum, which was assumed would improve SIMCE scores in the short-term. The theoretical assumption of this approach would suggest that external support needs to address the weaknesses of ineffective schools by providing structured designs that prescribe how effective schools work (Desimone, 2002; Rowan and Correnti, 2009), aligning both pressure and support to these schools (Barber and Phillips, 2000). There was no evidence in this case study of a self-evaluation process that would help determine whether the external technical support strategy addressed the school's weaknesses or internal improvement needs; rather the school focused solely on meeting the external demands of the programme.

In all three cases, schools, as basic units of accountability, were expected to show evidence that they met a set of national standards within a framework of performance-based, bureaucratic accountability (O'Day, 2002; Sahlberg, 2010). The assumption that underscores this notion of basic units of accountability is that underperforming schools need to be targeted, take responsibility and seek appropriate support and/or intervention to modify their internal management processes to improve their educational outcomes (Barber and Phillips, 2000). This support or intervention can be either a local, small-scale initiative such as the Schools Network or the Leading Head Teachers project, or a national, large-scale strategy like the Shared Support Plan.

#### *Top-down and bottom-up strategies*

The combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies configures a delicate balance across the three external technical support programmes, in terms of the approach that these programmes displayed regarding the design and the implementation of the support initiative. A top-down strategy, for instance, is often associated with centralisation and the attempt to mandate change at the local level; meanwhile, a bottom-up strategy is associated with

decentralisation and the attempt to devolve the control of the change process to the local level (Fullan, 1993; Fullan, 2000). These strategies, Fullan (1993) argues, should be combined to maximise the capacity of education reform to produce deep change across the system, in a similar way as the blending of high pressure and high support has been backed as the way to promote improvement (Barber and Phillips, 2000).

In the three case study programmes, this combination was directly associated with whether the initiatives' design or implementation, or both, employed these strategies and how these were balanced in practice. For instance, the most balanced case was the Leading Head Teachers project, which constantly combined top-down and bottom-up strategies to both design and implementation. The design of this programme was sufficiently clear to establish a core mandate of what it aimed to improve, while it was also sufficiently flexible for external advisors to adapt it to the needs of each head teacher and their schools. Similarly, the implementation of this programme was constantly negotiated between head teachers, external advisors, and the project manager, to the point that the project manager declared that they were not looking to impose a specific leadership model on head teachers, although she clearly asserted that external advisors needed to develop a set of leadership competencies with the head teachers.

In the other two cases, the balance was skewed towards either strategy. For instance, the Shared Support Plan is a clear example of a centralised strategy that mandated what needs to be changed and how in the school. This programme displayed a top-down design, where the external support activities were fixed and non-negotiable, and the programme's implementation – despite being undertaken by school leaders and teachers themselves – was supervised and monitored on-site by technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) and off-site through the recording of the activities in the programme's website. The case of the Schools Network, conversely, showed a decentralised strategy that did not establish an *a priori* mandate for change and the participant schools, with help from external advisors, collaboratively constructed a common improvement goal and focus. Both design and implementation of the external technical support employed a bottom-up strategy.

Interestingly, none of the three cases proved to be less problematic than the others, in terms of dealing with the top-down and bottom-up *dilemma* (Fullan, 2000). For instance, the Shared Support Plan delivered the exact same instructional strategy to all schools participating in the programme, although it was open to minor adjustments within each school. This raised some concerns among teachers in High Forest regarding how to tend to the specific needs of students in their classrooms while implementing this fixed strategy. Conversely, in the case

of the Schools Network, the initial negotiations to set up the network and define their common goal was heavily influenced by the external, centralised demands of the system to produce a good performance in SIMCE, rather than by the internal and collective improvement needs of schools and the network. Finally, the Leading Head Teachers project, despite working towards balancing top-down and bottom-up strategies, was often caught in what one of the external advisors described as *disciplining* the head teachers, meaning that advisors had to make sure head teachers and their schools developed sound management processes to meet national learning and performance standards.

As these cases showed, more than talking about *balancing* these two strategies, it seems as if external technical support programmes and schools deal with the symptoms of the *tension* between bottom-up and top-down strategies (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996). This is especially true in the Chilean context where, as I have tried to demonstrate, the national curricular and assessment framework has had such a strong influence in schools and classrooms, which has been amplified by the enactment of the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) and the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC). In this sense, Darling-Hammond (2004, p. 19) suggests that school systems should seek to promote ‘a policy paradigm that provides “top-down support to bottom-up reform” rather than top-down directives for school-level implementation’. However, these cases showed that the influence of national standards often means that there is always a top-down directive that overrides bottom-up initiatives.

#### *The role of external agents*

The three cases of the external technical support programmes showed that external agents occupy an instrumental role in the transference and delivery of external support for improvement. This instrumental role is related to what research has shown regarding the fact that external agents often work within a prescribed agenda that is set either by the external support programme or by the policy context where they operate, and their role of support is restricted to such agenda (Swaffield, 2015). For instance, I briefly mentioned in the previous subsection that an external advisor from the Leading Head Teachers project mentioned she sometimes felt that she was *disciplining* head teachers into complying with demands external to the school rather than assisting them in developing their potential as leaders. In the case of this programme, these external demands stemmed from the school system’s normative and institutional framework (SIMCE, attendance rates and enrolment numbers) and the programme itself (developing leadership competencies and effective management processes). Similarly, the other two cases also display an instrumentalisation of the role of external agents positioning them either as role models or custodians of programme and

policy implementation, as illustrated by school improvement research elsewhere (García and Donmoyer, 2005; Harris, 2001b). I will return to this idea in the next section when discussing *normalisation and accountability*.

The theoretical assumptions about the role of the external (change) agent in the three *ideal types* or approaches to external support might differ in the way these agents enacted their role. I defined these roles using Tajik's (2008) broad classification of technical experts, facilitators and critical friends. These roles carry out the aim of 'enhancing school capacity to initiate and sustain change [and] bring about successful reform in schools' (Tajik, 2008, p. 252) through different strategies. While technical experts 'concentrate on providing teachers with explicit directions, prescriptions and guidelines for what they should or should not do, and how they should do it' (ibid, p. 258), facilitators 'essentially facilitate teachers in the various processes of school improvement' (ibid, p. 256), and critical friends 'primarily mirror teachers' actions to engage the teachers in systematic and critical analysis of their practices' (ibid, p. 257).

In the review of school improvement literature, I associated each external agent's role with a specific approach to external support according to the way these approaches ostensibly promote change and improvement (see table 1 in chapter five). Thus, I associated the critical friend role to the collaboration and networking approach; the facilitator role to the target-setting and resource-based approach, and the technical expert role to the prescriptive pressure and support approach. Nevertheless, the case descriptions of the three external technical support programmes showed that only two of these three roles were discernible in practice: the facilitator and technical expert roles.

For instance, in Schools Network and Leading Head Teachers, external agents assumed for the most part a facilitator role. In the Schools Network case, university advisors initially facilitated the transference of the networking strategy to the participant schools and were available throughout the first year of implementation to guide schools in setting up the network. Similarly, ATE advisors from the Leading Head Teachers project facilitated the process of individual and institutional self-evaluation to head teachers to develop their performance contract; however, in some instances they also assumed a technical expert role in relation to guiding head teachers in the implementation of certain internal management processes (e.g., monitoring teachers' lesson plans). Conversely, the Shared Support Plan positioned technical pedagogical advisors (ATP) in a technical expert role supervising how school leaders dealt with the delivery of the instructional intervention strategy in their schools, and advising on the analysis of data that emerged from the programme's

implementation.

