
CHILE AT CROSSROADS IN 21ST CENTURY: EDUCATION POLICY AND STUDENTS' STRUGGLE

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Abstract: Chile constitutes a remarkable demonstration of the inevitable triumph of economic and political liberalism. Since its transition to democracy from authoritarian rule in 1990, Chile has made significant progress in economic development, poverty reduction and democratic consolidation. Today, Chile can look back at last three decades of economic growth, very much in contrast to most other Latin American countries. Their social programmes of providing education, health facility and housing facilities to the poor have resulted in the drastic poverty reduction. All this has been achieved through a unique process of consensus building which provided stability and certainty to both the government and the opposition.

In spite of achieving all this, Chile has been going through a phase of continuous students protest against their education system. Although, Chilean education system is ranked higher in quality than that of other countries of the region but the students in protest believe that the present education system has created a lot of segregation in the society which they term as "education apartheid".

This paper will highlight which social groups have benefited and which have not from their education policy and will analyse the shortcomings in the education policies of Chile after the end of dictatorial rule and will try to link it with the rise of first major student movement named "penguin revolution" of 2006. The paper will also discuss the course of students' movement which took a large shape in 2012 and what all it has achieved and where does it stand now.

Keywords: Chile, Chilean education policy, Students' protest.

Introduction: Since transition to democracy in 1990, Chile made significant progress in economic development, poverty reduction, and democratic consolidation. *Concertación* coalition which came to power after the end of dictatorial rule followed consensus policy model and applied it in implementing neoliberal model of development, consolidating democratic institutions and increasing social policies spending. All these works helped the *Concertación* coalition in successfully keeping the legacy of economic growth of the previous authoritarian government which broke the trend of failure of other newly formed democratic governments in Latin America. This all helped in bringing democratic restoration, consolidation of post authoritarian regime and course correction of socioeconomic model with a significant improvement of living condition of the population, especially of poor masses. Moreover, they were also able to bring the armed forces under the control of civilian government which was possible only after several years of starting the process of re-democratization.

However, this, in the context of economic prosperity, became increasingly unacceptable to the majority of Chileans. Because Income inequality became a sort of permanent presence, a "spectre" that kept on haunting the *Concertación* coalition, and although everyone knew very well that it was there, as a reflection of a divided society, nobody really seemed to know what to do about it [2]. This happened in spite of following "growth with equity" model which

was always at the core of the distinctive project that *Concertación* pursued since 1990. "Growth with equity" meant giving market driven distribution a helping hand through limited social programmes targeting at the poorest sections. Through this model *Concertación* government formulated social policies; thinking that it would have more penetration and success after the implementation. These newly implemented social policy reforms of *Concertación* coalition were based on neoliberal model, a part of which was inherited from authoritarian rule. Likewise, education policy was not so different which also inherited many of these neoliberal characteristics from authoritarian rule. There is no doubt that as a result of these new policies in education, the illiteracy rate and dropout rate of children from school decreased. But on the side of these achievements, many new problems grew in the form of poor quality and high cost of education which complicated and restricted the upward social mobility of students from low-income family.

Based on this background, the paper will try to justify above arguments. For this, paper will be divided in to three sections, two of which have sub-sections. First section will critically analyze the Chilean education policy in post-dictatorship with brief information about the policies inherited from authoritarian regime. Second section will link the shortcomings in the education policies with the students' struggle since 2006. It will also discuss the course of students' struggle which took a large shape in 2011. Last section

will conclude the paper with the outcome of this struggle and present state of this movement.

Education Policy in Chile: Shift from State to Market: In Chile, historically, the State as the *Estado Docente* used to be the driving force behind the expansion of education. Framing education policy was an integral part of the national project and a key element of citizenship. The compulsory primary education started in 1920 provided four years of free universal education which was increased to eight years in 1965. During that time, the state used to control the education with a strict regulation of the inputs of the schooling process within their intention of establishing the foundations of the nation and the citizenship. However, things changed radically in Chilean education sector after the introduction of education reforms by military regime in 1980 and 1981. These new policies were generally framed keeping in mind the labour market and meeting the demand for skilled personnel for employment in technical and professional careers [6].

Educational Policies during Military Rule Which Continued After the Restoration of Democracy:

Under the new policy, the administration of most of public school was transferred to the municipalities. And municipalities took two approaches to education administration. First option was to establish a municipal education administration department within the structures of local administration that were administered by municipal administration and regulated by normal municipal guidelines with the departmental head being a teacher. The other option was to follow a corporate way and to privatise education administration through the establishment of a *Corporación Municipal* (Municipal Corporation). It used to run the organisational structure of local education as a privately operating entity. Despite the great faith placed in the transformation of public administration into private regulatory bodies, most municipalities chose to establish municipal government schools because of greater ease of their establishment and the low costs involved [13].

Authoritarian government also established a system of partial commodification of education under which voucher scheme was started. Within this system, the state provided funding on the supply side, with schools receiving payments based on the number of students they could attract, imparting a strict competition ethic into the education system. The competition was between municipal-run schools and private schools for state funded students. So, if the schools were unable to compete in this new marketplace environment then they were allowed to fail and face dissolution. However, on the side-line of these reforms, there was a drastic reduction in public education expenditure which finally led to a

significant drop in teacher salaries and increased financial burden on local municipalities' government.

