

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358078600>

Headship through the eyes of time in Chile: the influence of a dictatorship in the life of headteachers 1

Preprint · January 2022

CITATIONS

0

READS

48

2 authors, including:



[Sergio Galdames](#)

University of Santiago, Chile

35 PUBLICATIONS 211 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Proyecto Fondecyt 1140906 [View project](#)



Fondecyt 3220076: Explorando la influencia de la retención directiva en los procesos y resultados del mejoramiento escolar [View project](#)

Headship through the eyes of time in Chile: the influence of a dictatorship in the life of headteachers¹

Sergio Galdames (Centro de Investigación Avanzada en Educación, CIAE)

Fabian Campos (Líderes Educativos, PUCV)

Introduction

Like most Latin-American countries, Chile experienced a long dictatorship (1973 – 1990) that reshaped most aspects of society, including the educational sector. Politically and economically, during the last five decades, Chile has evolved from a left-wing, highly controlled economy to one of the most neoliberal countries in the world. While there is a growing interest in understanding education and school leadership in post-conflict societies (Wanjiru, 2019), little is known about the influence of the Latin-American dictatorship in the professional lives of headteachers. This paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on school leadership, presenting some of the main features of the headship evolution in a country in a post-conflict context. Adopting an interpretative paradigm (Creswell, 2014) and drawing mainly from biographic interviews with current and former headteachers, we portrayed the journey of the Chilean headteachers over the last five decades. We organised the data in three distinct following three critical historical periods in Chile: democracy (before 1973), dictatorship (1973-1990) and democracy (after 1990).

I. General background about Chile

Chile is located in the southwest of Latin-America. It is one of the longest (4,270 km) and narrowest (177 km) countries in the world. A car trip from the north to the south will take days, roughly equal to the distance between Qatar and Austria. Education is centrally administrated by the Ministry of Education who manage, having nearly 11,500 schools. School provision is mixed, having mainly three competitive systems working side-by-side: public, fully funded by the state and administrated by local governments; semi-private partially subsidised by state and parents, administrated by privates; and private, fully funded by parents and also private administrated.

II. Before the dictatorship: until 1973

Before 1973, public policies focused on building schools and teachers training, particularly in remote rural areas. Across Chile, communities welcomed the opening of a school as it was a synonym of progress and development. Schools brought not only education but also basic services like drinkable water, electricity, and healthcare. The rapid expansion of schools was not accompanied by a similar pace on teacher's preparation; hence teachers were perceived as a rare, scarce, and highly valued resource. Headteachers received a similar if not greater status than teachers by local communities. There were no formal recruitment or selection strategies in place, as just having a university degree was enough to stand out. Headteacher's appointments were made by local authorities based on various subjective criteria.

¹ [ORIGINALMENTE PUBLICADO AQUI: Revista Metodologías \(Enero, 2022\)](#)

[ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED HERE: Journal Manhajiyat \(January, 2022\)](#)

I graduated only a few days before. My father recommends that I apply to a newly opened school nearby our house, just as an exercise. I went in with a CV under my arm. I spoke with a person in charge for no more than 10 minutes. Even though I was applying to a primary teacher position, he offered me the headship (Aidan)

Aidan's experience is shared by most people who started working during this period, having deep and romantic memories of a school highly connected with its community. We argue that during this period, headteachers held a dual role as managers and community brokers. Hence transformational leadership attributes as charisma and communicative skills were a must.

III. During the dictatorship: 1973-1989

On the morning of September 11th of 1973, the combined military forces stormed the country, taking the main cities and institutions. Valparaiso, the biggest port of Chile, was controlled by the navy, while 'La Moneda', the government palace, was bombed by the air force and then assaulted by the army. Across Chile, smaller platoons took cities and towns. Many things happened that day and the following months as massive actions were taken to intervene educative institutions, including universities and schools. Many teachers were murdered, and universities were dismantled or taken over, affecting the supply of future teachers dramatically. Wages and professional status were lowered, greatly discouraging the access of aspiring teachers. None of our participants held a headship during this period as the dictatorship designated headteachers directly, often drawing from the army or people close to the regime. As this selection process privileged loyalty above instructional or managerial capacity, gradually set a troublesome scenario for schools, forcing policymakers to create an assistant headteacher position in 1978. Many of our participants held this role during the dictatorship.