### **Narratives of school improvement: between normalisation and innovation**

The second research question of my thesis relates to the narratives of improvement that emerged as theories of change from the four case studies (policy framework and external technical support programmes). The theories of change presented in the case descriptions of the three external technical support programmes illustrated a continuum from subtle to explicit systemic control over the school improvement process, and such control was either directly enforced by external agents or indirectly prescribed by effectiveness indicators like SIMCE or enrolment. Meanwhile, the theory of change that emerged from the policy framework indicated that there was an emphasis on what Ball (1994, p. 54) calls a “no hands” form of control as far as the relationship between education and the state is concerned’. In this theory of change, improvement was considered as the meeting of national learning and performance standards, and it was produced through finding the balance – or better yet, resolving the tension – between (performance-based) accountability and (true) school autonomy.

The policy framework’s narrative of improvement influenced, in turn, the improvement narratives of each of the three external technical support programmes studied. For instance, the Schools Network project introduced a process of self-review and planning under the guise of collaborative inquiry (autonomy), while participants were eager to take this opportunity to develop the internal capacity for answering to their external pressure points (accountability). Similarly, the Leading Head Teachers project was underpinned by the assumption that developing *good* leadership capacities based on schools’ needs (autonomy) would improve students’ learning outcomes, enrolment, attendance and other effectiveness indicators demanded by the school system (accountability). Finally, the Shared Support Plan openly drew on a single factor related to effectiveness, the level of curriculum coverage, to engineer an instructional intervention that was applied by the school (autonomy), to improve their fourth grade SIMCE scores in Spanish and mathematics (accountability).

Consistent with the analysis presented in the previous section about external technical support programmes’ implementation, my initial assumption that these three cases represented distinctive theoretical approaches to the provision of external support for school improvement, and therefore would implicitly espouse different narratives of school improvement, was proven wrong. These external technical support programmes and the associated narratives of improvement that emerged from them seem to deal with the

balance/tension between performance-based accountability and true school autonomy, by moving in a continuum between *normalisation* and *innovation* as opposites. I would argue that these opposites represent improvement trajectories associated with the policy context of the Chilean school system, where normalisation would sit closer to accountability and innovation to autonomy.

#### *Normalisation and accountability*

Normalisation, in this study, refers to the mobilisation of organisational conditions and management processes in schools to effectively respond to external requirements from the policy framework. Often, these organisational conditions and processes are established from the knowledge base of school effectiveness, which identifies characteristics of effective schools; and school improvement, which applies technologies to develop such characteristics (Reynolds and Stoll, 1996; Stoll, 1994; Stoll and Fink, 1996). In fact, Ball (1995, p. 261) affirms that ‘effectiveness is a technology of normalisation. Such research both constructs a normative model of the effective school and abnormalises the ineffective or “sick” school’. This link between effectiveness and improvement, termed effective school improvement (Reezigt and Creemers, 2005; Wikeley *et al.*, 2005), puts forward a set of characteristics that schools need to be considered effective (the norm) and improvement is conceptualised as the capacity of the school to systematically replicate such characteristics (Perryman, 2006).

Arguably, this notion of normalisation can also be described in terms of performativity (Ball, 1997a; Ball, 2003b). Performativity is conceptualised as a policy technology that seeks to introduce not only control and regulation but a culture based on ‘judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)’ (Ball, 2003b, p. 216). In other words, performativity ‘is linked with the increased accountability and surveillance under which teachers find themselves and their schools being judged in terms of outcome and performance’ (Perryman, 2006, p. 150). In this sense, normalisation could be considered as a mechanism of performativity as it shapes schools’ behaviour according to a set of measurable outcomes that are publicly scrutinised (Solomon and Lewin, 2015). Nevertheless, I have chosen to use the concept of normalisation to describe this improvement trajectory for two reasons.

First, as it emerged from the case studies, normalisation was considered by the external technical support programmes as a basic condition to initiate a process of improvement. As noted above, normalisation meant the definition of certain routines as a norm that schools had to abide by, and external agents’ responsibility was to help them follow this norm. Reflecting on what was reported in the case studies, external agents become instruments to



‘educate people to obey particular regimes’ (Perryman, 2006, p. 152), becoming themselves agents and subjects of these regimes. Moreover, these regimes are informed by the effectiveness and improvement knowledge bases, which ‘have been used as powerful mechanisms for dictating normality’ (Perryman, 2006, p. 150)

Second, normalisation holds an important place in the Chilean initiatives of school improvement. As I mentioned in chapter four, normalisation was first introduced with the 900 Schools Programme (P900) and has been systematically considered in later initiatives as well, becoming an unproblematic concept that is still in use by policymakers, external agents, and school leaders and teachers in schools. By using normalisation to describe this improvement trajectory, I aim to call attention to the problematic nature of this mechanism of performativity, something that I think would not be possible if I just replaced the concepts. Therefore, although performativity is implied in my use of normalisation in this section, I consider that normalisation captures in a more appropriate way the narratives of improvement that emerged from the case studies, and their problematic characteristics.

In the cases of external technical support programmes, normalisation was often evidenced in the strong pull that some outcome indicators (SIMCE, enrolment, attendance) had when it came down to designing and implementing the external technical support programmes. Within these programmes, outcome indicators were often associated with one or several key internal management processes that these programmes targeted to achieve improvement. The Shared Support Plan is a very good example of how external technical support programmes targeted management processes to influence outcomes. By developing an instructional intervention to increase curriculum coverage, dictating the management of lesson planning, the Shared Support Plan aimed to produce better SIMCE scores, as this test is based on curricular standards. In this sense, the studied school was heavily involved in implementing the instructional intervention, but had no influence in the intervention’s design. In this type of reform interventions or programmes, research has shown us, the school is expected to actively engage in implementation but the hierarchical and power structures of the programme – and arguably, of the school system – impede any attempt to engage in its design and development (Datnow, 2000; Datnow and Castellano, 2000).

The other two cases also evidenced a tendency towards normalisation, albeit not as explicit as in the Shared Support Plan. For example, Leading Head Teachers focused its strategy in providing tailor-made technical support to head teachers and other school leaders to assist them in developing their leadership competencies. However, the external advisors were also mandated by the programme to assist head teachers in developing certain management

practices, such as monitoring lesson planning, which would ensure they met a set of efficiency indicators included in their performance contracts (CDD). Similarly, in Schools Network, the external advisors worked during the first year of the initiative with participant schools to define their own improvement strategy and goals after a process of collective self-evaluation and data analysis. Interestingly, this process ended up with participant schools deciding to develop a training programme in mathematics for teachers to improve the performance of each school in SIMCE.

From these case studies, it is possible to discern a pattern of intervening in certain internal processes through the mobilisation of organisational conditions (instruction, leadership, and professional development) to influence certain outcome indicators (SIMCE, enrolment and attendance). This pattern follows a rationale where educational outcomes can be affected by internal processes that schools can change within their organisation by developing certain enabling conditions through improvement strategies, such as external support (Chapman, 2005; Hopkins, 2001; Reynolds *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, in the case studies, the knowledge base external agents drew upon to perform this normalisation of these internal processes was closely aligned with both the effectiveness and improvement research and the current accountability mechanisms in the Chilean school system.