Education Policy in the Post-Dictatorship Era

After 1990: In 1990s, after the transition of Chile into democratic government, a set of policy decisions of long term were taken that determined the appearance and extent of the intervention of *Concertación* coalition in education sector. Under these policy decisions, the issues of both education quality and equity into the educational policy agenda were given importance based on public policies of direct or indirect central intervention on the system. However, it was all done without altering previously mentioned inherited structures from the reform of early 80s under the military regime. So, the per student finance system for public and private subsidized schools were preserved with an increase in education spending so as to reverse the earlier tendency of decreasing resources in the sector. A major portion of this increased funding went into increasing school teacher wages after years of relative decline. Similarly, following the same trend, the government started a programme for poorest schools named P-900. This programme was initiated to supplement material and financial resources in the most impoverished and underperforming 900 primary schools of Chile. In addition, the government targeted a range of support measures to children in socially vulnerable families that included early years and pre-school interventions, free school meals and learning materials, and support for teenage parents [9]. The government also took initiatives to encourage student retention at secondary level by increasing the compulsory education period to 12 years and by giving financial incentives to municipal and subsidized private schools which improved the retention of children from low-income families. Moreover, in 1996, the government brought full school day initiative which increased the number of hours children spent in school.

Subsequently, by continuing the voucher system, the *Concertación* government introduced the system of shared funding whereby parents were also asked to contribute a complementary sum. Although this initiative gave schools extra resources to improve the quality of education but it was discriminatory. On the one hand, private schools got the freedom to raise revenue at the primary and secondary level but on the other municipal schools had to depend on the consent of the parents [14]. As a result of the implementation of this shared funding system, an educational hierarchy based on family income emerged in the subsidized private sector, with schools attended by children from the higher income groups charging significantly more than those that cater for children from less wealthy families.

Similarly, the municipal schools could not get much contribution because it used to cater for children from lowest income groups [12]. Although, shared funding arrangement increased the total expenditure on education but it was against the idea of equity in education because there was unequal distribution of expenditure on education.

In the higher education sector, government gave more emphasis to the establishment of private educational institutions. Due to which, the number of new private universities increased drastically but number of new public universities remained stagnant. In higher education sector government also followed the shared funding system, that's why public universities used to receive scarce funds from the government and students have to pay for their studies by taking long-term bank loans. Due to this, the access rates of lower income groups even to these public universities remained low. Not only that the governments were also incapable of regulating the quality and cost of education in private universities which also resulted in limited access of poorer students and large profits for investors in these universities [10]. Due to all these reasons, higher education in Chile became one of the most expensive worldwide in proportion to GDP per capita. The rising costs combined with high interest rates led a great proportion of students to default on their loans

Students' Struggle against Education Policy: With the implementation of above mentioned policies in Chilean education sector, Chilean youth experienced clear blocks to their social mobility. This led to polarisation in the stratification of education visible. It happened in such a way that quality of education and percentage of students enrolled varied greatly according to the income factor. It means to say that children from low-income families attended lesser quality schools whereas the children from rich families monopolised the highest achieving schools. As a result of this, according to a data, it was found that about 70 per cent of students from municipal or semi-private high schools were unable to pass the university entrance exam and about 93 per cent of students in municipal high schools failed to pass the university entrance exam. This led to just 10 to 20 per cent enrolment of students in post-secondary education from poorest economic strata of Chile [10]. Thus, as part of the 'growth with equity' programme in which government wanted to provide a high-quality education to all Chileans, the dual system of class dimension between choice and income in education system preserved deep inequalities in the expansion of education in Chile. This led to the rise of protest against the education policies after 2000 when situation became graver. In the following sections, the major protest movements against

education policies are being discussed:

Penguin Revolution of 2006: The penguin revolution started on April 24, 2006, organized by the Coordinating Assembly of High School Students (ACES). The student movement came as a surprise to many because of the marked decline in political mobilization witnessed in the aftermath of the dictatorship. It began as a reaction against high school bus fares and university entrance fees. As the protests escalated, the demands changed to a broader criticism of the education system as a whole. From there it grew into a national movement demanding quality education for all. The movement was fuelled further when President Michelle Bachelet failed to address educational reform in the annual presidential speech on May 21, 2006. Student leaders responded by calling for continued demonstrations and school takeovers.

Support for protesting public school students grew as the movement attracted the participation of university students, teachers, parents, and eventually from private school students. The protest became a national strike on May 30th when the then education minister Martín Zilic tried to pacify the protest by sending his deputy minister and providing space to only a few students in the talk. Almost 600,000 to one million people came out in the procession of the strike which completely immobilized many schools and universities [3]. Although these processions were peaceful, police used excessive force across the country by beating, using tear-gas, and soaking students with water cannons. This further outraged general public and the support for the protest grew. The situation pressured the President Michelle Bachelet to remove the education minister Martín Zilic and directly involve in the negotiations with the student leader [3]. However, these negotiations could not bring out any concrete outcome as government did not accept their main demand of freeing bus fare and decreasing university entrance fees. The only demand they accepted was to bring unspecified changes in LOCE (Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza) of 1990. Seeing their demand not being fully accepted by the government, the students continued demonstrations and school occupations and another national strike on 5th June [3].

