

New Approaches for School Improvement in Persistent Standards and Accountability Times: Evidence from ICSEI 2013

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Guest Editors

This section presents the first of two selections of papers presented at the 26th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) organized and hosted in Santiago by Fundación Chile in partnership with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto January 3-6, 2013. ICSEI is an international association and community of scholars and school system personnel committed to the investigation and promotion of school effectiveness and improvement for all (www.icsei.net). This event marked the first time in the history of ICSEI that its annual conference was hosted in a Latin American country. The aim of the conference organizers was not only to bring ICSEI to Latin America, but to bring greater exposure to Latin American experiences and research about school effectiveness and improvement within the international community. The conference was attended by 535 participants representing 47 countries. Of those registered, 51% (273) were from Latin America and the Caribbean, including participants from ten countries. Approximately 1/5th (61) of the 314 presentations (individual papers, symposium papers, posters) were delivered by participants from Latin America. We invited a selection of Latin American and international presenters to submit manuscripts of their presentations to the journal. Four of those articles appear in this issue of *Pensamiento Educativo*. A second set of papers will appear in the next issue.

The conference theme for ICSEI 2013 was “Educational Systems for School Effectiveness and Improvement: Exploring the Alternatives”. Within this broad focus, the conference organizers invited papers addressing school effectiveness and improvement issues and practices at the national, regional and local levels related to four areas: (1) systems of educational governance; (2) systems of accountability and support; (3) whole school improvement; and (4) classroom practice. For this and the next issue of *Pensamiento Educativo* we invited authors whose papers touch one or more of these areas. In keeping with the conference theme, the papers included are research studies that portray “alternatives” to traditional ways of thinking about and addressing school effectiveness and improvement.

In two recent books, Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, 2012) describe four ways to approach educational change at the national, local and school levels. The First Way relies on teachers' individual autonomy to achieve quality education, but has failed to produce coherence or equity in educational programs and outcomes. The Second Way is typified by central government mandates for educational standards, test-based accountability systems, sanctions for underperforming schools and policies that encourage school choice and competition. The Third Way involves the provision of added resources to schools to support improvement in the context of high stakes standards and accountability systems. The new resources are accompanied by an increased emphasis on data-based decision-making focused on the achievement of a narrow range of academic outcomes and by increasing reliance on external expertise rather than on teacher professionalism to lead improvement. Drawing upon case study research in a number of high achieving developed world school systems, Hargreaves and Shirley proposed a “Fourth Way” to achieving high quality and equitable education aimed at preserving teacher professionalism and democratic governance, while still achieving high levels of student performance. The Fourth Way consists of a set of core principles that emphasize genuine public engagement in defining the purposes of education (including the voice of students), teachers' collective responsibility and professionalism for ongoing improvement in student learning, partnership with agencies outside the school and government policies that enable rather than control. The operationalization of those principles is not standardized, rather adapted to local circumstances.

As illustrated by *Shirley, Fernandez, Ossa, Berger and Borba* in this issue, the Fourth Way is both an alternative approach to educational change and a way of understanding and critiquing change. In their article they apply the Fourth Way conceptual framework to the analysis of government education reform policies and grass roots educational change movements and school programs in Latin America. The article presents and critiques three cases. First is the Preferential Education Subsidy Law (Ley SEP) and recent student movements protesting inequities in the quality of education that have arisen under government policies that have institutionalized the standards, accountability and market-based strategies of the Second and Third Way in the Chilean school system. The authors argue that the potential for a shift towards the Fourth Way has been opened by the collective power of student voice in Chile. The second example presents the case of a single school in Porto Alegre, Brazil, that embodies the Fourth Way principles of community partnership, participatory governance, and faith in teacher professionalism, while sustaining comparatively high levels of student performance in a school serving low income working class families. The authors argue that future improvement would be enhanced by increased interaction with other schools that share similar approaches to achieving high quality and equitable education. The final case portrays the emergence and scaling up of *Escuela Nueva* in rural Colombia, a model of local school governance, curriculum, teaching and community involvement that demonstrates the potential for system wide implementation of Fourth Way principles across 20,000 rural schools. At the same time, the authors describe and critique the current government education reform policies that are replicating international trends aligned with the Second and Third way policies.