Finally, as I have indicated in this section and in the previous one, the normalisation also operated over the role of the external agent through performativity, just as it did for municipal schools, their leaders and teachers. The position the external agents displayed in these programmes is often that of ‘the expert, the consultant, the moral disciplinarian [that] is at hand to intervene with their models of “effective practice”’ (Ball, 1995, p. 262). I will return to this issue in the final chapter when discussing some assumptions related to external support.

#### *Innovation and autonomy*

Innovation, in this study, refers to the mobilisation of internal capacities in schools to find their own new strategies or paths to achieve improvement. Early school improvement research focused on how innovations were developed in schools, mainly led by practitioners, to produce change in educational practice (Hopkins, 2001; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001). At that time, some studies highlighted the importance of ‘external assisters’ in supporting innovations at the school level by ‘providing concrete and practical assistance on implementation issues’ (Clark, Lotto and Astuto, 1984, p. 59).

Later, this focus on school-led innovations gave way to an interest in developing and

researching large-scale initiatives of school improvement (Fullan, 2000; Fullan, 2009). These initiatives involved innovations developed from the accumulated knowledge of early research and evidence from international comparative work, offering strategies for managing the change process both at the school and system level in the context of comprehensive school reforms (Hopkins *et al.*, 2014). In this later stage of school improvement research, external change agents also played an important role putting forward their professional expertise to support and build schools' internal capacity to assist schools in the implementation of these innovations (Muijs *et al.*, 2004; Tajik, 2008). However, these large-scale, comprehensive reform efforts, particularly those developed under a policy context of standardisation, often ended up suffocating local innovations (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006), while schools either performed for the system the reform that was expected of them or resisted these externally mandated innovations (Solomon and Lewin, 2015).

The cases of external technical support programmes evidenced an orientation towards promoting innovation in their narratives of improvement, albeit in varying degrees. The best example of innovation can be found in the Schools Network project, which displayed a novel approach to school improvement given the context of the Chilean school system. The main feature of this initiative was the development of collaborative inquiry among participant schools, mediated by the university advisors, where they developed a collective self-evaluation and data analysis to build their improvement strategy. This approach went against the grain of the market model of education in Chile that promotes competition over collaboration between schools. Nevertheless, research shows that it is possible to develop collaborative strategies within competitive contexts usually in the form of partnerships and other networked initiatives (Ainscow, Muijs and West, 2006; Chapman, 2008; Evans *et al.*, 2005).

Innovation was also found in the other two cases, although attenuated in comparison to the Schools Network project. For instance, the Leading Head Teachers project had an explicit mandate not to impose a specific leadership model upon head teachers from the participant schools. Rather, the external advisors strived to work individually with head teachers in developing a coaching strategy that would exploit their individual leadership competencies, while critically analysing how these competencies would benefit the school in terms of improvement. This flexible strategy sought to take advantage of the potential positive influence that good school leadership was assumed to have over schools' management and students' learning. Similarly, the Shared Support Plan also involved some level of innovation by transferring a novel instructional intervention strategy from the ministry to the school, which was expected to transform teachers' practice in the classroom. Particularly, in the case

of High Forest, a previous experience with a similar private instructional intervention helped to ease the introduction of the Shared Support Plan and facilitated the associated cultural change in the school.

Finally, it is relevant to note that, from the cases analysed, innovations were often associated with school autonomy, in the sense that schools could choose which improvement strategies were more appropriate to meet their internal needs and answer external demands. Similarly, research has shown the relevance of autonomy, understood as increased decision-making authority at the school level, as a means to improve teaching and learning, when schools have the necessary capacity to exercise this authority (Honig and Rainey, 2011). This sets out a rationale where ‘the most effective schools are not those that take on the most innovations, but those that selectively take on, integrate and coordinate innovations into their own focused programmes’ (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001, p. 470). Similarly, school improvement research has associated the development of innovations with strategies that schools can develop, such as professional learning communities, internal capacity building, collegial relationships between teachers and school leaders, collaboration within and between schools, among others (Cibulka and Nakayama, 2000; Collinson and Cook, 2013; Earl and Lee, 2000; Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Stoll, 2009). However, this rationale can be problematic as it places the responsibility for the success or failure of these innovations in the school, discounting its political and organisational conditions, and its actual level of autonomy to achieve successful innovation (Fink, 1999; Lodge, 1998; Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2005).

### **Policy framework influence: (re)creating the (self) improving school**

The third and final research question of this thesis, deals with the influence of the policy framework for school improvement on the implementation of the external technical support programmes. In the previous sections of this chapter, several ideas have been advanced about this issue and here I want to develop a concise argument about how the model of improvement that is advanced by the policy framework, the self-improving school, is represented and operates through the theories of change of the three programmes. Interestingly, and in line with the analysis of the programmes’ implementation and improvement narratives, the influence of the policy framework for school improvement has led external support programmes and schools to align with the self-improving school model in one way or the other.

#### *The accountability-based, autonomy-driven self-improving school*

As I argued in the case description of the policy framework for school improvement, the

theory of change evidenced a tension between two improvement trajectories. On the one hand, there was a trajectory that drove improvement through the evaluation and control of schools, configuring what is known as a performance-based accountability system where schools are compared against a set of standards to determine rewards or sanctions (Figlio and Loeb, 2011; Fuhrman and Elmore, 2004; Sahlberg, 2010). In this trajectory, schools and their professionals are expected to perform and to evidence educational outcomes in line with these standards, in terms of normalisation and performativity. For this purpose, schools and professionals often display what Taylor Webb (2006) calls the *choreography of accountability*, understood as a set of performances developed by teachers to satisfy accountability demands and reap a good evaluation in the eyes of the policy-makers.

On the other hand, the policy framework evidenced another improvement trajectory that seemed to point towards school autonomy as the driver of school improvement. This trajectory is consistent with research highlighting the importance of developing contextualised local strategies to address local problems (Harris, 2001a; Harris, 2002; Honig and Rainey, 2011). This improvement trajectory suggests a less standardised way of addressing the internal needs of schools, developing differentiated approaches while also being responsive to the external demands of the school system (Harris and Chapman, 2004). Moreover, this trajectory also relies on the provision of adequate support to schools to assist them in developing the necessary internal capacity to take charge of their improvement process (Chapman, 2005; Potter, Reynolds and Chapman, 2002).

As argued in the case description, in the Chilean school system this tension is skewed towards the performance-based accountability trajectory, despite also promoting school autonomy. However, the case descriptions indicate that school autonomy is employed as a rhetorical argument to mobilise schools to take full responsibility for the success and failure of their improvement process. This configures a school improvement model that is described by one of the informants as *self-improvement*. This idea of a self-improving school and a self-improving school system (Greany, 2014; Hargreaves, 2010) is consistent with the arrangements that the Chilean policy framework displays to resolve the tension between accountability and autonomy.