Finally, government announced the formation of a presidential advisory committee which had greater representation of teachers and secondary school students. As the negotiations started in the committee, students started to return to classes and June 12th officially marked the end of the strike. The committee came out with the following recommendations after a consensus: the use of both public and private education; greater participation by students and their families in school management;

measures to encourage teachers and school directors to remain in their posts; changes to the education law to guarantee the right to education; an increase in state funds; new educational standards; an end to arbitrary forms of discrimination; and changes to the state's supervisory institutions for education [1]. But the implementation of these proposals took a lot of time and was not followed completely because of lack of conviction by Bachelet government and saving the interest of party people who used to earn huge profit from private institutions. Due to this, the students' protest continued but at lower scale.

Students' Protest Movement Of 2011: The 2011 mobilization for students' protest grew from a series of earlier protests by secondary students which started after 2006. It also inherited their demands of structural change in the education system from earlier mobilization.

The process began in April with a student strike at the Central University of Chile against a potential sale to a for-profit holding. In few weeks, the campaign managed to a more general demand to enforce the existing ban on profit in higher education and strengthen government regulation of private university operations. Within one month, with the coming of CONFECH (the national confederation of university students) this campaign took the shape of national movement. However, students intensified their struggle when on the eve of the annual presidential address to the parliament; the new president Sebastian Piñera ignored their demands [10]. A second mobilization was started in May, which was also endorsed by the national workers council and the teachers' federation. Later on, secondary students also joined in the movement because their demands also corresponded with those in colleges like free education, the prohibition of for-profit schools and greater public investments to improve Chile's public school system. Subsequently, a number of universities and schools were occupied and/or suspended until further notice. Over 100000 people demonstrated in Santiago and there were massive rallies in all the major cities. Students were joined by MPs from opposition parties, chancellors and faculty members of the main public universities and even well-known television personalities [8]. Following these protest, the government offered to establish a working forum with student leaders which was straightaway rejected because they were against any closed door negotiations. Soon after, a two-day National Citizen Strike summoned by social, union and student organizations was attended by approximately 400000 people. During this protest, vandalism and violence happened and as a result many people were arrested [11].

Along with these traditional marches and protests,

students also used creative mass demonstrations. For example, over 2000 students collectively gathered to dance, dressed in zombie costumes to represent the unpayable educational debts that presumably followed students even after death. They also ran a relay race by switching runners around La Moneda, called '1800 Horas por la Educación'. In this race, students ran day and night 1800 consecutive hours with the Chilean flag raised to symbolize the 18 billion Chilean pesos necessary to finance 1 year of free higher education [11]. Some of the prominent student leaders of these protests were Camila Vallejo from Federation of the University of Chile, Giorgio Jackson from Chilean Catholic University and Camilo Ballesteros from University of Santiago de Chile [11].

All these protest continued till 2012 in one or the other form and these protests resulted in changing the education minister three times between 2011 and 2012. On the sideline of these protests, the negotiations were also going on which resulted in the implementation of following proposals [10]

- a) The incorporation of right to an education of high quality as a constitutional guarantee.
- b) The infusion of more money for scholarships and financial assistance, especially for qualified students in the 40% poorest families.
- c) The government also announced the creation of a state agency to replace private lenders as well as reduction of interest on student loans from 6 to 2 percent, except for the richest 10 per cent of the population.
- d) The proposal also stressed to put an end to profits for universities and suggested the installation of the agency for monitoring transparency of higher education institutions.
- e) Tax reform was also proposed according to which taxes on business profits were increased from 17 to 20 per cent for increasing the national treasury contribution in education from 700 million to 1000 million pesos.

Although, these proposals eased the worst effects of the prevailing model, but these were not aimed at changing the underlying principles that have shaped the system over the past three decades, namely: subsidizing demand, the key role of the private sector and free competition as the mechanism of regulation and quality achievement. It was clearly evident that government's position prevailed and the current neoliberal model did not change.

Conclusion: The neoliberal reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s produced a cultural shift which saw the State displaced by the market, the public sector undervalued and replaced by the private sector, the collective national project dismantled and, in its place, the rise of individualism and consumerism. That's why the outbreak of the student movement, its

intensity, duration, and characteristics took both political parties and traditional civil society organizations by surprise. At the root of the struggle lied differing concept of education and the relationship between society and the state. The student movement defined education as a right of all citizens rather than a privilege for a few. On the other side, government understood education as an “investment” and a “commodity” and as a luxury rather than a mass consumer good [11]. Due to this reason these student movements were able to penetrate the society with their universal claim to public education as an opportunity equalizer. This goal made it easier to include more social actors in the movement which resulted in the formation of a heterogeneous alliance of actors that included every section of the society. The overwhelming support received from the public showed a big innovation in the fragmented and individualistic society of Chile.

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