As part of the Second or Third Way of reforms, governments over the last decades in the UK (OFSTED) and USA (NCLB) have employed School Classification measures based on learning standardized test for accountability purposes. Chile is recently introducing similar initiatives launching the national agency for quality of education. While there has been a strong debate within the international SESI field about the ways to measure, study, and identify 'school effects', these issues have been inadequately studied in Chile. Thus, at least for Chile, *Muñoz's* article offers new methodological strategies to explore the differences between ineffective and effective schools. In doing so, Muñoz offers insights to develop fairer and equal estimations and judgments to classify as well as support schools in the context of an accountability framework for school improvement. Her article conducts an in-depth and thorough qualitative research to better understand the similarities and differences between schools adding or not adding value. Muñoz offers a well-informed and up-to-date discussion about the different methodologies to capture 'school effectiveness', showing their advantages and disadvantages especially to make fair judgments about school effectiveness. She discusses the three main approaches used commonly to classify schools: raw scores (RS), value-added (VA), and contextualized value-added (CVA), emphasizing the advantages and fairness of the CVA particularly for accountability purposes. The selection of the two case-study schools is based on SIMCE panel data set in Language for 8^o and 10^o grades (2004 and 2006, respectively) which allow use prior attainment students measure. Muñoz aims to answer two key research questions: "How is a secondary school that adds CVA in language different or similar to a school that does not in terms of their processes/ practices? [And] Are there new processes/practices that emerged from the data relevant to highlight potentially new aspects of effective/ineffective schooling in order to differentiate between the more and less effective schools?" The use of two case-study schools was to generate a deeper understanding of how and why the differences in performance between these schools occurred.

A key finding from her study was the identification of two novel dimensions explaining the differences between schools beyond traditional 'key-factors' of effectiveness: "Agency" 'defined as the ability or determination to pursue the school goals' and "Trust" 'understood as the belief or confidence in the honesty, goodness, skill or safety of a person, organization or thing, were also playing a key role'. Despite the fact that both schools studied worked in similar socioeconomic contexts, school A (adding higher value-added) showed strong Agency and Trust, which implied that their stakeholders believed they could successfully challenge the limitations imposed by the background. Instead, school B (adding lower value-added) found much harder to cope and not despair, precisely because they reproduced what the students brought to the school in a more unreceptive way.

Muñoz argues that contemporary literature has been limited in explaining the distinctive practices/processes between effective/ineffective schools beyond a 'deficit' labelling of the ineffective ones. Challenging such approaches, she underscores that 'special attention was paid to describe how each factor was operating, not just highlighting its deficits'. Muñoz offers a well-argued criticism to previous Chilean school effectiveness research, which is necessary and imperative within an increasing policy context

of school accountability and high-stakes testing which demands greater sophistication in estimating school effectiveness. In particular, the author claims that making public school classifications could be 'counterproductive' as Agency and Trust she found are two key dimensions that helped school to overcome obstacles, to sustain their commitment, and effectiveness over time which could be seriously damaged by the way the information is going to be published, disseminated, and used. As the author concluded 'it is dubious whether the failure discourse can help schools recover or improve their performance'. Muñoz's findings resonate with the conclusions offer by Shirley et al. as it seems that school improvement will to a greater extent depend on the support provided to schools than blaming and shaming.