In other words, the policy framework for school improvement in Chile configures an *accountability-based, autonomy-driven self-improving school* as the model for school improvement. This model of school improvement can be traced to the design and implementation of external technical support programmes in schools. The case descriptions of each of these programmes offered insights into how this model of improvement influenced them, to

recreate the self-improving school

### 1. Collaboration in a competitive environment

The Schools Network project reflected the self-improving school model particularly in terms of its emphasis on seeking collaboration within a competitive system. Two of the building blocks for a self-improving school system are the development of inter-school partnerships, and a local solutions and co-construction approach (Hargreaves, 2010). These were present in the Schools Network project when the local authority invited schools to join the network to collaborate and work together to find a solution to their low performance in SIMCE.

This external support approach operated through collaborative inquiry, facilitated by university advisors, where all participant schools engaged in a collective investigation and offered their individual expertise to find strategies that would help them improve their current performance (DeLuca *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, when this approach is developed within a competitive environment it is important to consider how much the policy framework encourages schools to partner and work together (Evans *et al.*, 2005). In this sense, the collaboration and network approach to external support is expected to give prominence to knowledge circulation within the network and develop strong ties between participant schools. However, in the case of the Schools Network, the influence of the self-improving school model of improvement prompted schools to work *together* to find *individual* solutions.

### 2. Disciplining leadership and management

The Leading Head Teachers project focused on a topic that constituted another important building block for the self-improving school system: the development of school leaders who can take on the responsibility of improvement in their own school and beyond (Hargreaves, 2010). The importance of successful school leadership is strongly rooted in the literature of school effectiveness and school improvement where it is advocated as a key factor that influences student learning outcomes and teachers' motivation (Chapman, 2004; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004b).

In the Leading Head Teachers project, head teachers were coached to develop their leadership competencies, tapping into their individual potential, based on the assumption that a good leader would bring about good learning outcomes. However, leadership competencies were developed by external advisors to produce a normalisation of school routines and management processes. Similarly, research shows that the normalisation of these routines and practices, associated with neutral description of effectiveness factors, is

linked with the standardisation of learning and the disciplining of schools' and practitioners' performance (Perryman, 2006; Thrupp, 2003; Wrigley, 2008). In this sense, school leaders were coached in the Leading Head Teachers project to produce a new professionalism (Quicke, 2000; Whitty, 2000) and this approach to external support became a surveillance strategy of head teachers' practice (Swaffield, 2015), and arguably, for external agents' practice as well.

### 3. Social control

The Shared Support Plan developed an external support approach associated with a programmed approach to instructional change, which meant that it provided teachers with detailed instructional materials and empowered school leaders to act as monitoring and support agents (Rowan and Miller, 2007). As I noted in the case description of the Shared Support Plan, this programme displayed a specific form of social control over schools, procedural control, by developing and delivering a highly specified instructional routine for teachers and school leaders to use, and supervised them to ensure a fidelity of implementation (Rowan and Correnti, 2009).

This concept of social control links with the notion that, in a self-improving school system, most but by no means all the responsibility for school improvement is devolved to the local level (Hargreaves, 2010). In this sense, central government still holds a degree of responsibility, and thus, of (social) control over the activities of schools, where research shows that the specificity of the intervention is critical for implementation fidelity (Desimone, 2002). Additionally, in the case of the Shared Support Plan, the social control that the central government exerted over schools was offered as a tool for schools to build upon to incorporate and institutionalise effective practices, while the power and political relations that this programme established with schools restricted their role to implement these practices and not to develop them further (Datnow, 2000).

To summarise, the cross-case analysis offers an insight into the nuanced influence the policy framework for school improvement has over the external technical support programmes. Despite being underpinned by different theoretical assumptions, the three studied programmes evidenced that strength and weight of the accountability-based, autonomy-driven self-improving school model of improvement in their design and/or implementation. Moreover, the analysis evidenced some surprising issues; for instance, the use of school autonomy as a rhetorical argument to justify the current accountability regime, and the positioning of external agents as both agents and subjects of this regime through normalisation. In the next and final chapter, I will reflect on these findings elaborating on

the rhetoric and reality of school improvement in Chile, and continue with the problematisation of improvement that was introduced in the first chapter.



## CHAPTER XII

### PROBLEMATISING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT – PART TWO

In the first chapter of this thesis, I set out to problematise school improvement, using as a starting point the policy strategy of external technical support that has been adopted in Chile. This strategy is part of a policy framework that promotes a model of school self-improvement, which infuses all aspects related to how external technical support to schools is designed and implemented. These schools are allegedly autonomous in deciding what their improvement strategy should be and the kind of support they need to see it through. However, the findings of this thesis suggest that the Chilean policy framework, through an accountability system that exerts social control over schools, places responsibility directly at the school level for improvement, as the basic unit of accountability of the system.

The Chilean case illustrates the paradox of many current school improvement initiatives, where improvement is conceptualised as a process that is driven by schools autonomously, while at the same time is considered improvement only if it meets the demands of national standards for performance-based accountability (Darling-Hammond, 2004; O'Day, 2002; Sahlberg, 2010). In other words, schools are autonomous insofar as they comply with a set of standard criteria that establishes what an effective school looks like (Ehren and Swanborn, 2012; Wikeley, Stoll and Lodge, 2002). This model of improvement leads schools to normalise their practice to produce performances that make them appear as if they are effective. By appearing to meet the standard criteria established by the central government, they *fabricate* themselves as schools that improve (Ball, 1997a; Maguire *et al.*, 2011; Perryman, 2009; Taylor Webb, 2006). Additionally, in the case of Chile, if schools are unsure as to how to produce such performance through normalisation, external technical support is at hand to assist them. Consequently, what counts as *the norm* is based on the accumulated knowledge of school effectiveness and school improvement, defining processes and outcomes based on descriptions of effective improvement practice (Ball, 1995; Perryman, 2006).

As a result of my background readings, subsequent fieldwork experience and the writing process of this thesis, I have learned that policymakers and practitioners generally assume that school effectiveness and school improvement provide an unproblematic framework within which to stimulate and guide education reform in any given school system. In response to this, advocates of school improvement have called for responsible engagement between research evidence and policymaking, while critics have advocated disengagement from this practice and have called for an abandonment of these improvement efforts

altogether, instead focusing on a critique of the current global education reform landscape (Chapman, 2012; Thrupp, Lupton and Brown, 2007).

Despite these calls from both advocates and critics of this literature, *shopping lists* of effectiveness and improvement factors extracted from effective schools or systems are still circulating on a global scale, as part of an education reform agenda that borrows *what works* and *good practice* in one place to implement in another (Ball, 1998a; Lingard, 2010). In fact, these factors have taken the form of international benchmarking and comparative reports from international agencies and consultancy forms, to the delight of policymakers. A prime example are the two reports published by McKinsey & Company (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010), based on the performance of several school systems on a number of international assessments, most notably PISA. These reports offer policymakers lessons from around the world to improve their school systems' performance. In fact, according to Michael Fullan's foreword to the 2010 report, this document offers a list of 'critical factors that go together to create the chemistry of widespread improvement' (p. 6).

In my study, evidence of this global influence was found in both the discourse of the Chilean policy framework for school improvement, and in the practice of the external technical support programmes. Hence, an important lesson from my research is that large-scale, systemic reform and its associated policies tend to rest firmly on the foundation of global school improvement knowledge. This knowledge base is influenced by a technical-rational effectiveness perspective, constituting a pervasive discourse about education reform that seems to be unproblematic by policymakers and improvement advocates alike. For this reason, in this chapter I will problematise the rhetoric and reality of school improvement by reflecting on the findings and analysis of the four cases of this study, which will allow me to begin to formulate an alternative to approach school improvement.