It was a place of great exploration and experimentation, as there were no guidelines, regulations or support. I was clever enough not to get in trouble, but some colleagues were punished for innovating too much (Carice)

Leading school improvement in dictatorship times was a dangerous affair for teachers, middle leaders, and assistant headteachers. They were demanded to find a balance between change and obedience in order to move forward without raising flags by headteachers and local authorities. Any strategy that could be linked with socialistic ideas (i.e. learning communities) could be misunderstood as treason. Leading inside a school became a strange affair and the headship crystallised as a position of obedience and top-down management.

IV. After the dictatorship: 1990s onwards

After 17 years, the dictatorship ended in a democratic process. To the surprise of the teaching community, most policies and strategies introduced by the military regime stayed on. As public and semi-private schools funding come from students intake, headteachers were demanded to shift their attention to marketing strategies, spending most efforts recruiting students and competing with other schools, including those in the public sector. The competition component of the headship begins in the 1980s but consolidate in the late 1990s, being still active today.

They [parents] are customers. You have to pitch them the benefits of this school in comparison with others. However, it is challenging as you cannot concentrate on

pedagogical issues when the [semi] private school next door is offering a computer with every enrolment (Tony)

It was not before the turn of the century that any school leadership development occurred. The exodus of the dictatorship headteachers, primarily due to voluntary retirement, opened the door to a series of disconnected initiatives, including the design of a professional framework for headteachers and leading teams in 2005; professional development opportunities for current and aspiring headteachers since 2007; and more transparent and professional guided recruitment and selection process for new headteachers in 2011. Hence, headteachers were expected to be appointed based on merit for the first time in decades with an explicit focus on instructional leadership. All the individuals we interviewed were selected based on this new system. A typical agreement is a recognition that, despite its flaws, the new scenario was a massive shift in the right direction.

I was a novel teacher when the headteacher told me about the program for aspiring leaders and encouraged me to attend. I honestly can't remember most of the curriculum or even the faces of the programme professors, but I learnt so much from my peers. People came from all over Chile (Selina)

Over the last decade, the pace of leadership development has accelerated even more. Many of the strategies described before were updated and refined. However, a sense of confusion and disconnection grew during this last period, as research and practice have shown a series of challenges for headteachers consistently. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining headteachers have been linked with the demands of an accountability agenda, unsupportive relationships with local authorities and poor working conditions (including low salaries).

V. Conclusion

Chile has been singled out by its leadership advancement in the Latin-American region (Flessa & Weinstein, 2018). In this short contribution, we aimed to present, from the optics of school leaders, the headship evolution over the last decades. As researchers have pointed out before us (Wanjiru, 2019), approaching leadership in a post-conflict society demands examining the damage that political and social struggle has on the people. We aimed to expand this argument, presenting how the headship and school leaders were affected by the violence and cruelty of a right-wing dictatorship. We argue that sudden and authoritarian change in the social landscape has massive consequences on the mindset of headteachers and aspiring leaders, punishing most efforts to promote innovation and improvement. The reach and depth of these consequences are monumental, extending years and even decades after the return of democracy, affecting individual efforts to pursue a career as school leaders and the professional capacity to lead change.

Sergio Galdames is a Chilean Psychologist, holds a master's in educational Leadership from the University of Western Australia and a PhD in Education from the Institute of Education, University College London. His research explores the work and career of school leaders. He is currently working as a post-doctoral researcher at the Center for Advanced Research in Education, Institute of Education, Universidad de Chile.

Fabian Campos is a Chilean history teacher and holds a PhD in Psychology from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso (PUCV). His work has explored the relationship between leadership practices and school improvement in Early Childhood environments. He is currently working as Executive Secretary and researcher at the Leadership Center 'Líderes Educativos PUCV'.

References

Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*.

Flessa, J., & Weinstein, J. (2018). School leadership in Latin America: New research from an emerging field of study. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 46(2), 179–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217751728>

Wanjiru, J. (2019). Post-conflict reconstruction: Negotiating school leadership practice for inclusive education of conflict-affected children in Kenya. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 174114321881755. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143218817554>