The quality of teaching and teachers' ongoing professional learning are known to be key characteristics of effective schools. In their article, *Campbell, Leiberman and Yashkina* describe and evaluate an innovative government funded in-service teacher development program carried out system wide in the province of Ontario (Canada). The Teacher Leadership and Learning Project represents an alternative to conventional approaches to teachers' professional development in several ways. First, the project was developed and carried out by the Ministry of Education in partnership with the provincial teachers' union, the Ontario Teachers' Federation. Second, the project was designed to support self-directed school-based learning by classroom teachers working independently or in small teams (e.g., 2 to 4 teachers). Participating teachers apply for government grants to carry out and share their professional learning projects over a one year period. Third, the program emphasized teacher learning explicitly aimed at improvement in student learning. The focuses and strategies for improvement in student learning were decided by the participating teachers, not by external authorities. And fourth, the project goals included the promotion of school-based teacher leadership for classroom and school improvement and opportunities for participating teachers to share the products and results of their learning with other classroom teachers. Over a seven year period (2007-2013) the TLLP program funded 600 projects involving 1256 teachers. The researchers concluded that the program produced highly positive benefits for the participating teachers. Teachers reported that they gained new knowledge and improved understanding about specific teaching strategies, programs and practices. They described in positive terms their growth as informal teacher leaders in their schools in regards to developing, investigating and sharing new ways of improving student learning in multiple areas (e.g., differentiated instruction, literacy, technology integration, assessment, mathematics, literacy). Campbell, Leiberman and Yashkina also identify challenges associated with the implementation and impact of the program. Of these, the most prominent was the difficulty that the teachers had measuring and documenting the effects of their instructional innovations on student learning in more than informal and anecdotal ways. Most traditional teacher development activity occurs outside schools, disconnected to any teacher diagnosis of needs for improvement in student learning, and without any evaluation beyond teacher satisfaction. The fact that the TLLP teachers attempt to assess impact of their professional learning experiences on student learning can be viewed as a positive step despite the challenges of evaluating those effects.

The worldwide shift towards standards and accountability policies as drivers of school improvement has led to increasing centralization and control focused not only on student learning outcomes, but also on professional practices presumed to lead to improvement. At the same time, many education professionals and observers of school effectiveness and improvement continue to argue that genuine and sustained improvement requires faith and investment in the autonomy of principals and teachers working together to make important decisions about student learning needs and how to best go about improving the quality of student learning over time. In their article, *Umekubo, Chrispeels and Daly* report the results of research in an urban elementary school district (27,000 students) in the United States that has a steady history of improvement in student achievement over the past decade despite its challenging student population. The district serves a large percentage of low-income students (about 50%), many of whom are English as a second language learners (primarily Hispanic). The experience of this district is significant because district authorities have promoted and supported a high degree of decentralization through site-based management within a framework of decision-making focused on improvement in student learning and with ongoing district support (e.g., professional development) for school leadership development since the mid-1990s. This approach to district improvement has persisted in spite of the imposition of powerful state and federal standards and accountability pressures and sanctions, such as those mandated under the national No Child Left Behind legislation. The study was designed to explore how this district manages to balance centralization and accountability focused control with norms and practices of decentralization and professionalism. The study is interesting because partly because of the school district's efforts to combine top down and bottom up pressure and support for improvement, but also because of

the research focus and methodology employed. The researchers used Social Network Analysis (SNA) to investigate the focus, frequency, and patterns of communication about district improvement matters among district administrators, between district administrators and principals, and among principals. They compared patterns of communication related to information exchange and advice giving between and among principals and central office administrators related to overall collaboration, to implementation of district-wide instructional innovation, and to how schools were addressing the needs of English-as-a-second language learners (ELL). The social network patterns varied depending on the purposes and focus of communication. The overall frequency of communication and collaboration within the network of principals and district administrators was high. The level of communication within the network about implementation of the district's effort to promote the implementation of a particular instructional strategy, however, was low and largely one way (district to schools), not reciprocal. The researchers interpreted this as evidence of the degree of site-based autonomy of principals and teachers to respond to district initiatives depending on their fit with school-based perceptions of student needs and how to best meet them. The strongest communication links in the network were between principals and focused on addressing the needs of ELL learners, and reflected reciprocal relations with central office administrators. Drawing upon their findings and the experience of this district, Umekubo, Chrispeels and Daly draw attention to the potential for external authorities to create formal structures and opportunities that enable the development of strong informal communication networks and cultures of collaboration centered on improvement in student learning at the school level. In this organizational context school-based improvement efforts are not limited to and driven by implementation of top down reform initiatives while respecting central expectations and accountability for improvement in the quality of learning.

Overall, these four articles offer new insights at national, district, schools, and teachers levels about alternatives ways to undertake policies at national and local level to improve education for all. In a disputed policy context of steady accountability and standardisation policies, issues related to collaboration, trust, capacity-building, and fairer judgments of school performance seem to be urgently needed.