### **Rhetoric and reality of school improvement**

The four cases examined in this thesis provided evidence of a gap between the rhetoric and reality of school improvement in Chile. Rhetoric refers to policy discourse and texts, in which school improvement is primarily understood as an effect of performance-based accountability. Meanwhile, reality refers to the strategies that schools develop, with or without external support, and that is reflected in the practices of teachers, leaders and external agents. In this sense, professionals in schools, as well as those professionals working for external technical support programmes, develop strategies of adaptation and/or

resistance in response to policy rhetoric, while dealing with the effects of this rhetoric on their individual professional identity and collective educational practice.

Two issues have consistently come to light throughout this thesis regarding this gap between rhetoric and reality. One is the framework of performance-based accountability, which defines what will be considered improvement and intensifies the work of schools and its professionals. The other is the provision of external technical support to assist schools at the local level, only at times successfully, to meet the demands of the national accountability system.

#### *The overwhelming presence of performance-based accountability*

The theories of change underpinning the three approaches to external support presented in chapter five might differ in terms of their theoretical assumptions and empirical base. However, they all fall under the weight of the high-stakes testing regime that operates in Chile through SIMCE. The relevance of SIMCE was noticeable in all three cases observed in this thesis. In the case of the School Network initiative, SIMCE was the very reason why schools were invited to take part in the initiative and was the main driver for the local authority and schools to commit their efforts. In the Leading Head Teachers project, SIMCE was a relevant issue for the project manager, as it represented a trusted output measure of the impact of the programme and influenced decisions to modify or adapt the implementation strategy in schools. For the Shared Support Plan case, the focus was on improving curricular coverage as a way of fast tracking gains in SIMCE, as the medium- to long-term indicator of success for the strategy.

Additionally, the policy framework for school improvement showed a relentless focus on assuring quality through measures of *control-by-results*, which took the form of standards-based accountability. These standards are present in the curricular and assessment framework, which are used by both the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP) and the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) to define what counts as improvement. Several teachers I interviewed expressed their reservations about the broad scope and overwhelming quantity of the content standards in the curriculum framework, which they considered difficult to teach to their students. Teachers feared that this situation would negatively impact on their performance in the Teacher Evaluation system, which is based on a portfolio and a filmed lesson with their students. Also, some teachers expressed their concern regarding the decision in some schools to increase the lesson time for Spanish and Mathematics at the expense of other subjects such as History, Geography, Technology or Arts. This decision, coupled with the testing of Spanish and Mathematics yearly in several grades, reflects the

high stakes of SIMCE for schools and teachers.

This overwhelming presence of SIMCE, as the basis of the performance-based accountability system in Chile, provides evidence of the orientation towards normalisation and accountability that the policy framework for school improvement brings about. Interestingly, effectiveness and improvement research and practice have provided the basis for the rise of these performance-based reforms around the world (Reynolds, Kelly and Chapman, 2015). Subsequently, the efforts of schools and practitioners working in and with these reforms is intensified under a performative regime that is the result of accountability measures and *fabrication* in the school system (Ball, 1997a; Ball, 2003b). Furthermore, the use of autonomy as a rhetorical argument to place responsibility for improvement on schools was a particularly interesting finding from my study. Although some research has found that autonomy is relevant for leveraging improvement under conditions such as high internal capacity or a favourable social and policy environment (Honig and Rainey, 2011), my study results lead me to conclude that using autonomy to justify standardisation and accountability could give rise to the impossibility of achieving true, meaningful and lasting improvement and change. As Solomon and Lewin (2015, p. 11) explain: ‘an insistence on progress as indicated by what can be easily measured inevitably weakens the possibility of initiating changes that take time to develop’.

#### *Troubling assumptions about external support*

Research has found that external support is an important factor for the improvement of schools, particularly disadvantaged ones, by acting as a resource that is fitted to their capacity and needs (Chapman, 2005; Muijs *et al.*, 2004). Considering this, as part of the initial assumptions of my study, I defined three distinctive *ideal types* or theoretical approaches to external support, based on school improvement literature, to assess whether they produced different narratives of improvement. However, what I found was that external support became a vehicle for the transference and delivery of a prescribed agenda that sets a *norm* for all schools, in which external agents were instrumental in modeling or enforcing said agenda. Borrowing from MacBeath (1998), external support can play a *Trojan horse* role in this context in that it can either serve the policy framework by sustaining the illusion of school autonomy to answer to the accountability demands, or it can subvert it by encouraging schools to look above and beyond accountability and embrace a more authentic autonomy. However, as I noted in previous chapters when discussing the issue of normalisation as a narrative for school improvement, the role of external advisors is also intensified by the mandate that the policy framework for school improvement imposes on them.

There is evidence that external support has an important influence on targeted schools. For instance, it has an impact on professional identities and on the re-professionalisation of teaching and headship (Swaffield, 2005; Swaffield, 2015). Issues of professionalism and re-professionalisation are embedded in interventions and initiatives inspired by neoliberal and neoconservative views of the teaching profession (Whitty, 2000). As Quicke (2000, p. 303) explains,

Far from this market form of ‘new professionalism’ reflecting the emergence of a renewed moral identity, what we are experiencing now is just the most recent manifestation of shifting relationships between the state and the professional.

The strategy, in the Chilean case, is to devolve a great deal of the professional development of teachers to individual schools, putting emphasis on the acquisition of skills and competencies for *good* teaching and *good* leadership, as the core of their professional knowledge. This would configure a scenario where external advisors operate as disciplining agents (MacBeath, 2006; Swaffield, 2015), putting forward the agenda of the policy framework and mandating the type of change that schools should seek through normalisation.

For instance, in the case studies of external technical support programmes, some external agents reflected on this disciplinary role when nudging schools to comply with effectiveness and efficiency indicators (i.e., SIMCE and enrolment), normalising their practice instead of developing their capacities for improvement. They acknowledged that this was necessary given that the performance-based accountability regime where schools and external agents operate places external demands that can have serious consequences. Interestingly, evidence from the case studies showed that external agents were also subjected to this normalisation, because of the influence of the policy framework on their programmes’ implementation. This would explain why there was no substantial difference in the practice of the three external technical support programmes. Thus, this way of providing external support assumes ‘that all schools can follow the same recipe for success, and any deviation from this norm can be an indicator that a school is failing’ (Perryman, 2006, p. 150).

### **Thinking of an alternative: Critical School Improvement Studies?**

What is improvement then? For early school improvers, who concentrated their research on investigating innovations developed by schools, it was both the journey and destination, and they studied how schools engaged in this journey and what the outcome of it was. However, contemporary school improvement has developed a different approach. With the close

collaboration of effectiveness research, it has focused on detailing what the journey would look like and what destination schools will arrive at if they follow the signs correctly. Yet, what if this journey does not go as planned? What if schools decide to take a detour or find a short-cut? What if they arrive at the destination by a different route?

