

Professionalizing Teachers and Teaching Amid the Pandemic in Chile

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced school communities all around the world to mobilize and develop creative and innovative capacities like never before. In this context, I coordinated a group of colleagues and invited school communities to share significant experiences during April and May 2020 (Madero et al., 2020). We invited authors, teachers, and school leaders to share what they learned across professional development. This brief essay highlights educators' responses. The teachers' reform of the last decade has put teachers on track to a better professionalization than in the past (Madero, 2020). Nevertheless, Chilean teachers have a long way to go and the pandemic might very likely slowdown that trend.

Making Lemonade Out of Lemons: A Period for Creativity and Learning

Despite the challenges of continuing formal education during the five months of confinement in Chile, this period has represented an opportunity for teachers and school leaders to learn from their school communities on how to be better professionals. Indeed, and not without difficulty, teachers have experienced much growth in the first half of 2020 especially with regard to their upwardly mobile professional status in society, substantial reflections in their pedagogical communities, and increased professional collegiality. These actors in the school system are coming out stronger from the first stage of the pandemic. In showing what they have learned so far, five lessons emerged.

Lesson 1: The Need for More Holistic Educational Change

Shared experiences during this pandemic have led many teachers to see the urgent need for changes in their schools and classrooms. For anyone involved in formal education these days, such need was recognizable not just after but before the pandemic. However, these months gave it a greater urgency. One change that these teachers emphasized is that there is a need for more contextualized teaching and learning where they have an in-depth awareness of the lived realities of their students. As a result of that consciousness, a focus emerged on how to support each

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other and how to develop tools and strategies to support students' social emotional growth.

Lesson 2: The Urgency of Pedagogical Changes

Pedagogical practice—as just one component of education—has changed during this time. There has been a change in teaching methodologies, adaptation to new technologies, and adjustment of communication strategies between students, parents, and teachers. Nevertheless, what stands out, according to this group of professionals, is that they implemented new pedagogical practices based on evidence of how students were—or were not—learning. Physical distance has forced them to collect and analyze evidence about the learning process and the needs of their students in a new way. Before the pandemic, it was uncommon to collect evidence of learning with this level of intensity. This novelty is key to professional growth. Acting ethically based on evidence, with precise technical criteria rather than from beliefs, ensures quality in the teaching and learning relationship.

Lesson 3: Reorienting Teachers' Identities

Reflecting on the need for change at the macro level of education and changes in concrete pedagogical practices has led teachers to reorient their traditional beliefs. They asked themselves: (a) What it is like to be a teacher today, (b) what are motivations for staying in the profession, and (c) how important is the educator in the life of the school community? These are questions that the pandemic has produced. The question of why teachers do what they do becomes more relevant and urgent because the pandemic has produced a renewed sense of belonging to a community and to the profession itself.

Lesson 4: Placing Students at the Center of the Educational Process

Every educator knows that at the center of education are the students. However, among the many demands of the school system, this can be forgotten. As a result of the pandemic, these teachers reflected on this centrality. Students are the center, and the pandemic has highlighted it. The pandemic has challenged the student-teacher relationship and has adjusted toward what motivates students. This new relationship has required teachers to develop a higher adaptative capacity to serve the needs of students.

Lesson 5: Learning with Others

All of these lessons, teachers pointed out, have emerged through collaborative work within the community. Most of the educators were not accustomed to such collaboration prior to the pandemic. Research tells us that teachers learn better collaboratively and achieve greater job satisfaction in doing so; however, in

practice they rarely do so. Fast-paced workdays and large workloads often force a more solitary work environment. At this time, even without a physical presence, teachers and leaders show through their experiences that collaboration has been especially valued because that is where creativity emerges (Madero et al., 2020). The pandemic is a reminder that learning in isolation—or worse, being motivated solely by competition—is not the best way in which teachers create and innovate.

Toward a Stronger Profession for a Post-Vaccine School

The pandemic has proved to be an opportunity for school communities and teachers. However, not everyone has benefited from having teachers and leaders who have changed their actions and reflected upon them like those I highlighted here. We know that for many, this time has been a great injustice because the disparities that already existed have now widened. The school has the ability to play the role of a socioeconomic equalizer in society, which, although limited, was being fulfilled before the pandemic. That same role has ceased during these months.

That is why these reflections toward a more excellent teacher professionalism are an example for the time to come. Education will only be better if we continue professionalizing teaching. These lessons show us that some have been able to do just that, and they urge us to act so that everyone else can do so as well.

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