

# On public education in Chile

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In 2011 the Social Movement for Public Education led the biggest demonstrations since Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile. Since then, one of the main campaigns in Chilean society has been for the recognition of education as a social right, under the slogan of "free, quality, public education" (educación pública, gratuita y de calidad).

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For more than 30 years, education in Chile has been treated as a commodity. As a consequence, the Chilean educational system has been considered as a regulated market, one ruled by the principle of financial profitability. Throughout the years billions of dollars have been transferred from the public purse to private corporations and turned into private profit.

Meanwhile, public education in Chile has been completely left behind. The neoliberal hegemony overestimated the idea of the invisible hand of the market, and public institutions were treated in the same way as private institutions.

The equal treatment principle in the Chilean education system can easily be explained: public resources injected into education are distributed to public and private institutions alike, with no legal criteria for the state to make a distinction between the two, thus making it impossible to discriminate either in favour or against either one. In this context, while private institutions' enrolments increase, public institutions' enrolments decrease proportionally. Thus, policy on financing education is largely rooted in the neoliberal orientation of Chilean public policy. Indeed, we may consider it to be the reason why public education is in such a critical condition.

An instructive case is the state-sponsored Crédito con Aval del Estado (CAE), which enables students who would normally not gain access to higher education to take out special loans for studying. A report on the CAE by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) points out that "the way in which the system is constructed nowadays allows banks to accumulate a profitable free portfolio of risk, loading the state with the burden of the high-cost segment and charging excessive premiums".

For 30 years, (almost) all institutional changes stimulated the private sector offering but not that of public establishments. Today, we see the results of these policies: just a third of enrolment is in public sector schools, while just 15% of students enrolled in tertiary education are in state institutions. Chile has the lowest level of public enrolment in university of all OECD member countries and, before the reform of the education system, public education in Chile looked doomed.

This inspires a most genuine interpretation of President Bachelet's government programme, because it identifies the need for direct provision of education by the state as a core aspect of the paradigm shift that the people require. Of course, to overcome our neoliberal education system, and consequently make education a social right, the strengthening of public education is fundamental as "the engine of the institutional reform process," leading to higher levels of trust and social cohesiveness.

For us, those aims cannot be waived by making a public policy that is meant to oppose neoliberalism (still hegemonic in Chile) and a new system of public education possible that has democratic engagement at its base. The Education Reform Bill was designed to improve children's opportunities to obtain quality education, without social and economic discrimination.

Obviously, transforming education in Chile is never a simple task. We must overcome a market-centred view of educational services and work towards an institutional system able to guarantee respect for dignity and to promote integration into society. Keeping this goal in mind, the new system must be conditioned by equity and must develop collaboration among citizens: the rights of every child and young person, male and female, must be taken seriously, without any discrimination.

We must overcome a market-centred view of educational services 

Camila Vallejo was a student leader during the Social Movement for Public Education in 2011.

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