A key issue that comes along with linking school effectiveness and school improvement into a rigid system is that, in reality, the journey does not always go as planned, and that there is usually more than one way to reach the same destination. It may, in fact, be more important to begin to follow a certain path or direction than to reach a specific desired destination that has been externally mandated. As Rea and Weiner (1998, p. 27) explain:

It seems that whether the reference is made to ‘management arrangements’ or ‘key characteristics’, the message remains the same. If prescriptions are adhered to, the premise is that the individual or institution will be ‘empowered’ to change. The change required, however, is not necessarily part of any one institutional agenda and is a reflection largely of wider political rather than educational interests. Change thus becomes bureaucratic and managerial, administered through development plans, programmes, targets, outputs and measures of success – usually SATs and examination results.

In order to advocate for a critical stance regarding school improvement, it seems necessary to decouple from the problematic core assumptions of school effectiveness (Wrigley, 2004; Wrigley, 2008). The study of school education, and particularly of school improvement in the current policy environment, in which mounting pressure is placed on schools and teachers, need not insist on a technical rationalist stance (Ball, 1995). However, this is the stance present within what has lately been termed educational effectiveness and improvement (EEI) research and its support for performance-based reform (Reynolds, Kelly and Chapman, 2015). It is consistent with a policy analysis project or research purpose that seeks the efficient delivery of policies and gives precedence to outcomes (Ozga, 2000).

In response, critical school improvement studies should strive to develop an approach to research and practice that is less concerned with this delivery of policies and prescriptions. On the contrary, critical school improvement needs to embrace as its goal advocating for more equitable and socially just conditions for practitioners and students in schools and their communities. In practical terms, this means developing an approach rooted in a critical or transformative paradigm and making use of social theory to address the social and political dimensions of educational research. As a result, this approach would promote research and practice with a focus on studying the process by which schools tend to (or tend not to)

improve, instead of looking at the effective or ineffective school in isolation. This means paying attention to the social spaces in and around schools, as a means of critically analysing the influences that have constituted and reconstituted the school, to recognise and encourage improvement that is not tied to the sole technical rationality of effectiveness.

As researchers and practitioners of school improvement studies, we need to position ourselves as intellectuals (Ball, 1995) and social scientists (Ozga, 2000), to investigate school improvement policy and practice beyond a functionalist perspective, thus problematising the theoretical underpinnings of effective improvement models. In this sense, we need to use theory as a 'possibility of disidentification' – the effect of working 'on and against' prevailing practices of ideological subjection' (Ball, 1995, p. 267). In this sense, the role of theory in this study is not limited to the capacity of being simply *critical* and observing and judging the objects of study from a specific dogmatic perspective. In other words, it is not about overthrowing one theoretical truth to reinstate another. On the contrary, I would argue that theory must be employed by researchers to offer a different perspective, aspiring to achieve what I have described previously in this text as the following: thinking with theory to think otherwise.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1. INFORMATION LETTERS AND CONSENT FORMS

#### Information letter for Case Study Zero participants

Dear (Researcher, Advisor, Ministry Officer, Local Authority Officer)

The reason for this letter is for me to inform and invite you to participate in the activities of the research study called ‘Understanding the School Improvement Policies in Chile, through the study of External Support Programmes for Municipal Schools’<sup>15</sup>. This study is part of the doctoral thesis (PhD) of the main researcher.

The main aim of the study is to identify the key factors associated with the policy framework of school improvement, which are manifested through the implementation of external technical support programmes offered to municipal schools. In other words, I want to understand how these relate to the process of school improvement. To study this topic, a multiple case study will be developed to follow up the implementation of three programmes of external technical support to municipal schools (cases) which are currently operating in two districts. These are all situated in the current context of educational policies in Chile, which will also be analysed regarding the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) and the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP). After finishing the fieldwork process, a report about the cases will be produced, to analyse the process of school improvement.

Specifically, your participation involves a semi-structured interview about the school improvement policy in Chile, and particularly about how it has been implemented in the different levels of the educational system. This interview aims to provide a contextual framing for the study of three case studies of programmes or technical assistance initiatives which will be followed up.

It is very important to highlight that your decision to participate is voluntary and free. Any recollected information will be of an anonymous nature and will only be used for the aims of this study. In addition, and if you consider it necessary, you will have access to the study records (audio, transcripts, reports) that are directly linked to your participation.

The researcher is committed to adopt the necessary measures to guarantee the wellbeing, and the physical and psychological care of the participants in this study, according to the Ethical guidelines for educational research proposed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). If you have any questions about your participation, you can ask at any time during the study to the researcher via the email address indicated below. Likewise, you may withdraw from the study at any moment, without the risk of prejudice or the need of an excuse.

I do hope that you contemplate this invitation positively. I appreciate your disposition and time to consider participating of this study.

Sincerely.

**Alvaro González Torres**

Doctoral researcher. Institute of Education, University of London

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<sup>15</sup> This was the research title proposed for my Upgrade in late 2012, and I changed it later to ‘Rhetoric and Reality of School Improvement in Chile. A Multiple Case Study of School Improvement Policy and

Information letter for Case Studies One, Two and Three participants.

Dear (Teacher, Head Teacher, External Advisor)

The reason for this letter is for me to inform and invite you to participate in the activities of the research study called 'Understanding the School Improvement Policies in Chile, through the study of External Support Programmes for Municipal Schools'. This study is part of the doctoral thesis (PhD) of the main researcher.

The main aim of the study is to identify the key factors associated with the policy framework of school improvement, which are manifested through the implementation of external technical support programmes offered to municipal schools. In other words, I want to understand how these relate to the process of school improvement. To study this topic, a multiple case study will be developed to follow up the implementation of three programmes of external technical support to municipal schools (cases) which are currently operating in two districts. These are all situated in the current context of educational policies in Chile, which will also be analysed regarding the System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC) and the Preferential School Subsidy law (SEP). After finishing the fieldwork process, a report about the cases will be produced, to analyse the process of school improvement.

Specifically, your participation involves a semi-structured interviews about the implementation of [name of external technical support programme] and the process of improvement in the school, and participant observations of programme activities carried out in the school. These activities can be formal and informal meetings, classroom observation, evaluation procedures, and any other activity relevant for the remit of this study. These interviews and observations aim to learn about the implementation of [name of external technical support programme] in which you participate.

It is very important to highlight that your decision to participate is voluntary and free. Any recollected information will be of an anonymous nature and will only be used for the aims of this study. In addition, and if you consider it necessary, you will have access to the study records (audio, transcripts, reports) that are directly linked to your participation.

The researcher is committed to adopt the necessary measures to guarantee the wellbeing, and the physical and psychological care of the participants in this study, according to the Ethical guidelines for educational research proposed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). If you have any questions about your participation, you can ask at any time during the study to the researcher via the email address indicated below. Likewise, you may withdraw from the study at any moment, without the risk of prejudice or the need of an excuse.

I do hope that you contemplate this invitation positively. I appreciate your disposition and time to consider participating of this study.

Sincerely.

**Alvaro González Torres**

Doctoral researcher. Institute of Education, University of London

[agonzalez01@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:agonzalez01@ioe.ac.uk)

## Standard Participant consent form

Please, fill this form after you have read the information letter about this study

Study Title: Understanding the School Improvement Policies in Chile, through the study of External Support Programmes for Municipal Schools.

Thank you for your interest in participating of this study. Before you give consent the researcher has to explain the details of the study.

You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records and refer to it at any moment during your participation in the study.

Participant consent:

I, \_\_\_\_\_  
(Name)

- I have read the information letter and I understand the aim of this study,
- I understand that I can decide not to be part of this study at any moment. For that, I have to notify the researcher in order for my data to be withdrawn and disposed of immediately.
- I declare that my participation has not been forced by the researcher or any other third party.
- I understand that I will not be charged or that I will receive any monetary compensation for participating in this study.
- I give my permission for recording and processing the activities where I participate only for the purposes of this study.
- I understand that my data will be treated as strictly confidential and that it will not be used for any purposes other than those of the study. This data will be handled according to the safeguards intended by the Chilean legislation under law No. 19.628 for the protection of Private Life (1999), the British Data Protection Act (1998) and the ethical guidelines for educational research proposed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011).

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Standard Researcher consent form

Researcher consent form

I, Alvaro González Torres

- I have given the participant an information letter, made the necessary arrangements for the participant to be able to read and comprehend the letter, and I have answered all of the participant's questions about the study.
- I consider that the participant understands the information that was communicated to him/her, including potential risks, benefits, and rights associated with his/her participation.
- I have provided sufficient information to allow the participant to make an informed decision about his/her participation in the study.
- I declare that I have not forced or unduly influenced the participant's decision in any way.
- I declare that this is an academic research, and that it has not been commissioned by any private or public institution.
- I declare that I will not pay or charge any compensation to the participant for its voluntary collaboration.
- I declare that all data will be treated as strictly confidential, and it will be handled according to the safeguards intended by the Chilean legislation under law No. 19.628 for the protection of Private Life (1999), the British Data Protection Act (1998) and the ethical guidelines for educational research proposed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011).

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(Signature)

## APPENDIX 2. DATA SET SUMMARY

### Case Zero. Policy Framework for School Improvement

Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- University researcher 1</li> <li>- University researcher 2</li> <li>- Education advisor 1</li> <li>- Education advisor 2</li> <li>- Ministry officer 1</li> <li>- Ministry officer 2</li> <li>- Ministry officer 3</li> <li>- Local authority officer 1</li> </ul>
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Law N° 20.248, Preferential School Subsidy</li> <li>- Law N° 20.529, System of Quality Assurance of Education</li> </ul>
Field notes	(No field notes recorded)

### Case One. Schools Network

Interviews	<p>Eastern Primary School (EP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Head Teacher</li> <li>- Curriculum Leader</li> <li>- First Grade Teacher</li> <li>- Mathematics Teacher, and Special Needs Teacher (joint interview)</li> </ul> <p>Central Primary School (CP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Head Teacher</li> <li>- Fourth Grade Teacher/ Curriculum Leader (part time)</li> <li>- Second Grade Teacher</li> </ul> <p>Western Primary School (WP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Head Teacher</li> <li>- Curriculum Leader</li> <li>- Second Grade Teacher</li> <li>- Fourth Grade Teacher</li> </ul> <p>University department</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- External advisor</li> </ul> <p>Local Authority</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local authority officer</li> </ul>
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Minutes Network meeting (August 2013)</li> <li>- Minutes Network meeting (September 2013)</li> <li>- Minutes Network meeting (October 2013)</li> <li>- Minutes Network meeting (November 2013)</li> </ul>



Field notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Field notes visit Eastern Primary (April 2013)</li> <li>- Field notes visit Central Primary (April 2013)</li> <li>- Field notes visit Western Primary (April 2013)</li> <li>- Field notes Network meeting (June 2013)</li> </ul>
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Case Two. Leading Head Teachers

Interviews	<p>WB Yeats Comprehensive (WBY)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Head teacher</li> <li>- External advisor</li> </ul> <p>Gladys Marin Primary (GM)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Head teacher</li> <li>- External advisor</li> </ul> <p>Mayflower Primary (MF)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Head teacher</li> <li>- External advisor</li> </ul> <p>Centre of School Leadership (CLE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Project manager</li> </ul>
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leading Head Teachers in Vulnerable Schools Project (2011)</li> <li>- Guidelines for advisory at [District] (April 2013)</li> </ul>
Field notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Field notes advisory team meeting (January 2013)</li> <li>- Field notes first head teachers meeting (April 2013)</li> <li>- Field notes second head teachers meeting (April 2013)</li> </ul>

Case Three. Shared Support Plan

Interviews	<p>High Forest Primary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Head teacher</li> <li>- Curriculum leader</li> <li>- Discipline leader</li> <li>- Third grade teacher</li> <li>- Fourth grade teacher</li> </ul>
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PAC Strategic Manual (2013)</li> <li>- PAC Presentation (November 2013)</li> <li>- CLE Presentation (March 2013)</li> </ul>
Field notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Classroom observation, grade 1 (June 2013)</li> <li>- Classroom observation, grade 3 (June 2013)</li> </ul>

## Memos

Title	Description
Curriculum coverage and SIMCE	Assumption of direct relationship between curriculum coverage and SIMCE scores
Disciplining vs Innovating	Portrayal of the role of external agents and the external support to schools
Education Politics	The idea of clearly differentiated education politics and their effects, plus the questioning of such difference actually being as clear cut as people think
ES positioned by improvement policy	Personal reflection during interview with WB Yeats Advisor (Leading Head Teachers project)
ES Programme Learning	On how the programmes learn and change (or not) their design or implementation strategy
Improvement Model Policy	Linked to node 75. Improvement Model Policy
Improvement Policy. Sink or Swim	Reflection from the interview with ministry officials about the orientation of Chile's school improvement policy and its consequences at schools
Interviewing	Notes on the practice of collecting data through interviews; the good, the bad and the ugly!
Network Conditions	Three conditions to develop a network of schools: the social, political and technical
The Leadership Assumption	Reference to case two, Leading Head Teachers, and the assumption that leadership is key to turn schools around
The notion of 'system'	When I'm talking about the system, what does that mean? Who am I referring to? Where is it?
The SIMCE factor	The presence of SIMCE that is constant and pressing for schools, but also for local authorities. It dictates school improvement in Chile

### APPENDIX 3. INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

Interview schedule for Case Zero participants (researchers, advisors, ministry and local authority officers)

Theoretical Strand	Topic	Possible questions
Education policy and School improvement	School system structure School system legal framework Interventions, initiatives and programmes for improvement	How would you describe the recent changes and orientation of the structural framework of the school system? What is the school system doing to promote improvement in schools?
Evidence-based policymaking	Political foundations of the policy framework Evidence-base for the policy framework	What are the political intentions of the current policy framework, and how does it continues or diverges from previous intentions? What elements from national and international research evidence are picked up by the current policy framework? How is school improvement conceptualised and measured in the current policy framework?
External support for School improvement	External support role in current policy context Ministry role in the current policy context Other stakeholders role in the current policy context	How is external support conceptualised in the current policy framework? In what ways is the Ministry and other stakeholders (ATE, local authorities, and schools) involved in external support and school improvement?

Interview schedule for Cases One, Two and Three participants (teachers, head teachers, external advisors)

Theoretical Strand	Topic	Possible questions
School characteristics (management, instruction, working conditions)	School and community characteristics Professional role in/with the school Characteristics of other professionals working in/with the school Main achievements and challenges	How would you describe the school? How would you describe your role in/with the school? What elements of the internal context of the school you would highlight?
External technical support	Design and implementation of the programme Relevant characteristics of the programme (success factors) Relevant challenges to the programme (risk factors)	How did the external technical support programme started in the school? How has the programme been implemented in the school?
School improvement policy and practice	Conceptualisation of school improvement Key factors of school effectiveness and improvement Strategies to monitor/evaluate/measure improvement Key elements of the policy for school improvement	What elements are fundamental for the improvement of the school? What is the current condition of the school in terms of improvement? What elements from the local/national context have influenced the current condition of the school?

**APPENDIX 4. CODING MATRIX**

<b>Code Name</b>	<b>Sources Coded</b>	<b>Coding Frequency</b>
Ability Grouping	1	1
Accountability	11	23
ADECO	1	1
Administrative	3	3
Aim of Schooling	5	10
Assessment	10	12
ATE Complexity	2	2
ATE Expertise	3	9
ATE Internal Tension	1	2
ATE Offer	4	14
ATE Selection	3	3
ATE Services	8	13
ATE Theoretical Influence	2	2
ATP	6	19
Attendance	6	7
Autonomy	6	13
Better Education	1	2
Bond with School	1	1
Bureaucracy	3	3
Capacity Building	2	4
Change	9	11
Classroom Management	6	11
Classroom Observation	15	33
Classroom Practice	7	8
Coaching	2	2
Code Procedure	1	2
Collaboration	4	6
Community Involvement	3	4
Competition	1	1
Critical Friend	1	2
Curriculum Coverage	5	8
Curriculum Restricting	2	5
Data Use	12	35
Disadvantage	8	20
Disciplining	1	5
Doing other people's work	1	4
Early Years	5	9
Effectiveness Factor	12	15
ELE	1	10
Empowerment	1	1
Enrolment	17	25
External Agents Assumptions	1	1
External Agents Challenging	1	1
External Agents Experience	3	3
External Agents Expertise	4	5
External Agents Feedback	2	3
External Agents Learning	1	3

External Agents Policy	1	1
External Agents Presence in School	2	3
External Agents Reflective Practice	1	1
External Agents Relationship	6	14
External Agents Relevance	4	4
External Agents Role	14	30
External Agents Training	1	1
External Support	7	37
Funding & Resources	14	37
Headteacher Experience	6	7
Headteacher Good-Quality	2	3
Headteacher Motivation	1	1
Headteacher New	1	1
Headteacher Public Tender	3	6
Headteacher Responsibility	3	4
Headteacher Training	2	2
Headteacher Turnover	1	1
High Expectations	8	13
Hopelessness	1	1
ICT	7	10
Improvement Conjectural	1	1
Improvement Continuous	2	2
Improvement Indicators	10	19
Improvement Levers	3	8
Improvement Model Policy	9	55
Improvement Practice	5	13
Improvement Process	9	15
Improvement Sustainability	4	4
Improvement Tactical	2	4
Inequality	1	1
Innovation	6	18
Inspection	5	19
Instruction	3	8
Leaders Competences	7	26
Leaders Decision Making	1	2
Leaders Impact	1	1
Leaders Professional Experience	5	10
Leaders Relationship with	4	5
Leaders Role	15	64
Leaders Style	7	10
Leaders Training	3	3
Leading Heads Characteristics	6	24
Leading Heads Impact	1	3
Leading Heads Join	5	7
Lesson Planning	7	13
Local Authority Change	1	1
Local Authority Evaluation	2	2
Local Authority Learning	1	1
Local Authority Perception	1	1
Local Authority Role	19	57
Local Authority Sanctions	1	1

Markets	2	11
Meaning Network (school)	1	1
Ministry Initiatives	4	7
Modelling	2	4
Monitoring Learning	1	2
Negotiation	1	1
Network Assume Role	2	3
Network Background	2	4
Network Communications	2	3
Network Difficulties	5	15
Network Expansion	3	3
Network Expectations	8	15
Network Impact	4	4
Network Intention	3	5
Network Join	9	13
Network Leadership	2	5
Network Learning Process	1	1
Network Model	1	6
Network Organisation	7	16
Network Participants	7	10
Network Perception of	1	3
Network Previous Experience	5	8
Network School link	1	3
Network School-led	3	6
Network Support Leaving	2	4
Network Sustainability	8	10
Network University Involvement	4	10
Networking	7	13
Normalisation	7	18
Open Classroom	1	1
PAC Centralised Design	4	4
PAC Challenges	2	3
PAC Characteristics	11	43
PAC Decentralised Implementation	1	1
PAC Failure	3	3
Parents Involvement	4	5
Parents Relationship with	11	16
Parents Satisfaction of	3	3
Performance Contract	5	13
PME	9	21
Policy Borrow	4	12
Policy Change	5	14
Policy Evaluation	2	3
Policy Implementation	9	26
Policy Influence	2	9
Policy Intention	2	2
Policy Learning	4	9
Politics	5	48
Practice Borrow	1	1
Practice Change	1	1
Pressure	15	29

Privatisation	1	2
Professional Capacity	1	1
Professional Commitment	1	2
Professional Learning	6	15
Programme Adaptation	8	23
Programme Continuity	4	18
Prompting Action-Reflection	1	1
Reaction Poor Results	2	2
Research in Schools	2	2
Resistance	1	2
Responsibility shared	4	9
SAC	15	48
School Classification	4	7
School Closure	5	5
School Development Stage	1	1
School Diagnosis	5	9
School Directive Team	6	13
School Education Levels	3	3
School Ethos	18	40
School Infrastructure	2	4
School Interaction	6	6
School Internal Conflict	1	1
School Interventions	1	1
School Management	4	9
School Municipal	12	25
School Orientation	9	17
School Social Status	2	2
School Support Needs	4	9
Self Evaluation	1	1
SEP	12	30
Sharing Practice	7	17
SIMCE	29	87
Staff Changes	1	1
Standards	3	15
Student Background	1	1
Student Behaviour	8	16
Student Education Needs	8	10
Student Expelled	2	2
Student Learning Experience	5	8
Supervision	8	24
Support as Craft	2	2
Support Complexity	1	1
Support Develop Materials	1	1
Support Familiarisation	2	2
Support Impact	1	1
Support Individual-Institution	1	2
Support Instruction Conditions	1	2
Support Instructional	7	15
Support Interdisciplinary	1	1
Support Internal	6	9
Support Management	1	3



Support Personalised	5	6
Support Previous Experience	6	12
Support Purpose	2	3
Support Time	1	1
Teacher Assessment	5	6
Teacher Commitment	3	4
Teacher Contract	1	1
Teacher Cut Wings	1	1
Teacher Dismissal	1	1
Teacher Exchange	1	1
Teacher Expertise	4	5
Teacher Feedback	5	8
Teacher Frustration	1	4
Teacher Individual Work	1	1
Teacher Involvement	7	12
Teacher Management	7	15
Teacher Meeting	6	7
Teacher Motivation	1	3
Teacher Professional Experience	3	4
Teacher Relationship	8	21
Teacher Role	2	13
Teacher Statute	1	1
Teacher Work Off Hours	4	7
Teacher Work Pride	1	4
Teaching and Learning	4	4
Teaching to the Test	5	5
Teamwork	4	8
Textbooks	1	1
Time Use	10	13
Training and CPD	18	37
Transitions	1	1
Trust	4	5